UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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Marketing Miracles:

The Modern Relationship between Hollywood and Christian

Filmmaking

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Film & Television

by

Benjamin Nelson Sampson

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

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Professor Denise R. Mann, Chair

This dissertation examines the relationship between Hollywood and American Christianity from 1998 to the present—a time frame that encompasses the recent rise of the "Christian blockbusters." This period saw unprecedented interaction between Hollywood and what has been called the "Christian film industry," or "Holywood"—a loose and ever-changing assortment of Christian film companies and independent filmmakers that have operated in one form or another since the silent era and whose productions were, until recently, primarily relegated to local theatrical markets, church screenings, and Christian television. Although historically unprecedented, this new interaction between Hollywood and "Holywood" can be understood as a clear extension of the rise of both new media technology and transmedia industries. This

dissertation argues that a once not-for-profit filmmaking exercise by Christian filmmakers, for the purposes of inner-church ministry, has now become a huge business built upon selling films to churches as resources for both inner-church ministry and outer-church evangelism. Indeed, the business has grown so profitable that Hollywood studios now regularly market their mainstream wares to Christian audiences as well, utilizing the rise of middle-men marketing firms to reach faith-based demographics and speak a Christian sales language unfamiliar to most studios.

My dissertation is structured around six chapters: an introduction and conclusion, two contextual chapters, and two case study chapters. Chapter 1 sets the stage for the historical and cultural roots of "Holywood" since the silent era, the modern model for "Holywood" marketing established by Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), and the ways "Holywood" filmmakers have continued to adopt and adapt this model and earn great financial rewards in the process. Conversely, Chapter 2 establishes Hollywood's modern relationship to Christian audiences. Little has been written on the Hollywood/Christian relationship after the Production Code disappeared, and yet this time period leading up to the early 2000s contains some of the most controversial and essential encounters between studios and faith-based audiences. Chapter 3 then presents the first case study: an examination of the indie-Christian film *Fireproof*, the highest grossing independent film of 2008. Conversely, Chapter 4 investigates Hollywood's interaction with Christian film culture through a case study of *Man of Steel* (2013). This case study allows me to address the rise of Christian marketing firm Grace Hill Media since the early 2000s, as well as the film's narrative and paratextual marketing appeals Christian demographics. My main research methods for each chapter include industrial analysis, textual readings of films and marketing materials, and on-site ethnographic-based observations and interviews with the filmmakers, marketers, and production companies behind the films.

The dissertation of Benjamin Nelson Sampson is approved.

John T. Caldwell

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Denise R. Mann, Committee Chair

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2016

For my mother, who insisted that I take that

film history course back in high school.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I consider all the support I have received during the writing of this dissertation, let alone my entire time in graduate school, I feel truly overwhelmed. Writing an acknowledgements page is a reminder of how much collaboration buttresses the accomplishments of our lives, and how much community saves us.

This project truly would not exist without the support of my dissertation committee members, who not only advised this project to completion, but were voices of the support from the very beginning. The first seed of this project was planted in a conversation with Ross Melnick. As a young(er) Masters student at UCLA, coming from the film production into academia with wide eyes and a heart full of imposter syndrome, I looked for PhD candidates who could advise me on navigating the waters of graduate school. Ross could not have been more generous. One day, over coffee in Westwood Village, I mentioned an interest in examining the modern relationship between Hollywood and Christianity, and Ross immediately seized on the idea as a valuable contribution to the field of media studies. Over the years, as he pursued his own research and career, Ross would check in on the project, visiting panels at the SCMS conference or a presentation back at UCLA, and always continuing to encourage the work while offering insightful comments and critique. When the time came to form my committee, he once again proved a gracious voice of support and advisement.

Likewise, Allyson Field and John Caldwell were early champions of this project and invaluable resources during its formation and eventual realization. My first research for the dissertation took place in Allyson's American Film History seminar for MA students, where I examined Universal/MCA's management of the controversy over Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. From that work, Allyson and I developed a deeply constructive and on-

going dialogue that would span my entire time in graduate school. Her thoughtful advisement over the years would lead me to chase many avenues of investigation that proved fruitful not only for this dissertation, but for the next several projects ahead. I truly cannot express my gratitude for all of her shrewd insights, perceptive criticisms, and heartening support at every stage of the process.

Similarly, John Caldwell proved beyond invaluable in the shaping of this project. My first research into Christian filmmaking and audience marketing were produced for and shaped by his seminars on cultures of production. John's insights, both scholarly and moral, into issues of labor would challenge every level of my research. John's seminal work on media industries would provide the theoretical and methodological framework for this entire project. John's personal example as a patient, generous, and rigorous mentor will continue challenge my standards as both a professor in academia and as a person in the world.

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Mediascape (Winter 2011), "Curatorial Statement: Local/Global in Documentary Filmmaking."

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Society of Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Montreal, Canada, March 2015

"Teaching with Video in the 21st Century: Clips, Essays, Full-Length Films, and TV Programs."
Society of Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Montreal, Canada, March 2015

"Visualizing Media Studies: The Expansion of Scholarly Publishing Into Video Essays."
Society of Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Seattle, WA, March 2014

"Video Essays: Film Scholarship's Emergent Form."
Society of Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Boston, MA, March 2012

"Creating Causes for Christ: Film Marketing and the American Church."
Catholics and Cinema: Productions, Policies, and Powers, Oxford Brookes University, UK, September 2011

"Marketing Miracles: The Rise of the Christian Blockbuster Era."
Society of Cinema and Media Studies Conference, New Orleans, LA, March 2011

"Minority as Majority: The Controversy Over Martin Scorsese's <u>The Last Temptation of Christ</u>."
Popular Culture Association (PCA)/American Culture Association (ACA) National Conference, St. Louis, MO, March 2010

"Intelligence Doubled: A Visual Study of Spielberg's <u>A.I. Artificial Intelligence</u>."
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UCLA Regents Stipend, 2010-2015

Introduction – Holywood Meets "Holywood"

> "I think there are great opportunities, and I'd like to release one or two Christian films a year."
> - Meyer Gottlieb, President of Samuel Goldwyn Films (2009)[1]

> "We want to get the 'L' out of Hollywood."
> - Interview with Christian filmmaker, *Orlando Sentinel* (2010)[2]

This dissertation will examine the intersection of Hollywood cinema and Christian film culture, specifically from 1998 to the present. Researching this topic during this particular time period will help to fill a void within current film studies. While a great many scholarly works have addressed film and religion during the 1930s and 1940s—the era of the Production Code and the dominance of the Catholic Legion of Decency—very little has been written on Hollywood's dealings with religious culture after the studios converted to the Motion Picture Association of America's ratings system in 1968. Most recent works in this area, in both film studies and religious studies, have centered on issues of religious representation within film and television texts. Only a few scholars have studied the interaction between Hollywood and religion on the level of contemporary institutional and industrial forces, and as a relationship of production and consumption.[3] Thus, my project will be a contribution to a largely unexplored and highly relevant topic in both contemporary film studies and contemporary American culture.

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[1] Samuel Goldwyn Films has distributed several independently produced Christian faith-based films in the past five years, such as *Fireproof* (2009) and *October Baby* (2012). Quote comes from Neal Karlinsky and Victoria Thompson, "Christian Film Industry Going Mainstream," *abcnews.com* (June 6, 2009), accessed Oct. 20, 2011 <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/story?id=7765255&page=1#.T5S-zo7eaGE>.

[2] Roger Moore, "Hurray for 'Holywood': Central Florida gives birth to Christian film industry," *Orlando Sentinel* (Aug. 27, 2010), accessed Oct. 20, 2011: http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2010-08-27/news/os-movie-story-christian-film-20100827_1_faith-based-films-faith-based-movie-central-florida-film-festival.

[3] Some notable and recent exceptions that will be discussed later have been Heather Hendershot's *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), and several essays, such as James Russell, "Narnia as a Site of National Struggle: Marketing, Christianity, and National Purpose in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*," *Cinema Journal* Vol 48, No 4 (2009), 59-76.

The historical scope of this project is framed from 1998 to 2015—a time frame that encompasses the rise of films that Terry Lindvall identifies as "Christian blockbusters."[4] This period saw unprecedented interaction between Hollywood and what has been called the "Christian film industry," or "Holywood"—a loose and ever-changing assortment of Christian film companies and independent filmmakers that have operated in one form or another since the silent era and whose productions were, until recently, primarily relegated to local theatrical markets, church screenings, and Christian television.[5] It should be noted upfront that "Holywood" cinema is distinct from films about Christianity or Biblical subjects made by Hollywood, such as the Biblical epics of the 1950s or modern family films featuring Christians, like *Soul Surfer* (2011) and *Heaven is For Real* (2014).[6] While these types of Hollywood films may appeal to Christian audiences, they are still produced under the auspices of mainstream studios and generally not intended for the purposes of overt evangelism or Christian ministry. By contrast, "Holywood" films are independently produced by Christian film companies and/or Hollywood studios, contain overt Christian content, and while hoping for broad audiences, they are specifically marketed to Christian demographics, most often for the purposes of inner-church ministry and/or outer-church evangelism. By the early 2000s, "Christian films" left the narrow marketplace of church screenings and Christian home video and now competed for the first time, and often successfully, at the nation-wide box office. This new interaction between Hollywood

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[4] Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986* (NYU Press, 2011), 3.

[5] Christian television in this context refers to the rise in the 1980s and 1990s of what is commonly termed "televangelism." Many Christian television ministers, like Pat Roberston, however, now reject this term due to its associations with public financial and sexual scandals, and instead use the new euphemism "religious broadcasting." For a detailed account of the early Christian film industry, see Terry Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (New York University Press, 2007) and Lindvall and Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons*.

[6] I will keep the term "Holywood" in quotes throughout this work in order to easily differentiate it from the visually similar Hollywood, and thereby maintain clarity when discussing either of the two industries.

and "Holywood" has forged a relationship of mutual influence and exploitation as both groups have pursued the faith-based audiences as patrons at the box office.

Starting in 1998, DreamWorks Animation pioneered the first promotional campaign in 10 years by a major studio to overtly reach out to Christian communities with *The Prince of Egypt*.[7] In 1999, Gener8tion Media—a Christian film company and theatrical arm of the Trinity Broadcasting Network—used similar promotional tactics on *The Omega Code*, which became the first film produced by a Christian film company to debut in the box office top-10 on its opening weekend.[8] Then, in 2004, *The Passion of the Christ* exploded into cultural and industry consciousness through both the enormous controversy it generated and its remarkable box office success. In its wake, independent Christian production companies sprang up by the dozens and produced religious films by the hundreds. Not to be left behind, Hollywood studios began to experiment widely, if tentatively, with attempts to reach Christian audiences, and with varied degrees of success. Hollywood films like *The Nativity Story* (2006) primarily sought Christian patronage in theatrical markets, while direct-to-video divisions like FoxFaith emerged to target religious consumption in the home with titles like *Love's Abiding Joy* (2006). Many Christian-produced films—some, like *Facing the Giants* (2006), made on micro-budgets— suddenly found studio distribution for the first time.[9] In an attempt to bridge the gap between potential Christian audiences and the mainstream film industry, newly established public relations firms like Grace

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[7] The previous such marketing campaign by a major studio was attempted in 1988, when Universal Studios attempted to simultaneously cultivate and contain Christian controversy in the lead up to *The Last Temptation of Christ*. See Thomas R. Lindlof, *Hollywood Under Siege: Martin Scorsese, the Religious Right, and the Culture Wars* (University of Kentucky Press, 2008) and Larry Poland, *The Last Temptation of Hollywood* (Highland, CA: Mastermedia International, 1988).

[8] Scott Martelle and Megan Garvey, "Christian Filmgoers Create Heavenly Box Office for 'Omega Code'," *Los Angeles Times* (Oct 22, 1999), accessed January 12, 2012 <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/oct/22/business/fi-24846>.

[9] *Facing the Giants* was produced for $100,000 by two ministers and a large group of volunteers from Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, GA. It was distributed nation wide by Samuel Goldwyn Pictures and made over $10 million in box office grosses. See, Susan King, "Hollywood shines a light on the spiritual," *Los Angeles Times* (Oct 2, 2011), accessed April 3, 2012 <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/oct/02/entertainment/la-ca-religious-films-20111002/2>.

Hill Media and Outreach Inc. offered Hollywood their expertise (and their access to extensive networks of churches) in reaching out to the Christian demographic. These firms utilized sophisticated marketing campaigns that spanned churches and homes, new media and old, and transformed film texts into religious ministries designed to promote both inner-church growth and outer-church evangelism. While these initial models of "church marketing" skewed heavily towards white audiences, independent filmmaker Tyler Perry proved the power of previously neglected black church audiences to create grass roots campaigns and contribute to multiple box office successes. As a result of these burgeoning and diverse subcultures involved in both film production and consumption, a year now rarely passes without major box office successes for both mainstream Hollywood films marketed to church demographics—i.e., *The Blind Side* (2009), *The Chronicles of Narnia* series (2005, 2008, 2010), *Man of Steel* (2012), and *Heaven is For Real* (2014)—and overtly Christian films produced by Christian film companies—like *Courageous* (2011), *Soul Surfer* (2011), *God's Not Dead* (2014), and *Left Behind* (2014).[10]

Although historically unprecedented, this rise of the Christian blockbuster can be understood as a clear extension of the rise of both new media technology and transmedia industries. Indeed, while the production and consumption of Christian media content has long been present in American culture dating back to the silent film era, the economic difficulties involved in producing, advertising, and distributing this content had consistently circumscribed its distribution to local film markets, church screenings, and/or obscure regional and cable television networks. The recent and concurrent rise in digital technology and Christian

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[10] Some of these Christian-produced films have become some of the highest grossing independent films of recent years. *Courageous* was produced by Sherwood Pictures for around $2 million and went on to gross over $30 million at the box office. *Soul Surfer* was made through various co-production companies for $18 million and grossed over $43 million in theatrical sales alone. *God's Not Dead* was made by Pure Flix Productions for around $2 million and grossed over $60 million nationwide. In contrast to these successes, however, Stoney Lake Productions made *Left Behind* for roughly $16 million and only made back just over $14 million. Numbers come from BoxOfficeMojo.com, accessed April 20, 2012.

filmmaking is therefore no accident: new media has greatly reduced Christian film production

and post-production costs, and vastly improved the ability of both Christian and Hollywood film

companies to identify, measure, track, and advertise to faith-based audiences.

Besides improvements in efficiency and cost-effectiveness, however, digital interfaces

have also changed the very nature of film marketing and product branding over the past 20 years,

and facilitated most of the recent models of what can be termed "church marketing." As media

industry scholars like John Caldwell have argued, films now represent only one component in

the vast interactions of media conglomerations and content delivery platforms.[11] From the kernel

of a film text can spring a limitless number of paratexts that work in conjunction and cross

promotion with each other and with various other media outlets and brands. The dissemination of

film narratives now occurs in a transmedia context, crossing digital and analog platforms in the

search for viewer engagement, the development of fan subcultures, and the construction of

branded story "worlds," all in the ultimate service of advertising intellectual properties to

prospective consumers.

This new realm of transmedia industries becomes further complicated by its interaction

with Christian media content and audiences. Both independent Christian and Hollywood

producers use transmedia platforms to promote their film projects as Christian "ministries" and

culturally alternative media. For example, film websites not only offer pastors downloadable

content for presentation in their churches—from sermon illustrations and video clips to full

sermon notes and study guides—but also associate film properties with avenues for religious

charity support.[12] Moreover, DVDs of many Christian-marketed films offer additional content

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[11] See "Chapter 7: Industrial Reflexivity as Viral Marketing" in John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Duke University Press, 2008), 274.
[12] For example, the marketing materials for *Letters to God* (2010), a film about an 8-year old boy suffering from cancer and writing letters to God for help, linked the film to fundraising efforts for the Arnold Palmer Hospital for

designed for spiritual teachings, inner-church ministry, and evangelical outreach. Social media

sites encourage fan interactivity at a spiritual level of committed "prayer support." Video blogs

hype the spiritual significance of each new project and allow fans to ("prayerfully") track film

productions and advertising campaigns. This type of transmedia advertising and fan engagement

expands traditional concepts of brand building, participatory labor, and digital marketing.

Indeed, these efforts have directly facilitated the ability of filmmakers in both Hollywood and

"Holywood" to reach and mobilize a broad Christian audience.

      Outside of these industrial frameworks, however, there also have been numerous political

and cultural factors that influenced the rise of Christian blockbusters and originated during the

time span of this study. After eight years of President Bill Clinton's socially liberal Democratic

administration as well as his personal scandals, the presidential election of Republican George

W. Bush signaled a shift in power towards conservative political and moral values in the

conservative Christian constituency, and indeed the public at large, which continued through the

catastrophic events of 9/11 and the subsequent wars abroad. During these times of national

turmoil, politicians publicly invoked Christianity and God as justifications for enacting right-

wing domestic and international policies. President Bush's public identification as an

Evangelical Christian, his support for pro-religious and pro-life policies, and his framing of the

US wars abroad against largely Muslim populations in religious terms all fueled more public

debate and division over the issue of the separation of church and state. Together these cultural

and political events brought religion and religious tensions into the foreground of the mainstream

media and the public consciousness. These factors provide the vital socio-political backdrop and

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Children. See the promotional video: "Letters to God: On Location: Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children," *Youtube*, January 25, 2010, accessed March 6, 2010 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhB4biUhg-Q>. See also example for Samaritan's Purse and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (2010), discussed below.

contextualization necessary for framing the intersection of Hollywood and Christian film culture from the late 1990s to the present.[13]

As this project explores industrial, institutional, and transmedia relationships between secular and religious media cultures, the term "Christian" must be defined with some specificity. When discussing such a large and multifaceted demographic as "Christians" within the United States, researchers are faced with several temptations in terms of categorization. On the one hand, "Christians" can be defined in the broadest sense of the word in common usage; this may include all those self-described, but also eliminates denominational and cultural diversity, localized subtleties, and individual agency. On the other hand, researchers can equally find themselves caught up in tedious discussions of Christian denominations and which groups should or should not be included—an enterprise that becomes hampered by minutia and in theoretical/theological debate. As one of the only media scholars addressing Christian culture in dialogue with mainstream media institutions, Heather Hendershot offers a constructive model that uses the idea of Evangelism as a unifying category that spans the many Christian denominations. As she explains:

> They [Evangelicals] believe that it is important to share the "good news" of the Gospel with others, often through giving testimony of their own personal conversion experience; they understand the Bible to be the true, infallible word of God; and they are frequently morally and politically conservative, distancing themselves from any kind of liberal thinking, whether political or spiritual. … Although nonbelievers often call conservative Christians "fundamentalists," the group that this book looks at is more accurately described as evangelical; fundamentalists are, strictly speaking, more separatist than evangelicals and tend to emphasize more adamantly the differences between believers and nonbelievers.[14]

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[13] Beyond functioning as the political and cultural backdrop for the rise of Christian film production, several Christian film properties overtly exploited the events of 9/11 in their marketing and branding campaigns. These properties generally centered on Evangelical Apocalyptic teachings and the Book of Revelations. For example, the creators of the *Left Behind* series repeatedly used 9/11 as validation of their "end-times" apocalyptic predictions in both the *Left Behind* books and films. Similarly, film producer Matthew Crouch claimed that God designed *Megiddo: The Omega Code 2* (2001), another Evangelical apocalyptic film, as a personal response to the World Trade Center attacks. See Torin Monahan, "Marketing the beast: *Left Behind* and the apocalypse industry," *Media, Culture & Society* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), Vol. 30(6): 813–830; and Robert W. Welkos, "Following the Book to Success," *Los Angeles Times* (Sept. 18, 2001), accessed Feb. 20, 2010 <articles.latimes.com/2001/sep/18/entertainment/ca-46834>.
[14] Hendershot, 2.

Hendershot thus uses the concept of Evangelism to describe Christians within every denomination—from Protestant to Catholic to Mormon to non-denominational—who see themselves as separate from secular society, and yet are nonetheless desirous of a degree of engagement with, and influence over, that society. Put more simply, Hendershot uses Evangelism as a covering term for what general usage calls the "conservative Christian base."

While this covering term is definitely useful in categorizing the general ethos and beliefs of Christian filmmakers—that is, Evangelism offers a clear demarcation between "Christian filmmakers" working on Christian content and filmmakers within the mainstream that may simply self-define as Christian—Hendershot's use of the term becomes more problematic in categorizing Christian audiences. Evangelicals obviously play a crucial role in the success or failure of films tailored for a Christian-specific demographic—like New Line Cinema's *The Nativity Story* about the birth of Jesus Christ, or Sherwood Pictures' *Fireproof* (2008), which features an overt "altar call" that demonstrates for the audience the steps to receiving Christian salvation. Yet major blockbuster successes like *The Passion of the Christ*, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005)*, The Blind Side*, and *Man of Steel* earned their box office numbers through appeals to both the Christian conservative base and the broader spectrum of non-Evangelical mainline Christians, particularly Catholic audiences for *The Passion*, not to mention campaigns that created significant mainstream cross-over to primarily secular audiences. Indeed, even with the films that do not break out of predominantly Evangelical demographics, it is certainly the hope that they will reach the broadest spectrum of audience demographics possible. Thus, although the term "Evangelism" will be useful in circumscribing Christian filmmakers and core conservative Christian audiences, at the same time

it is necessary to have a more ecumenical and secular understanding of Christian audiences in order to fully appreciate the range of industrial marketing strategies.

In this regard, one research methodology that will be useful for this study positions my work squarely within the fields of film history, media studies, and industrial analysis, and specifically analyses of Hollywood and Christian industrial film cultures. This project seeks to investigate the intersection and meeting places of two distinct film cultures—Hollywood and "Holywood"—compelled to enter into relations of mutual cooperation and competition through the production and reception of specific media products. As such, the production cultures of these two cultural institutions become a crucial site from which to investigate this intersection. To this end, John Caldwell's *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* offers my project one helpful model in terms of both theory and methodology. While media industries have often been generally described—and accused—of being major culture producers in contemporary society, Caldwell instead specifically views the actual work culture behind media production as central to understanding what makes it onto the screen(s). Much more highly protected and mediated than most work cultures due to the public scrutiny it receives, media culture is a world unto itself, filled with its own industry practices, insider rituals, and cultural mindsets. In investigating media industries, Caldwell methodologically calls for a cross-comparison of the multiple research techniques in ethnographic fieldwork with academic scholarship across various disciplines so as to contextualize fieldwork findings. As Ellen Seiter, another advocate for interdisciplinary ethnographies, succinctly puts it, research should utilize "both fieldwork and homework; trips to the library as well as immersion within the ethnographic scene."[15] Both agree that time-

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[15] Ellen Seiter, *Television and New Media Audiences* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 135.

consuming subject observation and rapport development within fieldwork should be supplemented by other methods.[16]

In my own research, fieldwork involved worksite observations, industry ritual observations, interviews, surveys, and group discussions. My fieldwork is also contextualized through research from other academic disciplines, such as historiography and economics, as well as by textual analysis of film texts, paratexts, and marketing materials. Thus, in this study, trips to libraries and archives proved just as crucial as trips to company offices, industry conventions, and screening rooms. Indeed, as well as providing counterbalance and contextualization to fieldwork, interdisciplinary research ameliorated the inherent difficulties of conducting ethnographic research within the media community. Media work is fraught with intense levels of competition both within and between media companies, outright suspicion and fear of intellectual and creative theft, and intricate management of public personas under a harsh media spotlight. Within such an environment, gaining access to unfiltered opinions, workplace relationships, and bureaucratic structures is nearly impossible, especially at the higher levels of authority and management. Thus, the study of industrial work culture could not (and should not) take place at the level of ethnographic observation alone.

In regard to other avenues of access to film industry culture, the marketing and promotional materials surrounding a film become especially useful. As Caldwell has noted, marketing is the "quintessential form of industrial self-representation."[17] In my study, analyzing the multiple textual and paratextual materials and iterations generated from the core film texts

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[16] Many scholars, particularly ethnographic anthropologists, take issue with the use of the term "ethnography" within media studies. Indeed, even Ellen Seiter critiqued the use of the term in media studies in Chapter 2, "Qualitative Audience Research," of *Television and New Media Audience*. For the purposes of my own research, I refrain from describing my own methods as fully "ethnographic," but I acknowledge that many of my research methodologies come out of ethnographic fields of research and have been further developed within media studies in conjunction with other academic analyses, most prominently by scholars like Caldwell and Seiter.
[17] Caldwell, 274.

will prove vital to not only understanding the intentions and perceptions of the filmmakers, but also the specific complexities of marketing to church demographics. For example, film marketers often use paratextual materials to advertise these films as inner-church resources for ministry and congregational growth. In the case of *Fireproof*, a film centering around the crisis and redemption of a Christian marriage, the marketing team created two websites to publicize the film's release: one devoted to the film's production and promotion (www.fireproofthemovie.com) and one devoted exclusively to the principles of Christian marriage therapy advocated by the film (www.fireproofmymarriage.com).[18] Moreover, the film's eventual DVD release was promoted as a "ministry in a box," containing bonus featurettes like "Marriage Matters," about the difficulties of marriage in a hostile and secular American culture (and how *Fireproof* can help); a full promotion for *The Love Dare* (a marriage therapy spin-off book based on the film); and DVD-ROM content filled with discussion guides and quizzes geared towards the healing of Christian marriages.[19]

Indeed, many films marketed to Christian audiences have adopted this method of framing film entertainment as a church ministry through extra-textual materials, including those produced by major Hollywood studios. As just one example, 20th Century Fox promoted *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (2010) in a similar ministry-oriented fashion, creating both an official film website (www.narnia.com, now a defunct link that connects to the film's Facebook site) and an additional website offering resource materials to churches and pastors (www.narniafaith.com, link still active).[20] These extensive and all-gratis offerings include

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[18] *Fireproof* was produced cheaply by Sherwood Pictures for around $500,000, largely through the volunteer work of the congregants of Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, GA. It was distributed nation wide by Samuel Goldwyn Pictures and went on to gross over $33 million at the box office. *Fireproof* became the highest grossing independent film of 2008. See Tim Newcomb, "Faith-Based Filmmaking: The Sherwood Pictures Crusade," *Time* (Aug 25, 2011), accessed March 14, 2012: http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,2090429-1,00.html.
[19] *Fireproof*, DVD release (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2009).
[20] Both website links accessed April 25, 2012.

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original sermon outlines, study guides, and event planners, all connected to the film and all available with downloadable film clips, as well as video endorsements from prominent Christian leaders like Franklin Graham (heir to Billy Graham's evangelical empire) and promotional videos for Graham's non-profit charity, Samaritan's Purse. In the case of both *Fireproof* and *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, as well as many other films I have researched thus far, these paratextaul and transmedia materials attempt to move selected Hollywood and "Holywood" film texts well beyond the realm of mere media entertainment and into the territory of church-sanctioned, even God-endorsed, ministries that obligate financial support from the faithful.

Beyond just inner-church ministry, however, transmedia marketing campaigns also commonly associate Christian-themed films with outer-church evangelism and the conversion of non-Christians. These campaigns often openly position the film texts as sermons for those who might not regularly go to church and encourage pastors and church members to use the films as tools for reaching "lost souls." For example, one marketing technique utilized to great financial success by *The Passion of the Christ*, and subsequently utilized by nearly every film researched in this study thus far, was to create an option on the film website for advanced ticket purchases. In a novel tactic, Christian viewers were encouraged to buy blocks of tickets, or even buy out whole theater showings, and then give these tickets away to non-Christian friends and family members as an evangelistic ministry. As writer/producer David Nixon (*Fireproof*, *Letters to God*) told me in an interview:

> There are people in their congregations that have friends, neighbors, and family members that they can never get to church. But they can give them that ticket and say, "Now you take that family member or that neighbor that would never come to church or go to a Bible study and here's a free ticket, go take them to a movie and then you get them in front of the gospel in front of the theatre." So churches are getting that this is an amazing evangelistic tool. I believe that Christian films may be the greatest evangelistic tool of our era.[21]

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[21] Phone interview with David Nixon (March 8, 2010).

In terms of marketing, this promotional tactic equates the number of ticket purchases to the eternal salvation of souls, transforming the film-going experience into a higher spiritual movement. This emphasis also communicates an implied obligation for "faithful" church audiences to participate in order to remain in good spiritual conscience. Moreover, in terms of revenue, this tactic transforms the traditional theatrical film model—product (film) is advertised/sold to consumer (ticket buyers)—into a commercial broadcast television model—the audience (unsaved souls) is the product sold to sponsors (Evangelical church congregations) by various content providers (film production companies, whether Hollywood or "Holywood"). Thus, theatrical films provide a façade of "entertainment" that churches can purchase and then promote at the grassroots level in order to reach prospective church members.

As these few marketing examples demonstrate, the relationship between Hollywood and Christian film cultures is driven and shaped by powerful economic, institutional, and cultural forces that require examination at the industrial level. By utilizing a methodology that incorporates research approaches based in ethnographic fieldwork in conjunction with academic contextualization, this project aims to both reveal and analyze the industrial processes that produce the texts and paratexts marketed to church audiences. Moreover, this methodology will help explore how two such divergent cultures as Hollywood and "Holywood" operate in an industrial and economic relationship with each other, as well as the inherent controls, conflicts, courtships, and compromises that result from such a relationship. Following this methodology, my project will hopefully fill an important historical and industrial gap in contemporary film and media studies.

Indeed, to date, the majority of current scholarship on the relationship between mainstream cinema and Christianity has focused on religious representation and textual analysis.

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This focus has been dominant in both scholarship on religion within film studies as well as in scholarship on film within religious studies. With the exception of several important works on religious censorship in the Classical Hollywood Era, most film scholars approach the topic of religion and cinema at the level of the film text.[22] As a paradigmatic example, Ivan Butler's early *Religion in the Cinema* surveys the representation and treatment of Christianity in both Hollywood films and popular foreign films.[23] Butler structures the book thematically around the different types of Christian representation—for example, "Bible Stories," "Monks and Nuns," "Christ in Cinema," and "The Dark Side," among others—and draws on films ranging from the silent era to shortly before the book's date of publication in 1969. A more contemporary work of film scholarship, Paul Coates' *Cinema, Religion, and the Romantic Legacy: Through a Glass Darkly* (2003), follows a similar thematic analysis of on-screen Christian representation, but also adds an additional auteur study of European directors, like Andrei Tarkovsky and Krzysztof Kieslowski, whose works deal consistently with spiritual themes.[24] While the theoretical models and interpretations vary greatly between these two works, the research model for both remains primarily textual analysis. For both authors, the intersection of religion and cinema is limited to their relationship in cinematic representation.

This methodological approach is also dominant in the majority of works by religious

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[22] For books directly addressing religion and film censorship, see James M. Skinner, *The Cross and the Cinema: The Legion of Decency and the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, 1933-1970* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993); Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Frank Walsh, *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry* (Yale University Press, 1996); and Black, *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies, 1940-1975* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). For books discussing religion and film censorship through the topic of studio self-regulation, see Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (University of California Press, 1997); Matthew Bernstein, ed., *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation During the Studio Era* (Rutgers University Press, 1999); Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema; 1930-1934* (Columbia University Press, 1999); and Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (Columbia University Press, 2007).
[23] Ivan Bulter, *Religion in the Cinema* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co, 1969).
[24] Paul Coates, *Cinema, Religion, and the Romantic Legacy: Through a Glass Darkly* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003).

scholars. For example, Adele Reinhartz's *Jesus of Hollywood* (2007) is one of several books

published in the past 15 years on the topic of "Jesus films," or film adaptations of the Biblical

Jesus narrative.[25] Reinhartz places Biblical scripture and various popular and/or popularly known

film adaptations into dialogue with each other through close textual readings of both. In general,

most religious scholars utilize this same methodology when addressing film. Thus, while the

specific research topics vary widely and produce different conclusions, the template of textual

readings oriented around popular films remains fairly consistent. Robert Jewett's two studies on

cinema, *St. Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with American Culture* (1993) and *Saint*

Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph over Shame (1999), both challenge Christian audiences to

see theological principles from the New Testament within mainstream and secular Hollywood

film texts, such as action films like *Star Wars* (1977) and revenge-dramas like *Unforgiven*

(1992).[26] Even a scholarly work like John C. Lyden's *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and*

Rituals (2003)—a conscious attempt to redirect religious studies of film away from

superimposed theological readings and towards an embrace of cinema as having a religious

worldview in its own right—still grounds its argumentation in close textual analysis.[27]

Regardless then of differing topics, religious scholars keep their focus only on study of the films

themselves.[28] While these works in religious studies have consciously engaged with Christianity

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[25] Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Adele Reinhartz is
 Professor in the Department of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa. For other examples of
scholarship on "Jesus films," see Richard C. Stern, Clayton N. Jefford, and Guerric Debona, *Savior on the Silver
Screen* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999); Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark* (New York: Trinity,
2003); W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge,
2004); Jeffrey L. Staley and Richard Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus
on DVD* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).
[26] Robert Jewett, *St. Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with American Culture* (Louisville, KY:
Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) and *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph over Shame* (Grand Rapids,
MI: Eardmans,1999). Robert Jewett is Professor of New Testament, University of Heidelberg, Germany.
[27] John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York University Press, 2003). John C. Lyden
is Professor and Chair of the Religion Department at Dana College in Blair Nebraska.
[28] For further examples of religious work on cinema, see Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-
Figures in Film* (Kansas City, MO : Sheed & Ward, 1997); Mark I. Pinksy, *The Gospel According to Disney: Faith,*

and film in contemporary society, indeed much more so than current scholarship in film studies,

their logical motivation still remains rooted in theology and not in historical, cultural, and

industrial issues. In sum, while textual analysis may represent the majority of scholarly work

dealing with Hollywood and Christianity—both in film and religious studies—it only offers my

own project tangential assistance in terms of relevant research materials and methodological

models.

Significantly, two notable exceptions to this methodology within religious studies have

recently emerged. Terry Lindvall's *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry*

(2007) and Lindvall and Andrew Quicke's *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian*

Film Industry, 1930-1986 (2011) are the first histories written on the Christian film industry and,

significantly, they offer my own project several practical benefits in terms of historical

contextualization.[29] First, their time frame neatly dovetails into my own. Designed as a series,

Sanctuary Cinema covers early Christian experiments in filmmaking during the silent era and

Celluloid Sermons picks up the narrative at the emergence of sound and carries it forward to the

mid-1980s, just before the major proliferation of Christian home videos in the 1990s and the

subsequent rise of current theatrical "Christian blockbusters."[30] Second, their historic positioning

of early Christian films validates my focus on the economic and industrial models of

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Trust, and Pixie Dust (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004); Kim Paffenroth, *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006); John C. McDowell, *The Gospel according to Star Wars: Faith, Hope, and the Force* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2008); and Eric S. Christianson, Peter Francis, William R. Telford, eds., *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology And The Bible In Film* (London: SCM Press, 2011).

[29] Terry Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (New York University Press, 2007) and Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986* (New York University Press, 2011). Terry Lindvall is C.S. Lewis Professor of Communication and Christian Thought at Virginia Wesleyan College. Andrew Quicke is Professor of Communications and the Arts at Regent University.

[30] According to the closing pages of *Celluloid Sermons*, Lindvall is currently preparing a final book that begins 1987 (presumably starting with the controversy over *The Last Temptation of Christ*) and ends in the present era of "Christian blockbusters." See Lindvall and Quicke, 218.

contemporary Christian films. Specifically, both books narrowly define pre-1986 "Christian films" as "films of, by, and for the people of the church, not aspiring to high aesthetic values nor aiming at economic profit, but seeking to renew, uplift, and propagate."[31] Besides eliminating an extraneous discussion of Hollywood Biblical epics, this definition overtly emphasizes the non-profit motives of most early Christian filmmakers. Indeed, the case studies laid out in both books demonstrate a pronounced lack of interest in film profits by early Christian filmmakers and film companies—a lack sometimes based in practical issues of distribution and exhibition, but often based in principles of theology and ministry. The authors situate these motives and limitations as more economically chaste and naïve than current Christian filmmaking, which now not only cooperates with but also competes against Hollywood filmmaking at the box office.[32] Thus my own focus on the intersection of Hollywood and "Holywood" since 1998 is reinforced as a topic and a timeframe that has a specific historical basis.

Beyond historical contextualization, *Sanctuary Cinemas* and *Celluloid Sermons* also offer my project historical materials based in applicable methodology. Although produced by religious scholars, both works demonstrate a dramatic shift away from theology-based textual analysis and towards a historical accounting of Christian cinema based in archival research and cultural contextualization. For example, Lindvall begins *Sanctuary Cinema* with a survey of the many historical Christian debates over visual forms of religious representation and offers a primer, overview, and contextualization of early Christian cinema useful to my own project. Furthermore, the footnotes for this section provide a valuable collection of important works on the subject. Lindvall then shifts to methods of historiography similarly found in many academic film histories based in primary research, and uses these methods to investigate a range of

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[31] Lindvall, 1.
[32] Lindvall and Quicke, xiv.

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technological precursors to cinema and how their general adoption and use by churches predated and predesigned early religious experiments in cinema. He then moves into case studies of the early and often sectarian Christian films produced by churches and ministers for religious instruction, evangelism, and entertainment, and ends with discussions of several Christian attempts to start nonsectarian film businesses, including the industrial details of their production, distribution, and exhibition practices. These discussions are based in primary materials, such as newspaper accounts, personal journals and financial records, church records, business records, production records, advertisements, and, when available, the films themselves. In following this methodology, both *Sanctuary Cinema* and *Celluloid Sermons* offer my project sound narrative positioning, research and archival support, and cultural contextualization. At the same time, it must be noted that the authors explicitly frame their motives in writing these books as seeking to redeem the "pioneers" of the Christian film industry from historical obscurity.[33] Thus, while the books utilize sound research methodology, they are insufficient in their critical evaluation of both the films and the historical contexts that produced them.

Just as Lindvall and Quicke represent exceptions within the field of religion, certain key film scholars have also moved beyond pure textual analysis in their address of the intersection of Hollywood and "Holywood." In particular, Heather Hendershot's aforementioned *Shaking the World for Jesus* (2004) has contributed significantly to my understanding of and methodological approach to the "Holywood" half of this intersection. Beyond merely addressing the existence of Christian media—a significant contribution to film studies in itself—Hendershot explores Christian media production and products from a number of useful perspectives, and includes among them historical, industrial, economic, and cultural analyses. While Hendershot's methodology does not fully incorporate the ethnographic methods of Caldwell and Seiter, it

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[33] Lindvall and Quicke, xii-xiii.

nonetheless provides a model for my own project in an interdisciplinary analysis that is key in

supporting and balancing my fieldwork-based findings. Furthermore, Hendershot's diversity of

approaches is inherent in the way she structures the book. Conceived in three parts, the book's

first section, "Commodification," lays the historical groundwork for the rise of Christian

consumerism since the 1970s, the cultural demand for Christian alternatives to mainstream

media, and the subsequent rise of the now very powerful Christian music industry. Part two,

"Sexuality," deals with the social, cultural, sexual, gender, and bio-politics advocated by

Christian media and negotiated by Christian audiences. Part three, "Filmmaking," provides a

historical and industrial narrative of Christian filmmaking similar to the latter half of *Celluloid*

Sermons, although it does so through different case studies and from a cultural analysis of

Evangelicals' engagement with and negotiation of mainstream media objects. In this regard, like

Lindvall and Quicke's works, Hendershot's historical and industrial positioning of Christian

media and its interactions with popular culture further validates the focus and the periodization

of my own project.

Furthermore, Hendershot offers one of the most vital contributions to my project through

her theoretical and methodological approach to Evangelical media producers and consumers as a

unique subculture within the landscape of popular culture. Drawing on cultural theory,

Hendershot argues that Christian media production and consumption results from engagement

with, and response to, mainstream media culture. As she explains:

> Evangelical negotiation of mainstream culture is in some ways a text-book example of how scholars such
> as Michel de Certeau, Henry Jenkins, John Fiske, and Dick Hebdige have described the mechanics of
> popular culture: as a process of appropriation, of poaching on the terrain of mass-culture industry.[34]

Like most media subcultures, Evangelical media industries attempt to adopt, model, and recycle

mainstream media products for their own cultural ends. These industries appropriate the media

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[34] Hendershot, 13.

trappings of mass culture while at the same time resisting the latter's ideological hegemony.

Hendershot argues, however, that unlike most media subcultures Christian media's conservative

nature uniquely complicates other examples of resistance to hegemonic mass culture.[35] As a

distinctly religious and conservative form of counterhegemonic culture, the subculture of

Christian media seeks not only to transform mainstream mass culture, but also to actually

overtake and convert it, and thus "aspires to lose its 'sub' status" and become a new cultural

hegemony.[36] Hendershot's theoretical approach to Christian media industries over the last 30

years as a historical relationship of subculture to popular culture provides an essential model for

my project that will inform my own focus on the Christian film industry since 1998, as well as its

subculture relationship to the hegemonic Hollywood mainstream. My project will thus seek to

understand not only Hollywood's influence upon "Holywood," but also the reciprocal influence

of "Holywood" on Hollywood. How this mutual influence occurs, how it manifests itself, what it

looks like, and where it is going will all be central questions driving my own work.

 Indeed, while academic efforts to study "Holywood"'s side of the relationship are few,

the attempts to study Hollywood's perspective on Christian film culture are fewer still. The

works from this latter perspective that apply most directly to my project have been several case

studies of Hollywood marketing campaigns engineered towards Christian audiences. As

discussed above, marketing represents a crucial point of industrial self-representation and

motivational disclosure for film companies, and thus will play an important role in my study of

industrial culture for both Hollywood and "Holywood." One particularly useful work in this

regard is James Russell's "Narnia as a Site of National Struggle: Marketing, Christianity, and

National Purpose in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*." This

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[35] Hendershot, 14.
[36] Hendershot, 13.

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essay not only covers the wide-ranging materials utilized by Walden Media and Walt Disney Pictures to reach Christian Evangelical audiences, but also discusses the rhetorical devices shaping those materials as well as the political and cultural contextualization guiding the campaign. Likewise, Erica Sheen's "Cartoon Wars: *The Prince of Egypt* in Retrospect" describes the marketing campaign utilized by DreamWorks SKG for *The Prince of Egypt*.[37] This campaign—mentioned earlier as the first by a major studio to reach out to religious audiences since *The Last Temptation of Christ*—is explained in the context of negotiated appeals to three religious audiences, namely Christian, Jewish, and Muslim filmgoers. Once again, the description of marketing rhetoric and research sources are most useful. This is also true for the handful of both scholarly and non-academic works devoted to the marketing campaign for Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, not only a highly influential film in regards to faith-based marketing but also one that straddles the boundaries between Hollywood and "Holywood" more than almost any film had before.[38]

This dissertation is divided between two chapters offering historical and industrial contextualization for both "Holywood" and Hollywood respectively, and two chapters featuring specific case studies for each side. The first two chapters are necessary given the lack of understanding and scholarship regarding Hollywood's relationship to Christianity, outside of censorship issues. Although "Holywood" has been operating in the United States, in one form or another, as a historically independent film movement since the silent era, almost no film scholarship has addressed its roots and industrial progress over the past century. In order to fully address "Holywood"'s contemporary era and concentrated relationship to Hollywood, this

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[37] Erica Sheen, "Cartoon Wars: *The Prince of Egypt* in Retrospect," in Lynn Schofield Clark, ed., *Religion, Media, and the Marketplace* (Rutgers University Press, 2007), 154.

[38] See Timothy K. Beal and Tod Linafelt, *Mel Gibson's Bible: Religion, Popular Culture, and 'The Passion of the Christ'* (University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Kenndall R. Phillips, "Chapter 5: Religion: Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*," *Controversial Cinema: The Films That Outraged America* (London: Praeger, 2008).

project must first establish the movement's origins and industrial struggles before modern times. Likewise, little has been written about Hollywood in relationship to Christianity since the end of the Production Code, even though Hollywood's most significant encounters with Christian audiences would happen in the three decades between the end of the censorship boards in the late 1960s and the birth of Christian blockbuster era in the late 1990s. Thus, this project will fill in the historical gaps in this relationship before proceeding with a contemporary analysis of Hollywood's response to Christian film culture.

After setting the historical and industrial stage with the first two chapters, the last half of this project will offer more a deep-dive analysis of both "Holywood" and Hollywood in the contemporary era through specific case studies for each side. These case studies allow me to examine each side of this relationship as well as their convergence with equal depth and analysis. As opposed to a broad survey that discusses many films, the case study structure allows me to delve deeper and in more concentrated directions. Case studies also enable me to convey more specific historical narratives for both Hollywood and "Holywood" on individual levels through the cultural and industrial contextualization required for the film discussed in each chapter. By engaging with these industrial film cultures equally and together, this project demonstrates where the cultures meet within the marketplace and how industrial, economic, religious, and regional pressures can cause each culture to transform one another as well as conform to one another.

Chapter 1 takes on the complicated task of contextualizing "Holywood" in the modern era. It does this through an industrial history of "Holywood," an examination of the modern Christian blockbuster, and a methodological analysis of "Holywood" Christian marketing. Specifically, this argues that "Holywood" could not compete at the box office until independent cinema first established a model for indie grassroots marketing and distribution. The first part of

this chapter examines "Holywood"'s three major periods, from the silent era to contemporary times. In particular, this section addresses the financial, industrial, and theological structures that kept independent Christian films from theatrical markets, and instead relegated the movement to internal church networks and Christian home video markets. This section ends with a brief overview of the rise of the modern Christian blockbuster era and the types of Christian media produced since the late 1990s. The second part of the chapter then examines *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and its crucial role in reviving "Holywood" cinema and fully establishing the modern Christian blockbuster. Specifically, this chapter argues that *The Passion*'s marketing campaign established the first successful and repeatable model for Christian film marketing, and that this model was designed around contemporary changes within the infrastructure of Evangelical society, as well the growth of "culture war" divides and the prevalence of new media technology. The final section of this chapter then demonstrates the continued impacts of *The Passion* within "Holywood" marketing, and how Christian filmmakers have adopted and adapted *The Passion*'s methodologies to rally Christian audiences at the box office. The historical and industrial context of this chapter is necessary for three reasons: it provides a general understanding of "Holywood" (a movement little known until recently); it contextualizes the industrial, technological, and cultural reasons for Christian cinema's sudden success in recent years; and it offers a primer on marketing advancements—innovated mostly by "Holywood" and then copied by Hollywood—discussed in the subsequent chapters. This foundational exploration of advances in Christian marketing will prove essential for the entire project, as Chapter 3 will more deeply dissect "Holywood" marketing through the specific case study of *Fireproof*, while Chapter 4 will demonstrate how Hollywood has adapted many of these mythologies for their own courting of Christian audiences.

With Chapter 2, the project shifts to the Hollywood side of the relationship. And just as

Chapter 1 provided contextual history for "Holywood," so Chapter 2 will also provide

Hollywood's industrial context leading up to the present day, specifically Hollywood's

interaction with Christian film culture since 1968 and the adoption of the MPAA ratings system.

Although much has been written on Hollywood and Christianity during the years of the

Production Code and the dominance of censorship boards like the Legion of Decency, almost no

industrial history has been published regarding Hollywood in relationship to Christianity during

the heated rise of the "culture wars" in the United States. These three decades provide fascinating

dramas as Christians adjusted uneasily and unhappily to films addressing more controversial

religious topics for the first time. This chapter will address the major Hollywood/Christian

interactions leading up to the present day, from controversy and protest surrounding *Monty

Python's Life of Brian* (1979) and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) to

Miramax's religiously provocative marketing campaigns in the 1990s to, finally, Hollywood's

renewed attempts at Christian courtship in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This contextual

background is essential for establishing Hollywood's tentative attitude towards the rise of the

Christian blockbuster era, explored in depth in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3 then shifts this project into the case studies, specifically addressing

"Holywood" through an examination of the film *Fireproof.* Produced for $500,000 by Sherwood

Baptist Church through a nearly-all volunteer crew of church members, the film was distributed

nationwide by Samuel Goldwyn Pictures and grossed more than $33 million at the box office,

becoming the highest grossing independent film of 2008. Thus, *Fireproof* offers a remarkable

example of Evangelical Christian film culture working in complex affiliation with Hollywood

distribution and marketing resources. By using *Fireproof* as a case study, I also am able to

discuss the industrial, economic, and cultural context that surrounded and enabled the film's creation. The first part of the chapter establishes the historical and cultural background of the Christian film industry leading up to Sherwood Pictures. work culture of Sherwood Pictures and their novel production model of volunteer support, which developed progressively through two previous film productions before *Fireproof*. Additionally, I address Sherwood Pictures' complex relationship with Hollywood, which has fluctuated between public bouts of antagonism in the press towards both Hollywood morals and conflicts over MPAA ratings, as well as smooth instances of cooperation with certain Hollywood distribution companies, both through theatrical and home video platforms. Finally, I address *Fireproof*'s marketing campaign, both in terms of the grassroots marketing precursors that *Fireproof* copied, adapted, and greatly expanded upon, as well as *Fireproof*'s specific and highly profitable use of transmedia marketing and merchandising. I close this chapter by gesturing to the ways Sherwood Pictures successfully continued this model with very few alterations in their most recent film, *Courageous*.

As the converse to Chapter 3 in orientation, Chapter 4 focuses on Hollywood's interaction with Christian film culture through the case study of Grace Hill Media and *Man of Steel*. As a franchise reboot and summer tent pole film by Warner Bros Pictures, this film provides an ideal example of a seemingly mainstream, broad-audience appeal film that was also heavily marketed so as to appeal to Christian demographics. In regard to the latter, Warner Bros. mainly used a two-front approach. First, Warner Bros commissioned *Man of Steel Resources*, a website specifically directed at Christian pastors and audiences and filled with "ministry resources" such links to advanced screenings for pastors, sermon downloads based on the film and the Superman mythos, and video clips packages from the film (http://manofsteelresources.com). Sermons offered on the site, such as "Jesus: The Original

Superhero," systematically break down the Superman origin story, as well as the Jewish backgrounds of the comic book creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, and explicitly translate these narrative and historical backdrops as support for Christian theology. Second, Warner Bros. interlaced overt Christian symbolism throughout the film itself in order to emphasize a Christian interpretation of Superman mythology. Beyond the important cultural and industrial processes that constructed and distributed the film, *Man of Steel* also allows me to explore Grace Hill Media, the film and television marketing firm that handled the film's highly successful faith-based marketing campaign. As mentioned above, Grace Hill Media and other similar firms exist solely to help Hollywood studios reach Christian audience demographics and are a new sub-industry within the film industry developed entirely as byproducts of the rise of "Christian blockbusters" and Hollywood's newfound need to court Christian audiences. As with "Holywood," the eventual success of *The Passion of the Christ* proved a game changer and led to Hollywood studios mimicking and adapting the grassroots campaigns designed by Christian film companies, and to the eventual development of Christian marketing firms like Grace Hill Media that court and cater to the concerns of Christian audiences. As I will detail, this "middleman" marketing relationship between studios and audiences is not without its own set of conflicts and negotiations at the level of industrial culture. As illustration, I detail *Man of Steel*'s specific marketing campaign and then close the chapter by gesturing to other films that have subsequently adapted this highly successful film's narrative and marketing strategies.

Finally, Chapter 5 then elaborates on these future models and the various other forms they might take and directions they might lead. Each of the case studies my project addresses have led to a crop of imitations, sometimes by the same filmmakers, with varying degrees of success. Some patterns of success have led to stale repetition in the hopes of capturing and

exploiting the economic potential of Christian demographics. At the same time, certain

filmmakers, production companies, and marketing firms have attempted new and innovative

ways to reach this audience. There were, for example, a flood of Hollywood and "Holywood"

films with Christian appeal released in 2014 that both hit and missed at the box office. On the

"Holywood" side, *God's Not Dead* aimed small in terms of budget and narrow in terms of

marketing and scored huge returns at the box office. *Left Behind*, in contrast, aimed big in terms

of budget, cast, and a more mainstream marketing campaign, only to fail with both religious and

secular audiences. Hollywood films also mirrored these mixed results. While Christian audiences

embraced the family-drama *Heaven is for Real* and the Jesus story *Son of God*, they largely

scorned the large-scale Biblical epics *Noah* and *Exodus* on the basis of major scriptural

inaccuracy. This concluding chapter will also address a "Holywood" filmmaker that both

confirms to and utterly complicates the models of Christian filmmaking discussed thus far.

Rooted in material Perry first developed as a performer in community theaters and churches,

Perry's films feature narratives that are simultaneously social melodramas and family comedies

centered on the particular problems of many black urban communities, these including child

abuse, spousal abuse, and general family dysfunction. However, within these narratives, Perry

also overtly stresses Christian moral lessons of forgiveness, redemption, and self-worth, as well

as the place of the church within black community life. In this regard, Perry markets his films to

underserved demographics within the underserved African American community. While Perry

conforms to "Holywood" filmmaking in terms of spiritual branding, his subject matter and

marketing methods differ greatly and deserve concentrated analysis.

     In all these cases, the success and failure of key films has demonstrated and solidified the

potential power of Christian consumers at the box office. This power, and its potential for profits,

ensures that films with Christian appeal made by both Hollywood and "Holywood" will continue into the indefinite future. It is a future that demands academic address. Indeed, while media studies have embraced the exploration of media's interaction with most aspects of cultural identity—from race to class to gender to ethnicity to sexuality—religious identity has been consistently neglected from the discussion. Yet religion, and in particular the Christian religion, has been a key form of American cultural identification since the nation's inception, and this religious identity has actively engaged with Hollywood since the industry's inception. In the present day, Christianity and Hollywood represent two of the most powerful and well-established cultural institutions within the United States, and while their historical relationship has been complicated and often contentious, and remains so in many ways, it has never before been so concentrated or explicit. Thus my project engages with this historic new concentration. It will dissect the economic pressures that compel such strange bedfellows into mutually exploitive relationships with each other. It will study how this cultural collision of motives and mindsets happens at the industrial level, and subsequently influences film culture at every level. As the call to harvest Christian audiences has gone out and been taken up by both insiders and outsiders to Christian culture alike, Hollywood and "Holywood"'s competition and cooperation will affect the future of media production, media culture, and mass culture at large. This important cultural relationship should not remain in the dark and I hope my study helps bring it into the light.

Chapter 1 – "Holywood":

Historical Roots, *The Passion of the Christ*, and the Rise of the Christian Blockbuster

Although this project deals with the modern relationship between Hollywood and "Holywood"—i.e., the mainstream film industry's relationship to independent Christian cinema—it is safe to assume that most readers will only be familiar with Hollywood's industrial and cultural background. While Hollywood history is more easily accessible, and continues to carry a widespread cultural identity, "Holywood" (like most longstanding independent film movements) has received little historical attention amongst scholars. Indeed, despite the recent box office successes of many Christian films, "Holywood" currently remains a cultural subgroup little understood outside Evangelical insider circles. Thus, before proceeding with the modern case studies of the following chapters, some modest leveling of the contextual playing field is required. This chapter will act as a historical primer for those who may know little about "Holywood," its roots and various formations/mutations from the silent era to the present, and its parallel industrial narrative alongside Hollywood. Indeed, the current rise of the "Christian blockbuster" only occurred through specific industrial, technological, and cultural changes in recent times, and thus these occurrences are best understood in the light of times that came before.

Specifically, this project divides "Holywood" into three distinct time periods: early pioneers (silent cinema to the 1970s), central distribution (1970s to late 1990s), and the Christian blockbuster era (late 1990s to the present). This chapter will argue that "Holywood"'s historic struggles during its first two eras mirrored those of other independent film movements struggling through the changing economic and industrial landscape of American film history since the silent

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era while dealing with specific philosophical restrictions and a lack of Hollywood infrastructure. Additionally, this chapter argues that the current "Christian blockbuster era" only solidified through the marketing methodologies established by Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. These methodologies allowed Christian film companies to target niche Christian markets and finally rally support at the nationwide box office, essentially transforming Christian filmmaking from nonprofit ministry to profitable entertainment sold as ministry. While Christian filmmakers had tried to rally Christian audiences at the box office since the late 1990s, *The Passion* would be the first "Holywood" film to successfully merge all the changing elements of Evangelical culture into a single concentrated marketing model. The film's radical success thus set a standard that continues to be copied and refined by Christian filmmakers.

Given the historical and industrial complexity of this topic, this chapter is divided into three sections. Part 1 lays out a brief historical and industrial background for "Holywood"'s three main eras, from early pioneers to central distribution to the modern Christian blockbuster. While Part 1 provides the reader with a narrative framework for understanding "Holywood"'s historical and cultural development, it also addresses the specific industrial and economic challenges that prevented Christian cinema from thriving until recently. As a counterpart, Part 2 will investigate the advances in film technology and marketing techniques that undergird contemporary "Holywood," and the model established through the success of *The Passion of the Christ*. Part 3 will then offer an analysis of the various "Holywood" grassroots marketing methodologies employed by different Christian film companies in the wake of *The Passion*. This general overview of "Holywood" methodologies will prove foundational for examining how Hollywood has adapted "Holywood" tactics for their own gain (Chapter 2) and the deeper dissections of Christian marketing in the case studies of *Fireproof* (Chapters 3) and *Man of Steel* (Chapter 4).

This marketing background is also crucial for understanding how "Holywood" rose to Christian blockbuster status so quickly in the new millennium.

PART 1: ROOTS OF THE CHRSTIAN FILM INDUSTRY

In the pioneering works *Sanctuary Cinema* and *Celluloid Sermons*, authors Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke describe early Christian cinema in rather glowing, altruistic terms. They cleanly define Christian cinema before the 1980s as films by Christians and for the purposes of Christian ministry, with little aesthetic aspiration and no intention of great financial return.[39] While Lindvall and Quicke's detailed research offers many examples of these altruistic motives in early Christian filmmakers—indeed, several filmmakers openly expressed their non-profit ambitions as theologically motivated—still, the consistent presence of financial and technological limitations must also be taken into account.[40] Simply put, the Christian film industry, like all independent movements, has never had the production infrastructure of the Hollywood studios nor the ability to distribute films to theaters on large-scale basis. While certain Christian leaders have always recognized the possibilities of cinema—as both a teaching tool for inner-church ministry and an Evangelistic method for outer-church growth—the costs associated with filmmaking have never been truly overcome by filmmakers outside of Hollywood, whether religious or secular, in a manner that would allow for a consistent challenge to Hollywood's domination of film production, distribution, and exhibition, as well as profits. The non-profit motives of pre-1980s Christian cinema should not be discounted, and yet it must be acknowledged that these filmmakers could not have realistically hoped for great profits, even if

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[39] Lindvall, 1.

[40] Lindvall and Quicke's description of the nonprofit motives of early Christian filmmakers can be clearly seen in Chapter 3 of *Celluloid Sermons*, titled "Methodist and Ecumenical Films." Here the authors chronicle the progress of the Protestant Film Commission and the Methodist Church in the United States during the late 1940s. While the Protestant Film Commission sought to create narrative and instructional films that could appeal to all denominational branches, the Methodist Church turned their efforts towards appealing only to Methodist congregations. However, in both cases the efforts were geared toward congregational edification without hopes of real profits. See Lindvall and Quicke, 56.

they had wanted to. Thus, while Christian filmmaking does indeed date back to the earliest

origins of cinema, present during the silent era and continuing through each decade and each

change in film technology, it was always a fragile industry and subject to frequent starts and

stops. Like all filmmaking outside of Hollywood, there was never a central organizing body for

Christian filmmaking, and the leaders in the field had a tendency to rise and fall quickly.

The silent era perfectly illustrates this instability amongst Christian filmmaking. While

early "Holywood" overcame many obstacles in the first three decades of cinema history, these

advances were eventually overwhelmed or overturned by social and technological changes. For

example, churches in the United States spent the first decade of the 1900s struggling with

whether to embrace cinema or not. This struggle could be described as a general religious reflex

to distrust "low brow" cultural entertainment. And yet certain pastors and religious figures—like

Reverend Herbert A. Jump—recognized cinema's potential to be an effective and contemporary

religious tool. In speeches and tracts, Jump argued that Christian filmmaking could teach and

evangelize, while the screening of inoffensive secular films in churches would also bring

unsaved souls into houses of worship.[41] As films went from cheap novelty to mass entertainment

during the 1910s, more and more denominations came around to Jump's way of thinking. The

Methodist Church in particular began embracing and experimenting with Christian filmmaking

and film exhibition, even going so far as to erect a massive eight story, open-air screen at their

Methodist Centenary in 1919—essentially a "World's Fair" for Methodists from around the

globe—to advertise religious narrative and educational films as a central facet of the future of

their denomination.[42] Indeed, by the early 1920s most denominations had changed their tune. For

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[41] Lindvall, 62-63.
[42] Lindvall, 111.

example, the practice of screening Hollywood films on church grounds became so thoroughly adopted that movie theaters began to publicly protest the competition from churches.[43]

Yet, despite these advancements in Christian social acceptance, actual Christian filmmaking remained far too costly for churches until the introduction of cheaper stocks of 16mm film in the mid-1920s. And by then, initial efforts in Christian filmmaking faced several overwhelming challenges. First, radio had already become the primary method of popular mass media adopted by preachers and churches in the 1920s, given the medium's quick popularity with the public and its cheap cost of production. This successful adoption of new technology caused many Christian leaders to feel wary of venturing into cinema, which remained a much costlier business that always paled in quality next to the better funded efforts of Hollywood. Second, no sooner had the price of film stock dropped than sound films entered the market. While much has been written about how sound technology upended the Hollywood studios, little attention has been paid to the way sound decimated the efforts of early independent filmmakers, secular and religious. The public now wanted sound films and this technology would be cost prohibitive for the independents until the 1940s. Although Christian filmmakers had slowly developed several church-exhibition networks during the 1920s, these initial outlets essentially collapsed by the end of the decade.[44] Unlike Hollywood studios, which have weathered all manner of turmoil in the last century through cultural and financial powers based in monopolistic practices, Christian film production and exhibition—like all independent cinema—would never have the financial stability and infrastructure to survive such dramatic shifts.

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[43] For examples of trade reports on these tensions, see "Churches-Exhibitors' Fight," *Variety* (December 27, 1923), 1-2; "Memphis Churches Do Capacity on Sundays: Theaters Obliged to Close on Sabbath—'Moral Pictures'—'Free Will' Admissions," *Variety* (February 14, 1924), 1; "Church Shows Stopped by Pa. Dept. of Labor; Inspectors Allege Violation of Panic Laws—Must Have Permit to Exhibit Pictures—Structural Changes Required," *Variety* (March 12, 1924), 20; and "MD. Church Exhibitors' Competitor: Hagerstown Sees Regular Picture Business in House of Worship," *Variety* (October 15, 1924), 23.
[44] Lindvall, 201-202.

This fragility can also be seen in the more successful Christian filmmakers and production companies that emerged over the years. While their struggles would actually parallel some of the challenges faced by Hollywood in the coming years—such as the rise of television and changing cultural tastes—although for different reasons, the stakes for this independent industry were much higher. For example, Gospel Films was one of the first and most successful "Christian studios," founded as a nonprofit organization in 1952 through the efforts of Christian filmmakers and business investors. Their product ranged from evangelical teaching films to narrative films and followed a distribution model already popular with 16mm educational films, wherein churches and youth camps could rent materials from local libraries.[45] Sunday nights became an especially popular time for churches to rent materials and show them to youth groups and families at evening services. Although initially successful—the company had their first breakthrough by acquiring distribution rights to *Martin Luther* (1953) and later produced their own minor hits like *The Tony Fontaine Story* (1963) and *The Gospel Blimp* (1967)—the company teetered on bankruptcy by the late 1960s and early 1970s due to cultural and social changes. Similar to its effect on Hollywood, the rise of television programs proved disastrous for Christian films, with Sunday night programming in particular causing the demise of Sunday night church services, and thus film rentals for that most popular of church time slots.[46] Sunday night services, once a dominant activity in the United States, essentially disappeared by the early 1960s. Gospel Films only recovered through the unexpected rise of church instructional films in the 1970s, coupled with unforeseen development of home video in the 1980s (discussed below).

Only one early Christian production company proved relatively (although not completely) stable and, like modern studios, this steadiness came from being owned by a larger

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[45] Lindvall and Quicke, 124-125.
[46] Ibid, 126-127.

and generally successful parent company. World Wide Pictures (WWP) was the film production arm of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), and from 1953 to 2004 they would produce 25 feature films of relative high quality and nearly regimented narrative consistency. Almost all of their films contained the same plot structure—a person reaches a crucial breaking point in their life that's resolved when said person wanders into a Billy Graham Crusade (complete with footage of Graham from an actual Crusade) and accepts Jesus Christ into their life. While these resolutions lacked novelty, the plots themselves would often address timely social issues, such as the focus of disaffected youth culture in *The Restless Ones* (1965), one of WWP's largest commercial successes.[47]

However, WWP's consistent successes actually came less from the recycled plots and more from the company's groundbreaking efforts in Christian film marketing. While their initial films merely screened at Billy Graham Crusades or through the film libraries established by Gospel Films, later releases developed the concept of Evangelistic "four-walling," where BGEA would buy out specific theaters in major markets months ahead of time—thereby guaranteeing ticket sales for the theaters whether people showed up or not. Graham's promoters would then spend up to six months saturating these markets and encouraging local churches and organizations to buy tickets as evangelistic tools to get non-Christian friends and neighbors to see a "friendly" Christian message. BGEA even worked with secular junior and senior high schools to sell students one-dollar tickets that would allow students to attend special screenings during the school day.[48] WWP also made a distinct narrative turning point in the 1970s by focusing on true-life Christian stories, which proved for a time to be very successful. For example, WWP's most successful film, *The Hiding Place* (1975), illustrated the life of a Dutch

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[47] Ibid, 147.
[48] Ibid, 147-148.

Christian family who helped to save many Jewish families during World War II.[49] These

methods laid out templates for Christian filmmaking and especially Christian film marketing that

would be adopted in recent years by modern filmmakers in both "Holywood" and Hollywood.[50]

Yet even the larger and more successful of the Christian production companies could not

long survive on the open market. Despite consistent successes and the support of a larger parent

company, World Wide Pictures still failed financially by the 1980s. The reasons for this are

multiple, but again rooted in the social and industrial forces that would affect all sectors of

Hollywood and independent cinema. First, the films were never geared to be massive profit

making ventures. WWP mostly hoped to cover production overhead at their Burbank studio,

marketing costs, and the costs of the next feature film. Second, by the 1980s Hollywood had

shifted towards the production of blockbusters and tent pole films—massive hits modeled after

JAWS (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) that could open in a large number of theaters and earn

generate enormous ticket sales. This change in industrial focus caused production and marketing

costs to escalate for all crafts and guilds, and by the mid-1980s, WWP could no longer afford

their studio's overhead. In addition, change in studio release patterns caused most theaters to

actually reject WWP's four-wall offers.[51] In 1986, BGEA shuttered the studio and turned WWP

into a distribution company. Yet the legacy of WWP and other successful Christian production

companies from this era would not be films that resonated over the years with the public, or even

with churches, but rather innovations in filmmaking, marketing, and distribution.

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[49] Examples of other WWP films focused on real-life Christians include *Shiokari Pass* (1977), about a Japanese
Christian facing persecution in the early 1900s; *Born Again* (1978), about the eventual salvation of President
Nixon's hatchet man Charles Colson; *Joni* (1980), about the struggles of a Christian woman who becomes paralyzed
at 17, played by the actual Joni Eareckson; and *Scars That Heal: The Dave Roever Story* (1993), about a wounded
Christian veteran of the Vietnam War.

[50] These marketing methods and their adoption by modern Christian filmmakers will be discussed in the Part 2 of
this chapter. The subsequent adoption of "true-life Christian tales" for certain Hollywood films will be discussed in
Chapter 2.

[51] Ibid, 155-156.

This was certainly the case for Mark IV Production and *A Thief in the Night* (1972). As Heather Hendershot reports in *Shaking the World for Jesus*, most Evangelicals over thirty have some memory of the film, and if they saw it as children, they usually report having had nightmares afterward. Indeed, many Christians credit the film with prompting their personal conversion, while many ex-Christians, like satanic rocker Marilyn Manson, associate the film with the psychological abuse of their Christian childhoods and validation for leaving the faith.[52] The film tells the story of Patty, a young woman who considers herself a Christian because she occasionally reads the Bible, but wakes up one morning to discover her husband has disappeared, along with millions of Christians around the globe. The world has experienced the Rapture—the collection of all Christians by God before the seven-year reign of the Antichrist—and Patty was left behind.[53] The film then follows Patty through landscape of conspiracy and betrayal as she runs from a New World Order government and those who convert to Christianity are beheaded.

Although largely unseen by mainstream audiences, *A Thief in the Night* was a phenomenon amongst Evangelical churches and institutions during the 1970s and 80s, spreading steadily through church networks one 16mm print at a time. The film's budget of $68,000, while minuscule even in 1972, was much larger than typical Christian films, which were usually produced for a few thousand dollars. Even more importantly, the Christian filmmakers had backgrounds in low budget filmmaking—director Donald W. Thompson came out of Paramount's television division, and producer Russell S. Christian had been a disciple of schlock filmmaker Irvin Yeaworth, director of *The Blob* (1958)—and thus brought distinct genre

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[52]Hendershot, 190.

[53] The Rapture is a form of pre-tribulation eschatology—an apocalyptic interpretation of the Book of Revelation wherein Christians will be collected by God and thus spared the seven-year Tribulation, or the rule of world under the Antichrist before Jesus Christ's second-coming. While certain Puritan preachers had discussed notions of a Rapture-type event in the 1700s, John Nelson Darby solidified the modern understanding of the Rapture in the 1830s. Today, it is only prescribed to by certain strains of Evangelical Protestantism. For a detailed history, see Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor/Bridgepoint, 1993).

sensibilities to their sincere plea for audiences to "turn or burn." The filmmakers intended to literally scare the fear of God into people, and often achieved this result.[54] While most Christian films trickled out slowly through word-of-mouth amongst networks of churches, usually only requiring 40 prints to supply national demand and with no expectation of net profits from the investment. *A Thief in the Night* required over 250 prints and earned over \$4.2 million in distribution by 1984.[55]

While that film became possibly the most widely seen Christian film of the era, Mark IV would never again produce such a significant hit. Instead, the more lasting result of *Thief* would be the establishment the Christian Film Distribution Association (CFDA) in 1974. The success of *Thief*, along with precursor hits like Gateway Films' *The Cross and the Switchblade* (1970), spurred certain Christian distributors and businessmen to form a concentrated church-network rental system. Churches would no longer have to rely solely on the availability of local libraries established by Gospel Films, and could instead rent from a larger and exclusively Christian distribution network. Libraries could still supply films through the CFDA's services, and without the block booking tactics that some Christian companies used, where distributors had to take all product offered if they wanted the more popular titles. As Lindvall and Quicke argue, the CFDA "essentially unionized the Christian film industry."[56] In addition, the CFDA also encouraged the production of better quality Christian films through the establishment of Crown Awards, an alternative to the Oscars for 16mm Christian films. However, beyond these initial advancements, the true significance of the CFDA was the groundwork and infrastructure it created for the next movement in Christian filmmaking.

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[54] Lindvall and Quicke, 172-173.
[55] Ibid, 189-190
[56] Ibid, 182.

Following the success of *A Thief in the Night* and the creation of the CDFA, "Holywood"

underwent a dramatic shift. First, film distributors in the 1970s discovered an unexpected

demand amongst churches for instructional films. In 1976, Gospel Films released Franky

Schaeffer's *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*, a

film series comparing Western civilization to the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. The serial

predated the culture war debates of the 1980s and distributors had little expectations for profits,

and yet the films became a major hit amongst churches. However, the true game-changer

occurred three years later with the release of Dr. James Dobson's seven-part film series *Focus on

the Family*. The series cost $30,000 to produce, even less than *How Should We Then Live?,* and

abandoned artistic pretensions for a straightforward "talking head" format with Dobson directly

addressing the audience. The pop-psychology approach Dobson brought to issues of family and

marriage resonated deeply with congregations and became a huge hit amongst churches. Dobson

then expanded upon this success by parlaying the film profits into a nonprofit media ministry

based out of Colorado and revolving mostly around daily radio broadcasts to over 1200 stations

across the country. Where once Christian radio had hampered the progression of Christian

filmmaking, Dobson now used the medium in synergistic tandem with his filmmaking and

promoted his teaching films through his radio addresses. When his second film series, *Turn Your

Heart toward Home*, released in 1986, it shattered the previous records for rentals set by

Dobson's first series.[57] Dobson's contributions to Christian filmmaking were initially widely

praised and even credited with reinvigorating distribution networks. In 1987, Chris Frazen

defended the instructional film phenomenon, also derided in certain circles as the "rent-a-

preacher" serials, by declaring that Dobson

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[57] Ibid, 132-133.

> . . . rewrote the history of religious films. Nobody knew, back in 1978, if churches would rent a film series featuring a man standing and talking, . . . but Hitler almost conquered the world, and one of the things that stopped him was Churchill's oratory—his ability to stand up and say we will never, never, never quit. Oratory has the capacity to capture the imagination of people, to move their hearts.[58]

Ironically, the success of Dobson and other copycat speakers actually ended up demolishing narrative Christian films. While teaching serials initially sustained the CDFA and other film libraries during the 1980s, their easy profitability actually became a liability by the end of the decade. Instructional films were much cheaper to produce than narrative feature films and never had to compete with the production standards of Hollywood filmmaking. Although there was still a desire amongst churches for narrative Christian films—despite Dobson's popularity, *A Thief in the Night* remained the highest requested title from the CDFA throughout the 1980s—the cost of renting serials left little room for other product. For example, in the 1980s the full *Focus on the Family* series cost $400 to rent, a price tag that consumed over 90% of most churches' annual film exhibition budget.[59] In addition, the flexibility of serial media could create brand loyalty not associated with narrative Christian films. As Mark H. Senter III stated succinctly in *Christianity Today*, in a very prophetic 1981 analysis, ". . . [S]erials make money. . . . They create repeat audiences, multiply ministries, and frequently increase revenues."[60] Narrative films, on the other hand, would cost much more to produce and even successful titles did not guarantee future successes for production companies.

As the rental of narrative Christian films declined throughout the 1980s, the technological breakthrough of home video sealed the fate of most Christian production companies. Churches could now rent videos for three dollars instead of film prints for $50-100. Old film prints of long-cherished Christian films started collecting dust on the shelves, and at the same time most

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[58] Chris Frazen, "Dobson Brings the Family into Focus," *Christian Film and Video Review* (Spring 1987), 7.
[59] Lindvall and Quicke, 132.
[60] Mark Senter III, "Bringing Back Cinema Serials: Christian Style," *Christianity Today* (November 20, 1981), 37-38.

Christian film producers resisted changing their production and distribution methods out of a realistic fear that profits would plummet. Unlike Hollywood, which adapted to home video by adding the new medium into established distribution windows, essentially making theatrical distribution an advertisement for the video distribution, Christian producers had no other recourse for profits outside the CDFA rental system. Dobson and his ilk, on the other hand, easily adapted to church demands for video while still covering their limited overhead. By the early 1990s, narrative Christian films were essentially dead. As a result, the CDFA could no longer supply enough diversity of product to maintain film libraries across the nation. Outside of instructional videos, the Christian film industry simply disappeared.

However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a few key film events would roust the Christian filmmaking from its slumber and suggest the oncoming direction of the next period of "Holywood" cinema: the Christian blockbuster era. Given the importance of *A Thief in the Night* amongst "Holywood" history and church-audiences of a certain age, it is unsurprising that the first films of the Christian blockbuster era were (almost literally) spiritual sequels. *The Omega Code* (1999) followed *Thief*'s formula of placing an apocalyptic, anti-Christ narrative inside the thriller genre, while adding some contemporary updates like a globe-trotting male hero and the (at that time) trendy "Bible code" teachings. The film was produced by Gener8xion Entertainment, a production arm of the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), and it became the first Christian film to receive a nation-wide theatrical release.[61] Although a small release by Hollywood standards—a mere 300 screens—the box office still proved large enough to grant

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[61] The connection between Gener8xion Entertainment and TBN lies mainly with Matthew Crouch, Gener8xion's Chief Executive Officer and Chairman. Crouch is the son of TBN founder Paul Crouch and formerly served as Vice President of TBN for 15 years, overseeing operations for television and film productions. TBN has financed or co-financed all of Gener8xion's films and extensively advertised the films through the broadcast of film trailers and "behind-the-scenes" specials on the "Praise the Lord" show. See William Lobdell and Stuart Pfeifer, "Missionary in Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times* (Oct 23, 2006).

Omega Code the distinction of first "Holywood" film to debut in the Top 10 weekly U.S. box office with a per-screen average higher than any other release that weekend.[62] The film's success is largely attributed to the low-cost, yet highly effective, marketing push by TBN, which blanketed its televangelist channels with advertisements for the film and used church networks to spread the word at the grassroots level. For a Christian film to compete at the box office with no national advertising and take in around $12 million (on a $7 million budget) was unheard of at the time. Other "Holywood" filmmakers soon took note.

Like any film success, whether indie or mainstream, the most immediate effect is always imitation, and a crop of "end-times" apocalyptic imitators sprang up quickly, usually as cheaper direct-to-video releases. The only two imitators to reach theaters(?) were *Left Behind: The Movie* (2001) and *Megiddo: The Omega Code 2* (2001), and neither could repeat *The Omega Code*'s success. *Left Behind,* based on the best-selling novel series by Tim LeHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, once again updated rapture theology with thriller genre elements. Cloud Ten Pictures attempted an intriguing two-fold campaign, first releasing the film straight to video—and including a special video plea by openly Evangelical actor Kirk Cameron for audiences to support the film in its theatrical run—and then releasing it wide into theaters one month later. However, the theatrical run barely made back the $4 million production budget and two subsequent sequels only saw direct-to-video releases.[63] In the case of *Megiddo*, TBN decided to remake original *Omega Code* with the higher budget of $20 million, but this time the film only made $6 million in theaters.[64] *Megiddo* had a much longer life on the actual TBN network, where it continued to

[62] Scott Martelle and Megan Garvey, "Christian Filmgoers Create Heavenly Box Office for 'Omega Code'," *Los Angeles Times* (October 22, 1999), accessed October 12, 2012: http://articles.latimes.com/1999/oct/22/business/fi-24846.

[63] Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 34.

[64] Lorenza Munoz, "Fox Puts Faith in Christian Films," *Los Angeles Times* (September 19, 2006), accessed October 13, 2012: http://articles.latimes.com/2006/sep/19/business/fi-faith19/2.

screen for years after. While the original *Omega Code* and its imitators made little impact on

Christian filmmaking outside of their theatrical runs—indeed, few "Holywood" films currently

deal with apocalyptic narratives—they did establish a first precedent for releasing Christian films

nationwide and circumventing the huge costs of theatrical film advertising through

unconventional media campaigns. The conditions of "Holywood" filmmaking were obviously

changing and expanding and waiting for the right film to truly capitalize on this transformation.

 The Passion of the Christ was the film that truly ushered in the Christian blockbuster era,

and, ironically, it would not come from a likely Christian source. *The Passion* was a personal

project from Mel Gibson, who appears to have given little thought to the marketing of the film

when he conceived and then executed the project. As a life-long Roman Catholic and subscriber

to traditionalist, pre-Vatican II branches of church theology, Gibson seems to have co-written

and directed the overtly religious film as act of spiritual devotion.[65] The film chronicles the last

12 hours of Jesus' life—Jesus is betrayed by Judas, tried by first the Jewish high council and

then the Roman governor, convicted of sedition, and subsequently tortured before eventually

being crucified to death. Gibson had filmed the movie not in English, but instead Greek, Latin,

and Aramaic, which would have been the actual languages used in Jesus' region and time period.

However, this religious sincerity on the part of the filmmaker did not mean that Gibson had

recreated a stoic and turgid Biblical epic like those produced by Hollywood in 1950s and 60s,

and which modern Hollywood might have embraced if just to appease the famous actor/director.

Instead, Gibson brought the fascination with violence and brutality on display in his previous

film, *Braveheart* (1995), to the story of the Christ. Most of the film's 126 minutes are devoted to

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[65] Gibson spoke of the film as an act of spiritual devotion in multiple interviews. For one example, see: David Neff and Jane Johnson Struck, "'Dude, That Was Graphic': Mel Gibson talks about *The Passion of the Christ*," *Christianity Today* (February 23, 2004), accessed online, March 9, 2015 <https://web.archive.org/web/20080709100026/http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies/interviews/melgibson.html>.

the Jesus being scourged and whipped and driven through the streets and eventually suffering on

the cross. The film focuses on these events in graphic detail. In an otherwise glowing review,

Roger Ebert still labeled *The Passion* "the most violent film I have ever seen," as well as the

most violent film audiences will likely ever see, and went on to offer this criticism of the

MPAA's already much-maligned ratings system:

> The MPAA's R rating [of *The Passion of the Christ*] is definitive proof that the organization either will never give the NC-17 rating for violence alone, or was intimidated by the subject matter. If it had been anyone other than Jesus up on that cross, I have a feeling that NC-17 would have been automatic.[66]

Yet, the film's use of foreign languages and graphic violence would not be the major

controversies to plague the film. Before *The Passion* was even completed, a shooting script was

leaked to an interdenominational Catholic committee and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL),

who judged the content as anti-Semitic. A more detailed analysis of Gibson's conflicts with these

organizations, and the revolutionary Christian marketing campaign it inspired, is offered in Part

2 of this chapter.

In spite of the many controversies surrounding the film, or maybe even as a result, *The*

Passion proved successful beyond expectation. On a budget of $30 million, *The Passion*

eventually went on to net over $370 million domestically and over $600 million worldwide.

Until 2016, it remained the highest grossing R-rated film in US history.[67] Yet, beyond mere

financial success, Gibson's film revealed the financial windfall that Christian audiences could

generate when the demographic was properly mobilized. In the wake of *The Passion*, both

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[66] Roger Ebert, "The Passion of the Christ," *Chicago Sun-Times* (February 24, 2004), accessed online, March 20, 2013 <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-passion-of-the-christ-2004>.
[67] Box office numbers come from Box Office Mojo, accessed online, March 1, 2012 <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=passionofthechrist.htm>.

Hollywood and "Holywood" immediately began experimenting with reaching this audience, and

doing so without the controversial fallout that injured Gibson's subsequent career.[68]

"Holywood"'s first response to *The Passion* was a failed Biblical adaption, and once

again Gener8xion Entertainment would take the lead. They approached their task with typical

extravagance, filming *One Night With the King* (2006) as an old-fashioned Biblical epic,

although adapted from the rather small-scale Book of Esther. The film carried a hefty $20

million budget—the largest budget ever committed to a "Holywood" production outside *The*

Passion—in addition to casting old-Hollywood stars like Peter O'Toole and Omar Sharif in

supporting roles, utilizing the production and costume designers from *The Passion*, and shooting

entirely on location in India. Yet the final film received the typical negative reviews associated

with most Gener8xion films, and it also failed to connect with the core Christian demographic,

recouping only $13 million across 900 theaters nationwide.[69] In the end, the failure of *One Night*

With the King severely impacted the future output of Gener8xion Entertainment. The company

would only release three more films, and all with much smaller budgets and much more modest

release schedules of around 200 theaters each: *Noelle* (2007), a Christmas themed family drama;

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[68] Mel Gibson's personal and professional reputation would suffer greatly in the following decades. Although many critics and commentators debated whether *The Passion of the Christ* was truly anti-Semitic, and although Gibson would personally deny such accusations, other issues would arise that cast doubt on his personal beliefs regarding Jewish people. For example, Gibson refused to publicly condemn his Traditionalist Catholic father, Hutton Gibson, for making Holocaust denial statements. Then, in 2006, Gibson was arrested for a DUI in Malibu, and made anti-Semitic statements to the Jewish officer who arrested him such as "the Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world." After a series of apologies and attempts at relaunching his then-stalled career, Gibson again returned to the spotlight in 2010 for accusations of spousal abuse, as well as racist comments recorded by his then-wife, in which Gibson screams that she dresses in way that will get her "raped by a pack of niggers." While Gibson has garnered some work as an actor in recent years, mostly in villain roles, all of these very public controversies combined to effectively stall Gibson's directorial career in Hollywood, up to the time of this writing. See: Jeffrey Weiss, "Gibson's dad stirs furor with anti-Jewish talk," *The Dallas Morning News* (February 22, 2004), 1D; and "Mel Gibson defends dad, discusses faith," *Herald Tribune* (February 2, 2004), accessed online, March 10, 2016 <http://www.heraldtribune.com/article/20040202/NEWS/402020490>; and Allison Hope Weiner, "Mel Gibson Apologizes for Tirade After Arrest," *The New York Times* (July 30, 2006), accessed online, March 10, 2016 <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/30/us/30gibson.html?_r=0>; and Ed Pilkington, "Mel Gibson faces flak again after alleged racist rant," *The Guardian* (July 2, 2010), accessed online, March 10, 2016 <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jul/02/mel-gibson-racist-rant>.

[69] *One Night With the King* hold a 19% Fresh Rating on Rottentomaotes.com. Box office gross comes from Boxoffice.com.

The Cross (2009), a small-scale documentary about an eccentric Christian preacher; and

Preacher's Daughter (2010), a $3 million romantic drama. None of these films recouped their

budgets and Gener8xion has essentially ceased all future productions.

Indeed, while "Holywood"'s modern era was birthed from the bigger budget productions

of Gener8xion Entertainment and, especially, Mel Gibson's Icon Productions, "Holywood"'s

continued growth in the years that followed would be through more modest production models.

Instead of continuing to compete in the costly genre arena, where Christian thrillers and

historical epics faced harsh comparison next to their dominant Hollywood counterparts, and

where the higher genre budgets demanded higher returns on profitability, the majority of

"Holywood" productions instead turned towards smaller-scale dramas featuring Christian

characters. For example, *To Save a Life* (2009) focuses on a popular teenager who turns to

Christianity after a childhood friend commits suicide, only to find further trials in his new

Christian life. The film's modest $3 million box office gross from 441 theaters was successful

when compared to its $1 million production and marketing budget.[70] Likewise, *October Baby*

(2011)—a modest-scale road trip drama focused on a young woman's quest to discover why her

mother tried to abort her as a baby—made $5 million in 200 theaters from a budget of $1

million.[71] More recently, *God's Not Dead* (2014)—a drama centered on debates between a

Christian college student and his atheist professor over the existence of God—achieved a huge

box office return on production investment, earning $64 million from over 700 theaters from a

budget of just $2 million.[72] While this model for Christian film narratives has occasional

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[70] *To Save a Life* was a co-production between three small "Holywood" production companies—Outreach Films, Accelerated Entertainment, and New Song Pictures—and distributed through Affirm Films, a faith-and-family-based subdivision of Sony Pictures. All box office numbers come from Boxofficemojo.com.
[71] *October Baby* was a co-production between Gravitas and Provident Films, the latter being a subdivision of Sony Music Group. The film was jointly distributed by Provident Films and Samuel Goldwyn Pictures.
[72] *God's Not Dead* was a co-production between Pure Flix Entertainment and Greg Jenkins Productions. Unlike many "Holywood" films, which typically find distribution through Sony affilitaiated companies—such as Affirm

exceptions—*Beyond the Mask* (2015) offered a swashbuckling Christian adventure story set around the Revolutionary War, and *Left Behind* (2014) attempted to reboot the apocalyptic series, this time casting Hollywood star Nicolas Cage as the lead—the vast majority of "Holywood" films focus on small dramas featuring a crisis in the lives of Christian characters.[73]

Although "Holywood"'s embrace of this narrative format made sense financially—indeed, most independent cinema stays low cost/low risk and resists genres where comparisons to Hollywood product would be unfavorable—the speed with which the format found adoption inside the burgeoning industry was due to the early and continued success of one production company: Sherwood Pictures. Based out of Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia, Sherwood Pictures struck upon a successful format early in the 2000s and have stuck closely to it ever since. The films are produced by the brother team of Alex and Stephen Kendrick, two pastors at Sherwood Baptist and the original proponents for starting the church production company. The films are low-budget dramas centered on Christians in crisis and production costs are further reduced through Sherwood's crew of almost entirely church volunteers. Their first film, *Flywheel* (2003), which follows a crooked used car salesman who turns to Christianity, was produced for a mere $20,000 but made its budget back in a few local theaters and then went on to

Films, Provident, and Samuel Goldwyn Pictures—*God's Not Dead* was distributed by Freestyle Releasing, a much smaller distribution house that offers no prints or advefrtising.

[73] For further examples of this narrative format in "Holywood" films, see: the films by the Kendrick brothers, specifically *Flywheel* (2003), *Facing the Giants* (2006), *Fireproof* (2008), *Courageous* (2011), and *The War Room* (2015); see also, *The Secrets of Jonathan Sperry* (2008), *The Grace Card* (2010), *Letters to God* (2010), *What If…* (2010), *Grace Unplugged* (2013), *I'm in Love with a Church Girl* (2013), and *A Matter of Faith* (2014). *Beyond the Mask* was produced by Burns Family Studio, which first tried its hand at Christian filmmaking in 2008 with another Christian adventure film, *Pendragon: Sword of His Father*. While that first film was an $88,000 low budget, straight-to-video release, *Beyond the Mask* featured an undisclosed budget in the millions, a cast that included John Ryhs-Davies from *The Lord of the Rings* series, and 200 theater distribution through Freestyle Releasing. *Left Behind* was again produced by Paul LaLonde, but this time under the new production company Stony Lake Pictures instead of Cloud Ten Pictures, and distributed by Freestyle Releasing. The film made $13 million on a budget of $16 million.

sell over 300,000 DVDs through Christian retail stores.[74] The Kendrick brothers' most recent

film, *The War Room* (2015), which follows a crooked businessman and his wife as they turn to

Christianity, was produced for $3 million, released through TriStar Pictures on over 2000

screens, became the first "Holywood" film to win the top spot at the box office and went on to

make over $70 million in ticket sales.[75] The specific history of Sherwood Pictures and the

Kendrick brothers will be further discussed in Chapter 3 through a case study for the film

Fireproof (2008).

PART 2: *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*

The Christian blockbuster era is dated from the late 1990s to the present and defined by the rise

of overtly Christian films made by overtly Christian filmmakers competing (and repeatedly

succeeding) for the first time at the theatrical box office against mainstream Hollywood fare.

Considering the fact that narrative Christian filmmaking lay mostly dormant during the decade

preceding this current era, and that Christian cinema resided solely on home video during the

1980s and 90s, this "Holywood" transition to box office competition and frequent triumph

appears all the more remarkable. In this regard, the influence of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the

Christ* (2004) cannot be understated. [76] Besides becoming a cultural, and controversial,

phenomenon, *The Passion* would establish a template for Christian marketing still followed

today by "Holywood" and, to a certain extent, Hollywood. While both Hollywood and

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[74] Rebecca Winters Keegan, "*Fireproof*: When Filmmakers Believe in Miracles," *Time* (October 3, 2008), accessed online, December 13, 2013: <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1848758,00.html>.

[75] *The War Room* debuted in second place at the box office in its opening weekend, taking $11 million in tickets sales from only 1,135 screens, while *Straight Outta Compton* took first place with $13 million from 3,142 locations. In the film's second weekend, *War Room* took first place at the box office, beating the week's previous box office with $13 million from 1,526 screens while *Straight Outta Compton* fell to $11 million. Box office numbers from Boxofficemojo.com.

[76] Although Mel Gibson was and remains a Hollywood insider, *The Passion of the Christ* fits the definition of a "Holywood" film given its independent production, Gibson's overtly Christian aims in making the film, and the film's marketing campaign, which positioned *The Passion* as a Christian cultural object for inner-church ministry and outer-church evangelism.

"Holywood" had at different times, and to different degrees, attempted to rally Christian

audiences to the box office, *The Passion* found success through the combined exploitation of

specific elements within modern Evangelical society. The success of the film would become a

touchstone for Christian filmmaking and reveal for the first time the economic power of

Christian audiences, when effectively mobilized.

As Part 1 of this chapter demonstrated, "Holywood" filmmaking was never seen as a

moneymaking venture until the 1980s and the introduction of home video, which then shifted

Christian films away from narrative features and towards more-cheaply made instructional

sermons. Thus, throughout "Holywood"'s first two eras, most Christian films never attempted

theatrical releases and never hoped to gain vast returns. When *The Omega Code* and *Left Behind*

films attempted large-scale theatrical releases around the start of the new millennium,

"Holywood" had no model for rallying Christian audiences to the box office. There had never

been a successful model in the years prior.

Indeed, only Hollywood—as the industry sector holding a historic monopoly on theatrical

distribution in the United States—had ever experimented with targeting Christian audiences for

theatrical releases. However, Hollywood only rarely attempted these campaigns, given their

generally mixed-to-unsuccessful results. For example, the industry's various attempts with

Biblical epics had offered Hollywood periodic chances to court Christian groups. Cecil B.

DeMille specifically targeted women's groups and churches when promoting his silent epic *King

of Kings* (1926), although his campaign was mainly to mitigate backlash from religious sectors

still suspicious of cinematic portrayals of the Christ.[77] These attempts proved unsuccessful, as

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[77] DeMille's unsuccessful attempts to court Christians as a way to contain religious controversy would predict the
troubles of Martin Scorsese and Universal Studios with *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988 (see more in Chapter
3.) For more on DeMille's campaign for *King of Kings*, see: Richard Maltby, "The King of Kings and Czar of All
the Rushes," *Screen*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1990).

both Christian and Jewish groups across the nation condemned the film and fought against its

release. Still, Paramount repeated this approach in 1933 for DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross*,

laying out a marketing plan that specifically separated Christian moviegoers from mainstream

audiences. Actual instructions to internal marketers could not have been more clear:

> Church-goers! Here the appeal is tremendous. Reach this class thru the clergy, thru sermons, thru direct mail. This phase of your campaign is quiet. It is out of the newspapers and away from the mass public…. DON'T MIX YOUR ISSUES! REMEMBER: THUNDER AND DRAMA AND SEX FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC… RELIGIOUS APPEAL FOR THE CHURCHES.[78]

Once again, religious audiences refused to be easily manipulated, and *Sign of the Cross* actually

created a Catholic outrage that helped lead to decades of stricter Hollywood censorship. Most of

Hollywood's Biblical epics during the 1950s and 1960s utilized campaigns that bypassed direct

Christian marketing and instead focused on mainstream appeals, such as the spectacle of color

and widescreen technology and the reduction of Biblical narratives into family-friendly

melodramas. However, with George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), United

Artists attempted a more somber and reverential treatment of the Biblical material, and thus

devised more concentrated appeal to churchgoers. Stevens sought endorsements from major

church organizations, utilized direct mailing to churches and religious social groups, and

emphasized his respectful adaptation of the Christ story in nearly every interview with every

major publication of the day.[79] Still, despite these efforts, the film became United Artists' biggest

financial failure of the 1960s and essentially helped to end the era of Biblical epics. Hollywood

would not attempt a Christian campaign again until the disastrous efforts of *The Last Temptation

of Christ* (1988), which is addressed in detail in Chapter 3.

While it may seem difficult to decipher why certain Christian marketing campaigns of the

past were unsuccessful, an examination of the campaign for *The Passion of the Christ*

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[78] Sheldon Hall, "Selling Religion: How to Market a Biblical Epic," *Film History*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Film and Religion (2002): 174.
[79] Hall, "Selling Religion": 175-176.

illuminates the many elements missing from previous Christian marketing efforts—from both

Hollywood historically and "Holywood" in the years immediately preceding. It also reveals the

many cultural shifts within Evangelical society, specifically since the 1980s, that prepared the

groundwork for the successful mobilization of Christian audiences. Additionally, *The Passion*

demonstrates how advances in new media and online marketing could be integrated with

Christian film advertising. Indeed, like many influential films of the past, *The Passion* benefited

from the collision of changes in economic, cultural, and social conditions, and from a filmmaker

with pockets deep enough to exploit them all simultaneously.

Intriguingly, given the intricacies of the eventual marketing, Gibson seems to have

stumbled upon *The Passion*'s Christian campaign by accident, and specifically as a response to

mounting accusations of anti-Semitism surrounding the picture. Before the film's release, Gibson

came into conflict with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the

Anti-Defamation League (ADL). During production on the film, Eugene Fisher, Associate

Director of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (responsible for Catholic-Jewish relations) for

the USCCB commissioned an ad hoc committee to investigate *The Passion* and discover if the

film conformed to reformed Roman Catholic teaching regarding blame for the death of Jesus,

which stated unequivocally that the Jews were not at fault. The committee was made up of both

Catholic and Jewish scholars, including several members of the ADL. While Gibson's film

company, Icon Productions, initially refused to supply the committee with a script of the film, an

anonymous member of the production eventually leaked a copy of the shooting script to the

committee. Fisher and his team objected to many portions of the script as indeed being anti-

Semitic and ascribing blame to Jews for the death of Jesus. The group submitted a private and

detailed report to Icon outlining suggestions for changes.[80] Additionally, the ADL declared the

script "one of the most troublesome texts, relative to anti-Semitic potential, that any of us had

seen in twenty-five years" and promised that the final film, if unaltered, would reinforce

"precisely the storyline that fueled centuries of anti-Semitism within Christian societies."[81]

However, from Icon's, and indeed Gibson's, perspective, the group had outright stolen the script

and thus the intentions of Fisher and his team were dubious. In the weeks that followed, and

through an intricate series of misunderstandings, miscommunications, and internal leaks on both

sides, Icon's and Fisher's teams both came to doubt each other's intentions, and talks quickly fell

apart.[82]

While the film was still in post-production, and still months away from eventual release,

Icon took the step of hiring A. Larry Ross, a Christian publicist who specialized in handling

faith-based public relations. Within days, Ross and his team implemented an aggressive plan of

action that would simultaneously make the USCCB report public, refute accusations of anti-

Semitism, side-step future dealing with the USCCB and ADL, and, most significantly, devise a

grassroots campaign appealing directly to a demographic Ross felt *The Passion* was tailor-made

to please: conservative Catholics and Protestants in general, and conservative Evangelicals in

particular.[83] Ross recalled telling Gibson in their first meeting that marketing required "the

largest number of people focused on the smallest point of agreement" in order to gain maximum

impact. In this case, Gibson's best opportunity for impact was getting Evangelical audiences to

see the film as a single message that they could rally around—specifically, that "Christ died for

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[80] Neal King, *The Passion of the Christ* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 8-10.
[81] "ADL Statement on Mel Gibson's *The Passion*," ADL Archive (June 24, 2003), accessed online, December 12, 2013 <http://archive.adl.org/presrele/mise_00/4275_00.html#.VMYfxHDF-0c>.
[82] For more details on the controversy over *The Passion of the Christ* and the dealings between the USCCB committee and Icon Productions, see: King, *The Passion of the Christ*; and Deborah Caldwell, "Selling Passion," in *Perspectives on The Passion of the Christ* (New York, NY: Miramax Books, 2004).
[83] King: 11.

our sins"—and to see all other claims regarding the film, especially claims of anti-Semitism, as simply in opposition to the core message. From this simple message, devised quickly in an attempt publicly reframe an oncoming and divisive controversy, was birthed an entire marketing campaign that became the main template utilized by most "Holywood" films thereafter.

When analyzing the Christian marketing for *The Passion*, it is apparent that Gibson and Ross benefited enormously from recent developments within Evangelical culture since the 1980s—developments no previous Christian campaign had been able to exploit. First, Evangelical Christianity had cultivated systems of centralized infrastructure that allowed Gibson to reach tens of thousands of evangelicals through a few key access points. For example, Gibson's first leg of the campaign was a flight to Colorado Springs, CO, often described as the de facto "capital of conservative evangelicalism" in the United States given the number of Christian organizations based there—such as, Focus on the Family, Christian Booksellers Association, Concerned Women of America, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, both Intervarsity Christian Fellowship and Youth for Christ (the two largest Christian organizations for college campuses around the world), and the International Bible Society, to name only a few.[84] The growth of Christian organizations in Colorado Springs began in the late 1980s, with Focus on the Family becoming one of the first significant groups to move their headquarters there.[85] From then on, the numbers ballooned to over 80 organizations by 2004. With this significant influx of Evangelical culture came a huge growth of churches as well. Colorado Springs now houses some

[84] Ibid; and James Ridgeway, "Day eight: Sunday morning in the 'evangeical Vatican'," *The Gaurdian* (October 20, 2010), accessed online, March 10, 2016
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/uselectionroadtrip/2008/oct/20/uselections2008>.
[85] Louis Sahagun, "Rise of Religious Groups Divides Conservative Town: Tolerance: Influx makes Colorado Springs nation's evangelical capital. Some see threat to city's traditions," *Los Angeles Times* (July 6, 1994), accessed online, March 9, 2016 <http://articles.latimes.com/1994-07-06/news/mn-12504_1_colorado-springs>.

of the largest and most influential Evangelical churches in the nation, such as Ted Haggard's 10,000-member "megachurch" New Life Church.

Indeed, Haggard was one of the many pastors, Christian figures, and Christian business leaders gathered by Gibson at a screening of the film at the Focus on the Family campus. And the effect of the film on Haggard, and many others in attendance, seemed to be exactly what Gibson and Ross were hoping for. In an essay for Beliefnet (www.beliefnet.com) titled "What's the Point of Focusing on Anti-Semitism," Haggard reported his elation over both the film and Gibson's personal testimony regarding his Christian faith. Haggard heaped praise on both the film's execution and message, stating:

> I can honestly say, without hyperbole, that *The* Passion ranks with the most moving artistic experiences I have ever had. It is a brilliant film—a compelling vision of Jesus' ministry, a challenging depiction of the violence of Roman crucifixion, and most important, a heart-rending portrayal of sacrificial love.[86]

Haggard's response was not atypical of the support gathered through this and later screenings. This concentrated collection of Evangelical media and ministry culture allowed Gibson to immediately reach many of the major leaders in the field in one trip.

Indeed, Ted Haggard and his New Life Church represent another example of concentrated access to evangelicalism that has emerged in recent times, and which greatly benefited Gibson's marketing campaign: the "megachurch." Megachurches are commonly understood to be Protestant congregations that number more than 2000 in average weekly attendance. Although churches with large numbers of congregants have existed throughout Christian history, the United States has seen a rapid proliferation of these megachurches since the 1980s, mostly in the "Sun Belt"—California, Texas, Georgia, and Florida. These churches are actually counter to the overall trend in Christian church attendance, which has steadily

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[86] Ted Haggard, "What's the Point of Focusing on Anti-Semitism," *Beliefnet* (November 2003), accessed online, March 11, 2016 <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2003/09/Whats-The-Point-Of-Focusing-On-Anti-Semitism.aspx>.

declined since the 1970s. Thus, since these megachurches grow in numbers each year despite the overall decline in Christian numbers, they are generally taking congregants from other churches instead of generating new converts. [87] Essentially, megachurches have taken existing Christian populations and grouped them into more highly concentrated outlets. As such, this modern phenomenon in Protestant culture has allowed for a much easier dissemination of information to large concentrations of Evangelical congregants, as exampled by Gibson's campaign.

Throughout the summer 2003, Gibson made numerous trips to megachurches around the nation, generally in the Sun Belt, where he screened the film for pastors and religious leaders. These figures were then encouraged to offer public endorsements of the film to both the press and their church bodies, if they felt so inclined. By the end of the church-to-church campaign, *The Passion* gained public endorsements from most of the major pastors and Evangelical figures in the United States, including James Dobson, Joel Osteen, Billy Graham, Darrell Bock, Pat Robertson, Rick Warren, Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, Chuck Colson, and David Neff, editor of the largest Christian magazine in the nation, *Christianity Today*.[88] Although the endorsements varied in slight details, most pastors followed a similar format of stressing how the film moved them personally and then deemphasizing the controversy regarding anti-Semitism. Billy Graham offered a clear example of this when interviewed by the Christian press:

> After watching 'The Passion of the Christ,' I feel as if I have actually been there. I was moved to tears. I doubt if there has ever been a more graphic and moving presentation of Jesus' death and resurrection - which Christians believe are the most important events in human history. The film is faithful to the Bible's teaching that we are all responsible for Jesus' death, because we have all sinned. It is our sins that caused

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[87] Pastor Joel Oslteen runs the largest megachurch in the United States, Lakewood Church in Houston, TX with 45,000 weekly members. The largest megachurch in the world is Yoido Church in South Korea with over 250,000 weekly members at seven different Sunday services in 16 languages. For more information on megachurches, see the Hartford Institute for Religious Research website, accessed online, October 5, 2014 <http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html>.

[88] John L. Pauley and Amy King, "Evangelicals' passion for *The Passion of the Christ*," in *Evangelical Christians and Popular Culture: Pop Goes the Gospel*, Robert H. Woods, Jr., ed., (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 40-41.

His death, not any particular group. No one who views this film's compelling imagery will ever be the same.[89]

While Icon's main focus remained on Evangelicals, it should be noted that the marketing team also sought support from his own Catholic Church. For example, Icon representatives fought hard to obtain a screening of *The Passion* for Pope John Paul II, which eventually happened in December 2003, just two months before the film's premiere. Although the pope's exact response was passed along through several people, and later much debated, most news outlets reported his single sentence review of the film to be: "It is as it was."[90]

Besides offering access points to thousands of potential Evangelical ticket buyers, megachurches also created other benefits for *The Passion* that were not immediately obvious. For example, the rise of megachurches has created a cottage industry of church public relations firms, like Outreach Inc. Companies like Outreach offer churches advice on attracting new members, consult on church design and beautification, create seasonal-themed decorations, and supply general Christian-themed merchandise. Outreach in particular has accumulated networks of thousands of church contacts and pastors, and they were the first organization to partner with Ross for *The Passion* marketing campaign. Through Outreach, Icon had immediate access to most of the megachurches where they would screen the film, with Gibson present, and the infrastructure to create a merchandising blitz based on *The Passion*. After screenings for pastors arranged through Outreach, some with as many as 3000 people in attendance, the company would set up tables where people could buy the merchandise. Outreach produced t-shirts, mugs, jewelry, posters, signs, banners, door hangers, bulletin inserts, teaching materials, and other arrays of film-related merchandise. The company produced and mailed over 250,000 DVD

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[89] "Evangelist Billy Graham Reviews Gibson's 'The Passion of the Christ'," *Lifesite* (November 26, 2003), accessed online, March 13, 2016 <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/evangelist-billy-graham-reviews-gibsons-the-passion-of-the-christ>.
[90] Peggy Noonan, "'It Is as It Was,'" *The Wall Street Journal* (December 17, 2003), accessed online, December 12, 2013 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB122451994054350485>.

screeners of the film to pastors around the nation. Additionally, Outreach made these items available both through chains of Christian bookstores and, more timely for 2003, through online at sites like www.sharethepassionofthechrist.com.[91] Outreach specialized in web creation for churches and put these skills to good use on behalf of Gibson's film. Thus, Outreach also tapped into another new element of the era, previously unavailable to Christian film marketing: online and social media.

However, this new media expertise would end up extending far beyond merchandise sales and church networking. Indeed, Outreach also used new media in a more central aspect of the film's Christian campaign: selling *The Passion* to Christians as a tool for outer-church proselytization. As one example, Outreach created the website ThePassionOutreach (www.thepassionoutreach.com), which offered churches detailed timelines for using the film to reach non-Christians in the lead up to the February 2004 release date. For example, the website recommended churches start their outreach in December 2003 by forming their own "Passion Outreach Team." By January, pastors were instructed: "show *The Passion of the Christ* DVD trailer [to] your congregation during your weekend services," to "train your members to invite friends, both to the movie and to the follow-up sermons," and for pastors to "place your order for *Passion of the Christ* Outreach materials," which were not priced cheaply. In February, these materials would finally be utilized when pastors hung "*Passion of the Christ* Outreach banners" outside their churches, placed door hangers in the surrounding community, and mailed "ImpactCard invitations" to unsaved friends, inviting them to *Passion*-related events held at the churches.[92]

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[91] Caldwell, 216; and Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008): 51.
[92] Caldwell, 220.

The website also offered thirteen others suggestions for using *The Passion* to evangelize local communities, among them a revolutionary sales idea: buy out theaters and give away tickets to non-Christians. As opposed to using the film as merely a conversation starter or sermon topic, this idea transformed the film itself into a means of communicating Gospel theology for salvation to those who might not attend a church service. And by offering specific links for block ticket purchasing on the website, this idea would also be, by a wide margin, the most profitable tool devised by Outreach for the film. As just a few examples, Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in California bought 18,000 seats for over 40 screens; McLean Bible Church in Virginia rented 40 screens for over four nights, for around 11,300 tickets; and Arch Bonnema, owner of a small business and member Preston Baptist Church in Plano, TX personally bought 6,000 tickets for a cost of $42,000.[93] Using the block tickets as an evangelistic tool helped elevate pre-ticket sales to then records for an R-rated film, with *The Passion* taking in over $10 million in pre-sales, nearly one-third of *The Passion*'s $35 million opening weekend returns.[94]

While Outreach used new media to shape *The Passion* into a ministry tool, Gibson also followed suit in his own personal testimony to pastors and media interviews. Time and again, Gibson emphasized the genuine nature of his personal Christian faith, his belief in God's sovereign blessing over the production, and his hope that the film would be used as a tool for evangelism. For example, Gibson often told pastors the same story of being close to suicide in his personal life until he turned to God: "I fell to my knees, and God saved me. The wounds of Jesus healed my wounds."[95] He would then repeat a phrase that would become an oft-quoted sound bite in the press: "The Holy Ghost was working through me on this film, and I was just

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[93] Ibid, 221.
[94] Pauley and King, 36–51.
[95] Ibid, 216.

directing traffic."[96] When speaking privately to pastors, and out of earshot of the press, Gibson would offer evidence of miracles that happened on the set, and conversions made to Christianity by atheist and Muslim crewmembers.[97] He would also tell pastors of his personal desire that the film would have "the power to evangelize" non-Christians.[98] In this way, Gibson slowly but surely established spiritual credibility within the Evangelical community. Gibson offered evidence of God's direct blessing on *The Passion*, even suggesting that God was the true author, and thus implying that Christians of good standing should support God's work through supporting the film financially. Gibson's testimony also had the effect of downplaying his image as a famous Hollywood star, which may have attracted pastors to listen to his appeals, but could also equally turn them off given Hollywood's supposed reputation for liberal, secular immorality within Evangelical circles. As Darrell Bock, a prominent Christian leader, explained at the time: "There's no doubt there's a star element to this, but Evangelicals don't embrace someone just because he's a star. They embraced him because he was a Hollywood star willing to put his faith on the line. They supported the kind of testimony this movie represented."[99]

Gibson's need to prove his Christian bonafides alludes to another new element in modern Evangelical culture: the rise of "culture war" divisions within the United States since the 1980s. Indeed, this single element has actually undergirded every other element mentioned thus far—from the concentration of Evangelical organizations in specific geographical regions, to the concentration of existing Christian populations into larger and larger megachurches, to the emergence of Evangelical PR firms and outreach consultants, and to the use of new media tools as Evangelical outreach ministries. While the history and reasons for "culture wars" in Western

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[96] King, 11.
[97] Caldwell, 216.
[98] King, 11.
[99] Caldwell, 219.

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nations is far too large a topic to fully discuss here, in short it refers to a conflicts between conservative and "traditional" values—often encompassing the conservative values espoused within Evangelical Christian theology—and liberal or progressive values.[100] As such, these divides between conservative and liberal values have come to be commonly associated with divides between religious and secular societies. For example, pollsters discovered a "worship gap" in the wake of the 2000 presidential election, wherein regular church-attenders were more likely to vote for George W. Bush by a two-to-one margin, and non-church goers were more likely to vote for Al Gore by the same margin.[101] In general, and for various reasons, Evangelical culture has come to see itself as a marginalized and oppressed people group within the larger American society, which conservative Christians see as moving decidedly towards liberal and secular values.

Within this context, Gibson openly and repeatedly played upon culture war fears and prejudices as a means of both advertising his film and shaping the conversation regarding anti-Semitism with *The Passion*. As just one example, when a reporter for *The New Yorker* raised the complaints of anti-Semitism by the ADL, Gibson pivoted the interview into a rant on Christian persecution within modern society, stating that

> the acts against this film started early. As soon as I announced I was doing it, it was 'This is a dangerous thing.' There is vehement anti-Christian sentiment out there, and they don't want [this film]. It's vicious. I mean, I think we're just a little part of it, we're just the meat in the sandwich here. There's huge things out there, and they're belting it out—we don't see this stuff…. But we're called to be divine, we're called to be better than our nature would have us be. And those big realms that are warring and battling are going to manifest themselves very clearly, seemingly without reason, here—a realm that we can see.[102]

Whether genuine sentiment or calculated advertisement, Gibson's remarks present his film as one piece in a larger struggle between Christianity and those who oppose it. He uses the

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[100] For further background on "culture wars" in contemporary Western society, see: James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); and Irene Tavis Thomson, *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas* (University of Michigan Press, 2010); and Roger Chapman and James Ciment, *Culture Wars: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints and Voices*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2015).

[101] Anna Quindlen, "At the Left Hand of God," *Newsweek* 143, No. 10 (March 8, 2004), 64.

[102] Peter J. Boyer, "The Jesus War," *The New Yorker* (September 15, 2003), 59.

language of "spiritual warfare" common within Evangelical circles, wherein what happens in the temporal realm is really part of a larger spiritual struggle between the forces of God and Satan. Within this struggle, Gibson positions himself fighting for the side of God in temporal, and achieves a larger victory in the heavenly realms unseen by human eyes. Gibson's feelings of religious persecution were a common refrain during his press tour. As he expressed to the *Los Angeles Times*: "I'm subjected to religious persecution, persecution as an artist, persecution as an American, persecution as a man. These things have happened in the past year. I forgive them all."[103] Here again, Gibson utilizes "culture war" language to express his feelings of persecution, even connecting the persecution of his religion to his identity as an American, all while offering Christian forgiveness to the opposition. These implied conservative political overtures were made even more explicit when Gibson only offered two television interviews in the lead up to releasing the film, one to Diane Sawyer for network television, and the other to the Fox News' "The O'Reilly Factor," a show notorious for ultra-right-wing conservative politics and religious viewpoints. This pandering to the political leanings of most evangelicals is clearly meant to show Gibson's support for the conservative side of the national "culture war" divide.

Lastly, Gibson and his marketing team were aided by an industrial advancement for independent filmmakers since the late 1980s: the availability of independent film distribution companies. Such a controversial marketing campaign—fully engaging with controversy on the levels of religion, anti-Semitism, and cultural politics—would never be embraced by a Hollywood studio, and indeed Icon's long-term studio partner, Twentieth Century Fox, declined to release *The Passion* when Icon and Gibson began their summer 2003 courtship of Evangelical audiences.[104] In October, Newmarket Films and its president Bob Berney stepped into the void.

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103 Rachel Abramowitz, "Gibson Talks About Film, Furor and Faith," *Los Angeles Times* (February 15, 2004), A1.
104 Sean Smith, "Passion Play," *Newsweek* (November 3, 2003), 12.

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Berney agreed to a straight distribution deal for the film, with a fee under 12% and Icon

Productions obligated to pay for all prints and advertising.[105] In retrospect, this limited

investment by Newmarket, though considered brave at the time, would significantly decrease

their return on the film's eventual and enormous ticket sales. Indeed, Newmarket's most

significant contribution would be the selection of Ash Wednesday (February 25, 2004) for the

release of the film, as well as the decision to give *The Passion* major nation-wide debut on 2000

screens.[106] While an Easter (April 9) release was considered, and might have offered Icon a

bigger Evangelical audience, the film would have been competing head-to-head against several

high-potential film releases, like *The Alamo*, *Scooby-Doo 2*, and, most significantly given the

discussions about film violence that would surround *The Passion*, *Kill Bill Volume 2*. In contrast,

the Ashe Wednesday still offered some spiritual significance for religious audiences and paired

The Passion against less high-profile films, like *50 First Dates*, *Confessions of a Teenage Drama*

Queen, *Eurotrip*, and *Welcome to Mooseport*. Against this selections of comedy films, *The*

Passion would stand out as counter-programming in terms of subject matter, style, and public

conversation.

Taken as a whole, the marketing campaign for *The Passion* achieved masterful results.

Without any precursors or successful examples to follow, Icon, Gibson, and his assembled team

rallied Christians around the nation and reaped huge box office results, and in the process

definitively demonstrated the power of Christian moviegoers when sufficiently motivated. This

motivation came about by advertising *The Passion* as an event beyond mere film entertainment.

For many Evangelical leaders and churchgoers, *The Passion* became a spiritual cause sanctioned

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[105] John Quelch, Anita Elberse, and Anna Harrington, "The Passion of the Christ (A)," *Harvard Business Review* (February 9, 2010), 4; and Lynn Hirschberg, "The Distribution Artist," *New York Times Magazine* (December 19, 2004), accessed online, May 25, 2016 <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/19/magazine/the-distribution-artist.html?_r=1>.
[106] Quelch, Elberse, and Harrington, "The Passion of the Christ (A)," 9.

by God and obligating Christian support in an attempt to renew the faith of believers and ignite

the faith of non-believers. In the midst of this spiritual branding, *The Passion* benefited

enormously from the concentrated infrastructures that had emerged within Evangelical society

since the 1980s, the rise of political "culture war" divides, and the recent prevalence of new

media technology within American life. In total, *The Passion*'s campaign succeeded as a result

of changing economic, cultural, ideological, and social conditions within US Evangelical society

and industry, all brought together by a marketing team with the budgetary means to pursue

Evangelical audiences at the grassroots level. While the marketing campaign only cost $15

million overall—a paltry sum in comparison to the marketing costs of most blockbusters, even in

2004—it still took a person with Gibson's wealth to invest in exploring this new arena of

Christian advertising. Most "Holywood" filmmakers would never have been able to make such

investments. Yet, once the marketing model of *The Passion* was established, "Holywood" moved

quickly to exploit the results for their own films.

PART 3: CHRISTIANS MARKETING TO CHRISTIANS

As the previous two parts of this chapter have demonstrated, "Holywood" filmmaking went from

a historically struggling independent industry, nearly decimated during the 1980s and 1990s, to a

thriving independent film culture that not only competes at the box office against mainstream

films but does business with the Hollywood studios as well. Never in film history has this level

of competitive and concentrated business relationship between "Holywood" and Hollywood ever

existed. Indeed, taken in the larger view of the past 15 years, *The Passion of the Christ* emerges

as certainly the crucial moment for Christian cinema. The vast majority of marketing efforts by

"Holywood" filmmakers have been modeled, in some way, on the campaign for *The Passion.*

Thus, this section will offer a general overview of the marketing methodologies adopted by

"Holywood" in the wake of *The Passion*'s success. Such a discussion is necessary before investigating Hollywood's own adoption and adaption of these methods in the latter half of Chapter 2, as well as the more detailed case-study examinations of "Holywood" and Hollywood filmmaking in Chapters 3 and 4. Although *The Passion* arrived like a psychic explosion upon America's pop-cultural consciousness, the long-term effects of the film were not immediately certain. In the following years, "Holywood" filmmakers would find themselves copying and modifying *The Passion*'s marketing schemes, as well as exploring new roads and alternatives.

The most dominant alternative came from Gener8xion Entertainment, which had established its unique marketing model previous to *The Passion*'s arrival and continued trying to exploit it in the years that followed. Much of this persistence came from Gener8xion's financial dependence and advertising relationship with the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN).[107] According to Christian filmmaker Stephan Blinn, Gener8xion used TBN almost exclusively for its networking, as opposed to independent networking agencies, like Outreach Inc. Gener8xion would first target communities where TBN contained strong market support and high ratings, generally in the Southern and Midwestern states, with less of a presence in the major coastal cities. Internal marketers then contacted local television stations within those communities for recommendations on forming church networks based on the stations' relationships with local churches and pastors through the broadcasting of religious programs. From these church lists, Gener8xion would generally contact pastors and denominations with stronger leanings toward "charismatic" views of Christianity, and thus more favorably disposed to the teachings and methodologies of TBN.[108] These churches tend to be associated with Pentecostal and Southern

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[108] Interview with Stephan Blinn (March 8, 2010). "Charismatic" Christianity is a form of Christianity that emphasizes the modern power of the Holy Spirit through spiritual gifts, such as speaking in spiritual languages (also known as speaking in tongues), performing miracles, prophesy, and personal revelations from God. This form of

Baptist denominations, which generally skew towards older members in both Caucasian and African-American communities.[109] In addition to this systematic selection process, Gener8xtion also used the many church contacts and donor support networks already in place at TBN. However, while this synergistic relationship certainly proved highly convenient for Gener8xion in their early films, prior to *The Passion*, their film releases in the years following Gibson's film would struggle. *One Night With The King*, a Biblical epic put into production immediately following the success of *The Passion*, failed to recoup its $20 million budget, as did the subsequent four Gener8xion films released thereafter. Much of this no doubt resulted from Gener8xion's high budgets, which necessitated much higher returns, but a main reason resides in the denominational self-limitations of TBN. By reducing their outreach to mainly Charismatic churches within TBN's network of communities, Gener8xion greatly reduced their Christian marketing capabilities. Their association with TBN likely hurt their influence with many Evangelical churches, since Charismatic Christianity is a controversial denomination amongst many conservative Christians.[110]

However, unlike Gener8xion, most "Holywood" production companies arose in the wake of *The Passion* and their marketing efforts were modeled on those established by Gibson and A. Larry Ross Communications. Indeed, Christian producer/director David Nixon followed *The*

Christianity is also known as "Spirit-Filled" Christianity. In 2011, the Pew Research Center estimated that Charismatic Christians numbered nearly 600 million globally. See: Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population* (2011), accessed online, April 12, 2012: <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2011/12/Christianity-fullreport-web.pdf>.

[109] According to Blinn, Evangelical and mainline denominations tend to have lower opinions of TBN's religious stances, which creates obstacles for Gener8xion in building relationships. The division between charismatic and evangelical Christians generally forms over the biblical interpretation of miracles, "speaking in tongues," and prophesy. Statistics are gathered from Gregory Smith, "Palin Nomination Puts Spotlight on Pentecostalism," *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life* (Sept 12, 2008), accessed online, April 12, 2012: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/949/palin-nomination-pentecostalism>.

[110] The divide between evangelicals and charismatics is well known and documented. For a brief overview of the conflicts, see: "Christian Movements and Denominations," *Pew Research Center* (December 19, 2011), accessed online, December 13, 2013 <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-movements-and-denominations>.

Passion's example successfully in promoting *Facing the Giants* and *Letters to God* (2010) to church audiences. Specifically, Nixon relied heavily on Outreach Inc.—the company that guided Gibson's campaign—to create church contacts, arrange and design promotional events, and produce film-related merchandise similar to those advertised by *The Passion*.[111] Nixon also used Outreach to research which theaters across the nation sold the most tickets for previous Christian-content films, like *The Passion of the Christ*, and which churches bought the most advanced tickets. He then investigated whether those churches, and other influential churches within the area, would be interested in showing an advanced screening of the film.[112] These influential churches tend to be white, Evangelical, and financially prosperous within the community. Within this target audience, Nixon claims the ideal demographic to be young mothers:

> We found that our evangelist for the movie is really a 35-year-old woman in the church. That woman can be so influential because she sells both up and down. She sells up to her pastor and down to her family. She's very influential in her group of people she associates with.[113]

This statement follows the overall purpose of these screenings, which is to generate active, public support for the film.

The operation model for the screenings also mimicked that of *The Passion*. Each of Nixon's screenings was followed by a question and answer time with the audience, which then segued into a promotional pitch by Nixon of future productions and recommendations on how to support the films. While he encourages some churches to follow the block-ticket presale model established by *The Passion*, which pastors can use for evangelism, Nixon also offers a few novel alternatives that still achieve the same result. According to Alyson Powers, Nixon's personal assistant:

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[111] Interview with David Nixon (March 8, 2010).
[112] Interview with Alyson Powers, assistant to David Nixon (March 8, 2010).
[113] Interview with Nixon.

> We also encourage churches to purchase a license for the movie so they can show it as many times as they want and have courses and things like that. We encourage them to do a fundraiser in which they sell tickets [for the movie] at whatever price they want and use a portion of the proceeds to buy out a theater, which costs between one to two thousand dollars depending on the size. They can then use the tickets they're given as an outreach tool [for evangelism].[114]

Licensing the film for a fundraiser to buy out theaters for the purposes of proselytization allows the filmmakers to reap the profits in multiple directions. The film becomes the means by which churches can support the film, via supporting outreach ministries. This form of block ticket sales continues to be a model for Christian productions in securing financial success.

"Holywood" marketers have also adopted *The Passion*'s online "ministry" and marketing component, and have even extended the use of new media as online tools have expanded. Almost all Christian films now have websites specifically designed for Christian audiences and offering a wide variety of content similar to that offered by *The Passion* websites, like ministry resources, licensing links, merchandise links, blogs, quizzes, and spiritual advice. In addition, these websites now also include broader uses of video and social media, which was still limited in 2004. For example, while the website for Nixon's *Letters to God* contained the standard links for purchasing blocks of tickets for the film's theatrical release, the website also offered an extensive collection of videos featuring crew devotional meetings and links to YouTube pages connected to the film. The film also had representation on Facebook, with discussion boards, photos, and videos all avidly promoting the film's release. Fans were even encouraged to track the film's progress on Twitter and pray for Nixon as he carried out the film's cross-country promotional screening tour.[115] These efforts encouraged church promotion run by church audiences. It cultivated the type of active fan interaction that remains crucial to the success of grass roots

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[114] Interview with Powers.
[115] A sampling of these cites includes:
the *Facing the Giants* website [http://www.facingthegiants.com],
the Facebook site for *Facing the Giants* [http://www.facebook.com/facingthegiantsthemovie],
the *Letters to God* website [http://www.letterstogodthemovie.com/],
the *Letters to God* YouTube page [http://www.youtube.com/user/LTGmovie],
and the Twitter page for *Letters to God* [http://twitter.com/prayer4ltg].

campaigns because it operates internally, virally, and independent of costly promotional

meetings.

Putting aside campaign operations, the messages commonly expressed through these

marketing methods also imitate those used by *The Passion*. Specifically, "Holywood" producers

commonly imitate Gibson's efforts to transform a film product into a spiritual and social cause

that will rally and/or compel active audience support. This occurs on several levels, all aimed at

connecting the films overtly to the Christian belief systems of the targeted churches.

One level is the creation of inner-church ministry resources based around the film's

content. While marketing materials for *The Passion* mostly focused on outer-church evangelism,

the film did offer some inner-church resources for pastors, like media packages that could be

used in sermon illustrations. However, in the hands of the "Holywood" filmmakers that came

after, this simple seed of a marketing concept has produced a vast alternative crop of revenue. [116]

Audio and visual materials for sermons, based on the film content, is currently just a first step for

most marketing teams. In addition, "Holywood" companies also offer entire pre-made sermon

packages and structured curriculum for small group discussions to go with the audio/visual

content, taking the responsibility for crafting a sermon out of pastors' hands. *One Night with the*

King, *Facing the Giants*, *Letters to God*, and *Courageous* all designed and promoted pre-made

sermons and small groups notes, and most of these films went even farther in terms of

transforming the film itself into a tool for spiritual growth. For example, in the case of

Courageous, a film based in conservative fears of fatherhood under crisis in modern society, the

Collectors Editions DVD comes with over two hours of exclusive "ministry content" specifically

centered on instruction and advice for Christian fathers. Videos and DVD-ROM lessons guides

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[116] Peter A. Maresco, "Mel Gibson's The Passion Of The Christ: Market Segmentation, Mass Marketing and Promotion, and the Internet" (2004), in *WCOB Faculty Publications,* accessed online April 9, 2015 <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/wcob_fac/24>.

work in much the same way as Dobson's instructional films in the 1980s—Christian pastors

advise viewers on the cultural war between Christians and secular society and offer guidance on

how to bring personal faith into the role of fathers and families.[117] Unlike Dobson's serials,

however, these instructional tools are based out of narrative Christian entertainment. Nixon has

referred to these types of DVD releases as "ministries in a box" which can be marketed to

individual Christians and, more importantly, to churches that may be looking for similar ministry

materials. Indeed, the film website for *Courageous* offers links for churches to buy DVDs in

block numbers or to license the film and its ministry materials for church screenings. The cost

for churches is from $99 to $299 per screening, depending on the size of the congregation.[118] As

a result, these Christian films can continue to sustain relevance with churches and organizations

long after their theatrical releases. Churches continue to utilize the DVD and the other film-

related resources, allowing the films to become synonymous with larger social (and, in this

particular case, religious) movements, depending on the specific message and ministry offered

by each film.

In addition to inner-church ministries, film marketers also commonly utilize *The*

Passion's model for outer-church evangelism as a promotional tool. Churches are encouraged to

"Holywood" films as part of the larger Christian effort of seeking spiritual converts. Blinn,

Nixon, and Frenzel all openly emphasize the role evangelism plays in gaining access to churches.

Nixon states:

> That's what really turns on a church to it—the tools they can use. The movie is just a catalyst to get people
> into a theater and think about a concept. That's one of the components that I think makes these movies
> successful, especially in a faith-based genre. It's a way to get a portion of the population that would never
> go to church to see a movie. Again, as an effective outreach tool.[119]

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[117] *Courageous*, directed by Alex Kedrick, DVD release (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2011).
[118] *Courageous* website, accessed online, June 27, 2014 <http://www.providentfilms.org/courageous>.
[119] Interview with Nixon.

Nixon even equates Christian films to the "Tent Revival" meetings of the 1940s and 50s, where people came to the tents expecting a circus, and instead heard a call for salvation. Congregations are encouraged to view the films in this manner as well, which also shapes the films' exhibition model. The regular call for churches to purchase advanced blocks of tickets and to buy out theaters (a profit model every mainstream film would covet) is often couched in a call to evangelism. For example, *Letters to God* specifically selected its theatrical release date for this purpose:

> That's the reason why we brought the movie up a week after Easter- It comes out April 9th because we knew on Easter Sunday, a very specific phenomenon happens: there's more people in church on Easter Sunday than any other day of the year. And Pastors know that.... So, they said, "Can we buy a theatre out in our town for this movie and then we'll give those tickets out on Easter Sunday and engage with those people that may only be there once a year."... And there are people in their congregations that have friends, neighbors, and family members that they can never get to church. But they can give them that ticket and say, "Now you take that family member or that neighbor that would never come to church or go to a Bible study and here's a free ticket, go take them to a movie and then you get them in front of the gospel in front of the theatre." So churches are getting that this is an amazing evangelistic tool. I believe that Christian films may be the greatest evangelistic tool of our era.[120]

As with *The Passion,* this promotional tactic equates ticket purchases to the eternal salvation of souls and sacred Christian doctrine, transforming a film-going experience into a higher spiritual movement. This emphasis also obligates "faithful" church audiences to participate in order to remain in good spiritual conscious. In addition, it transforms the traditional theatrical film model—product (film) is advertised/sold to consumer (ticket buyers)—into a television broadcast model—the audience (unsaved souls) is the product sold to sponsors (church congregations) by various content providers (film production companies).

Again following in Gibson's footsteps, most "Holywood" filmmakers commonly exploit feelings of cultural divide between the secular and Christian world, and specifically between Hollywood and "Holywood" films. Within this context, some church audiences believe that the on-screen portrayals of violence, sex, and non-Christian (i.e., liberal) values in many Hollywood

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[120] Ibid.

films are directly antagonistic to Christian society. According to Stephan Blinn, certain church segments "see Hollywood as this very literally evil place. It exists to try to corrupt our values and our morals."[121] While Blinn personally disagrees with this view of Hollywood, he admits that Gener8xion often rallied church support by highlighting separatist sentiments. The cultural split between Hollywood and heartland is often framed as a political election, where church members should "vote at the box office" in favor of films like *The Omega Code* series and *One Night with the King*, which contain Christian messages, mild film content, and conservative values.[122] A promotional video on the *Letters to God* YouTube page confirms this when Pastor Greg Matte of Houston's First Baptist Church, recently returned from an advanced screening, praises the film to his vast congregations and admonishes them clearly that "if Christians don't vote, we don't send a signal to Washington. If Christians don't go to movies that glorify God and send a message to Hollywood, then what are we doing?"[123]

As with the calls to ministry and evangelism, the call to combat Hollywood values once again frames Christian cinema as a cause to be supported outside of any considerations of film narrative, film quality, or film entertainment. Unlike *The Passion,* which was almost universally praised for its productions values and filmic qualities, "Holywood" films have always struggled with perceptions of low production quality, especially in comparison with their Hollywood counterparts. Thus, Christian film marketers often use "culture war" rhetoric to mask the low production values. In regards to Gener8xion Entertainment, whose films often receive harsh critical receptions, Blinn admits to core audiences often embracing the Christian causes associated with the films while overlooking the artistic value. He believes that "the purpose and

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[121] Interview with Blinn.
[122] Ibid. See also Welkos, "Following the Book to Success."
[123] Video titled "Pastor Gregg praises Letters to God the Movie," accessed April 4, 2012: http://www.youtube.com/user/LTGmovie#p/a/u/0/P0we1NKFD_k.

the cause behind [most of our films] superseded the stigma of perhaps lesser quality of it being a

Christian film" in the minds of the fan base.[124] These types of forgiving audiences would be

unavailable if not for the intricate infrastructure of cultural movements and higher causes

supporting the films.

A final ramification from *The Passion*'s marketing is the necessity of establishing

Christian credentials in the branding of each film. While Christian branding was important for

Gibson's one "Holywood" film, especially in terms of fighting the perception of Gibson as a

liberal Hollywood outsider, it is even more important for "Holywood" filmmakers who wish to

have longstanding careers within the Christian film industry. When successfully established,

brands can be supported independently of individual film titles—a goal sought after by most film

studios, but only consistently achieved by companies such as Disney and Pixar. As with Gibson,

Christian branding generally forms around a production's spiritual credibility. Bobby Downes,

founder of ChristianCinema.com, the largest streaming service for Christian-oriented cinema on

the Internet, believes that faith behind the camera is essential to making faith-based films.

Indeed, to Downes, faith-based cinema cannot even exist without Christian artists and

filmmakers:

> The three defining forces of a Christian film are the director, producer, and screenwriter. Two of the three
> need to be evangelical or born-again [Christians]. It's the heart behind it that makes it Christian because
> only people can be Christian, not art. It is the art then which reflects the Christianity of the people who
> made it.[125]

Based on common marketing strategies, most Christian filmmakers would agree with

Downes. Marketing materials often go out of their way to demonstrate Christian behavior and

values on the part of the film crews. For example, the *Letters to God* YouTube page contains

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[124] Interview with Blinn.
[125] Diane Panosian, "Marketing 'Son of God' & Faith-Based Films to the Most Passionate Fanbase on the Planet," *SSN* (February 28, 2014), accessed online, August 30, 2015 <http://www.ssninsider.com/marketing-son-of-god-faith-based-films-to-the-most-passionate-fanbase-on-the-planet>.

seven "Devo" (devotional) videos that directly highlight the daily prayers that opened each day

of production, as well as the numerous guest speakers and pastors brought in to present

messages, praise songs, and spiritual blessings to the crew. The video "A Different Set Etiquette"

profiles a small group of church volunteers, called "Prayer Warriors," that pray on set all day

long during the filming.[126] Nixon claims that these videos express the "level of credibility a

Christian audience would look for."[127] This unique type of marketing ploy completely forgoes

the usual branding claims of "quality entertainment," or even "family entertainment," and instead

builds its authority on the Christian beliefs and practices shared by both audience and

filmmakers. This form of branding also re-enforces the emphasis on message over art or craft. In

addition, Nixon later connects this credibility to "culture war" divisions, believing that the videos

> show [Christians] that we're not just another Hollywood company making a movie, but we're Christians making movies.... We don't want to just manipulate people or just make Hollywood movies that would manipulate an audience. Our faith is very strong and our walk is very strong.[128]

This connection to a higher power, however, is not portrayed as a one-way relationship.

Christian filmmakers adamantly stress God's active involvement with the planning, production,

distribution, and (when permitted) financial success of the film. The most common narrative of

God's involvement usually centers on miraculous happenings, as once again exampled by *The*

Passion. Gibson offered personal examples of on-set miracles during his screenings with pastors,

and the behind-the-scenes featurette for *The Passion of the Christ* DVD describes how actor Jim

Caviezel was struck by lightning while hanging from the cross, but completely unharmed.[129]

David Nixon would even go further to equate the success of his previous films with God's

sovereign seal-of-approval:

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[126] *Letters to God* YouTube page: http://www.youtube.com/user/LTGmovie.
[127] Interview with Nixon.
[128] Ibid.
[129] *The Passion of the Christ*, directed by Mel Gibson, DVD release (20th Century Fox, 2004).

> [Y]ou're part of something so much bigger than you. That's why these projects have been blessed. I mean, there's no reason a little movie called *Facing the Giants* made by a church for eighty-thousand dollars would get a theatrical distribution. That's bizarre that that would actually happen, that Sony would put 4 million into it to get it in theaters and then it would be successful. That just doesn't happen! Hollywood spends hundreds of millions of dollars to get that to work and here we are making a little movie with a bunch of volunteers that never made a movie before. It's really unheard of. [130]

While this carries uncomfortable implications for unsuccessful faith-based films, the public remarks of Matthew Crouch eclipse Nixon's bravado. Crouch claimed that God designed *Megiddo: The Omega Code 2* as a personal response to the World Trade Center attacks of 2001, which occurred just before the film's theatrical release date. In a *Los Angeles Times* interview Crouch said:

> I don't believe under any circumstances that God's hand destroyed those buildings. It was not God's breath that blew those planes off course and into those buildings, but when he knows that things like that are going to happen--because I believe God sees from the beginning to the end of all time--he positioned this film to be the answer for a question we didn't even know would be asked.... The thought that [God] would position us to have an answer to a world that would be screaming out for answers is dynamic. [131]

These examples, both big and small, attempt to connect each film to the plans and designs of God, which builds branding characteristics far more significant than personal credibility. God's choice to shower blessings, provision, miracles, and divine coincidences on these meager films and devoted filmmakers creates an implied, but nonetheless compelling, obligation on the part of Christian audiences to do the same. This brand literally transforms each film into the ultimate Christian cause—namely, God's sovereign will.

While these marketing methods have proved remarkably successful in resurrecting the Christian film industry, and indeed launching it to new heights of profitability unimagined by early pioneers in Christian media, this level of effectiveness has created its own set of future challenges. Most notably the rise of Christian films openly competing at the box office has also destroyed the uniqueness of Christian films at the box office. The competition to reach churches has increased dramatically in recent years, fueled in part by the rise in Christian marketing firms

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[130] Interview with Nixon.
[131] Welkos, "Following the Book to Success."

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like Grace Hill Media and event organizers like Outreach Inc. In conjunction, Hollywood has

apparently taken note of the metaphorical Christian voting system, although not in the ways

anticipated. While some studios produced overtly-Christian films like *The Nativity Story* and the

Christian-allegorical *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, the main response has been to flood

church markets with a variety of typical product in the hopes that something will eventually be

successful. The results have been predictably unbalanced--profitable films like *The Blind Side*

carry numerous failures like *The Road* (2009) in their wake--and have created backlashes from

the churches. According to Nixon:

> Hollywood thought we should be using this same pipeline or marketing method and it has kind of jaded
> pastors.... We've heard from pastors that we've gone out to that have said, 'I get an email everyday about
> the next movie' that are not necessarily Christian movies; that are not necessarily God movies.[132]

Even Alan Neirob, who pioneered church networks with *The Passion*, admits to pushing failed

church campaigns in recent years, most notably with *The Great Debaters* (2007).[133] While the

glut from Hollywood has made churches cynical, the success of faith-based independents has

also made them more selective. Blinn explains:

> I think the novelty of the rallying people on faith-based films because they're faith-based films is starting to
> wear off.... [W]e've seen less and less of a return on the efforts, which tells me audiences ultimately want
> to see a good movie. And I think more and more they're wanting to go see a movie they feel is a real
> movie.[134]

This newly formed product discrimination demands an expansion of production values and talent

pools that could prove financially difficult for many faith-based production companies. It also

displays the uncertain reliability of marketing social causes, which seek to mask product

deficiencies beneath messages. Blinn observes that "you can rally people only so many times.

And every time you go back and try to get people excited for the cause it becomes more and

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[132] Interview with Nixon.
[133] Interview with Neirob.
[134] Interview with Blinn.

more diluted."[135] These developments only highlight the future dependence on product differentiation and branding within faith-based markets.

However, the ability to differentiate becomes frequently restrained by the limitations of these core audience networks. Although the establishment of these networks can lead to early successes, their continued presence can create product uniformity. In the case of church networks, this becomes even more highlighted by the presence of pastors, who act as gatekeepers to the congregations. The need to please pastors in order to gain access forces faith-based films to emphasis doctrinal messages that would be theologically appealing. These strong messages, filled with insider knowledge and overtly-Christian content, tend to dually isolate the films from broader audiences and create further dependence on core networks for financial survival. In addition, the emphasis on retaining Christian messages at all cost can severely limit models of productions. In the case of Gener8xion Entertainment, the creative model mirrors that of television, with controls resting primarily in the hands of producer/writers. This model allows Blinn and Crouch to tightly control a film's vision and message, but limits their ability to experiment on creative talent. Blinn freely admits that this need to preserve message creates problematic hiring issues:

> [T]he challenge in finding someone who will do what you want them to do is that you end up discovering there's not a lot that they're going to bring to the table themselves.... It's completely market realities. There's a great director who actually teaches at USC named Jimmy Egan who we interviewed for *One Night with the King*, and he's Jewish and loves the story of Esther and he came in, but he had his own vision. And I think he's an artistic person who would have done something interesting with the film, but that's a risk we couldn't take.[136]

This example further reinforces the pattern in faith-based productions of religious message being more important than film craft. Without the message, filmmakers could not transform their films into larger causes and rally core support. Without the message, Christian films become

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[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.

anonymous low-budget productions, forced to fight for marketability alongside other such productions on the precarious basis of film craft, narrative, and wider audience appeal. Without the message, ancillary markets into ministry services and evangelism quickly evaporate. Without the message, the brutal relationship of art and commerce is stripped bare, as will be exampled with Hollywood's own attempts to negotiate Christian audiences in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 – Hollywood:

The End of Censorship, the Rise of Controversy, and the Birth of the Middlemen

This chapter will discuss Hollywood's relationship to Christian film content and audiences from 1968 to the present, and chronicle the key events that led the studios from early religious controversies to its current pursuit of religious dollars at the box office. It will also address the rise of modern Hollywood marketing tactics in response to Christian audiences, and in particular focus on the rise of Christian marketing firms like Grace Hill Media, which act as marketing middle men between Hollywood and faith-based viewers. Specifically, this chapter argues that Hollywood's various industrial components have failed in their attempts to engage with Christian audiences since the end of the Production Code, and that it took the rise of middle-men Christian marketing firms to facilitate a stable and repeatable financial exploitation of Christian niche markets.

As a counterpart to Chapter 1, which offers historical and industrial context for the largely unknown "Holywood" movement, this chapter addresses historical gaps in film scholarship regarding Hollywood's relationship to Christianity since the late 1960s. The vast majority of scholarship on this topic has centered on the Production Code and Hollywood's dealing with religious censors from the 1930s through the 1960s. Hollywood's interaction with Christianity following the end of the Production Code, and up to the present time, has been almost entirely neglected within media studies. Thus, in order to discuss Hollywood's current relationship to Christian film culture and the modern rise of the Christian blockbuster, it is essential to first fill in the gaps regarding Hollywood's relationship to Christianity since the Production Code disappeared nearly 40 years ago.

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Indeed, my dating of this chapter is specific and aims to achieve a particular goal. In 1968, Hollywood officially did away with the Production Code, which for over 30 years had governed standards for film content in the United States, along with the watchful eyes of multiple regional and religious censorship boards, such as the Catholic Church's National Legion of Decency. Since the mid-1950s, the Production Code had received multiple challenges to its power and even its legality, forcing Hollywood to once again create a new system for monitoring film content that would keep the government from intervening in the film business and, hopefully, satisfy parents and consumers. After initial attempts to reform the Code in 1966, Hollywood finally replaced the whole censorship mechanism with the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating system. Under this new system, all previous restrictions on film content were lifted and films now received ratings that would advise consumers as to the level of adult content present in a film. The majority of public response to these decisions understandably centered on new and often graphic representations of sex and violence onscreen. However, these immediate responses by consumers and the press largely overlooked another major ramification to the dissolving of film censorship. Indeed, media scholars from then to the present have overlooked this other consequence as well.

Outside of sex and violence, the MPAA rating system also forced the United States to deal with cinematic free speech in regards to religious content. Previously, the Production Code had governed the treatment of onscreen spirituality and specifically forbade any sacrilegious or disrespectful treatment of religious imagery. Religious censorship boards, especially Catholic and Protestant censors, were extremely sensitive to the portrayal of faith in movies and strenuously lobbied Hollywood for reverential treatment onscreen through threats of public denouncement and boycotts. However, the adoption of the MPAA rating system essentially

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eliminated the power of these censorship boards, which could no longer control Hollywood's flow of film content flooding the cinemas. For example, the National Legion of Decency, by far the most powerful of the censor boards, and which had advised Hollywood censors since the 1933, faded quickly in power and relevance during 1970s until finally being subsumed by the United States Catholic Conference in 1980. The dissolving of these censors left a power vacuum in the relationship between Hollywood and Christian consumers. Where once religious filmgoers could trust the degree of adult film content to not offend public sensibilities, now they had huge portions of films to avoid and disagree with. Where once Hollywood was expected to treat religion with a soft touch, now films and filmmakers could treat religion any way they chose, whether it offended or not. Where once censor boards acted as advocates within the Hollywood system on behalf of religious viewers, now viewers had no recourse but to privately grumble their complaints or rally their own churches to protest. Although the treatment of religion would prove to be a slowly dawning controversy in comparison to the overnight rise of graphic sex and violence in 1968 and onward, it would nonetheless prove in the end to be the most vocal of all controversies stemming from the dissolving of the Production Code. It would also end up sending the most fear through the halls of Hollywood.

Since this chapter covers 30 years of dense cultural and industrial history, a comprehensive analysis of every event is not possible. Instead, this chapter addresses the major highlights that have most affected Hollywood's relationship to Christian film culture, and vice versa. Although there would be early controversies between Hollywood and Christian audiences during the 1970s—mostly over religious representation in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and *Monty Python's The Life of Brian* (1979)—the first major controversy of the post-Code era occurred over *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). The size and wrath of this controversy

effectively halted Hollywood's engagement with religion for over a decade, with only indie film

companies like Miramax willing to wade into religious waters with films like *Priest* (1994) and

Dogma (1999); and then for the express purpose of stirring up controversy as a means of free

publicity. Eventually, *The Prince of Egypt* (1999) would restart Hollywood's courtship of

religious audiences and, most importantly, birth the initial development of modern Christian

marketing methods that continue to influence marketers today. Following the huge box office

breakthrough of *The Passion* and the rise of Christian marketing firms like Grace Hill Media,

Hollywood has struggled with their degree of investment into Christian demographics. While the

studios want to exploit every market available, they generally avoid being associated with issues

outside of mainstream popular culture, like religious films and Christian marketing. The three

films in *The Chronicles of Narnia* film series provide an ideal opportunity to examine

Hollywood's various experimentations with Christian demographics. Each film in the series

utilized Christian marketing firms to different degrees, and achieved different degrees of

profitability.

EARLY CONTROVERSIES: *JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR* & *THE LIFE OF BRIAN*

Hollywood's historic relationship with Christianity since the silent era could be described as

cautious and fearful, with occasionally tepid flirtations. Indeed, during the first six decades of

Hollywood's existence, the studios seldom ever ventured into making films with religious

content or actively courting religious demographics, and for good reason: religious films were

hard pressed to actually please religious audiences, and often incurred religious wrath. While

Cecil B. DeMille's silent version of the Exodus story, *The Ten Commandments* (1923), was the

second highest grossing film of that year, his attempt to tell the Christ narrative in *King of Kings*

(1927) sparked backlashes from various Christian denominations. Even Jewish groups

denounced the film, citing the same anti-Semitic portrayals they would be fighting nearly 80 years later with *The Passion of the Christ*. When DeMille attempted another religious epic five years later with *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), the backlash from Catholic sectors would help institute tighter censorship for decades in Hollywood.

So in general, Hollywood has stayed away from religious filmmaking. There are isolated examples throughout the Classic Hollywood Era, like the affirming portrayals of Catholic priests—friendly Father O'Malley in *Going My Way* (1944) or noble Father Barry in *On the Waterfront* (1954), for example—meant to appeal to Hollywood's most monolithic religious censor, the National Legion of Decency. And Hollywood did engage in a consistent run of Biblical epics through the 1950s and 60s, from early hits like *Quo Vadis?* (1951) and *The Robe* (1953) to DeMille's safer and more embraced *Ten Commandments* (1956) to the somber and reverential *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). Still, these efforts were much more tied to financial necessity—like post-World War II profit restrictions in European nations, which encouraged Hollywood to film in Europe and helped birth the Biblical epic craze—and the spectacle of technology, with Hollywood grasping for audiences during those declining decades and delivering familiar stories in Technicolor and often widescreen.[137]

Following the adoption of the MPAA rating system, unconventional depictions of religious material finally began trickling onto screens for the first time, generating immediate backlash and public debates. Although seldom remembered as a controversial movie today, Norman Jewison's film adaptation of the hit Broadway musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* was one

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[137] In short, 1950s and 1960s Biblical epics were facilitated by specific production conditions and marketing necessities, and often filtered through the most reverent treatment of Biblical narratives. While these films were somewhat theological in nature, given their source material, their most important attribute was the big-screen color spectacle that allowed Hollywood to offer attractions unavailable on television. This primacy of spectacle to Biblical epics can be seen in the fact that this short-lived fad did not spur other types of religious narratives, like modern-set or smaller-budget films based on Christianity.

of the first films to spark religious controversy in the post-Production Code era. When initially

performed on stage, Protestant and Catholic figureheads had heavily criticized the rock opera for

it's glitzy, postmodern, and admittedly agonistic presentation of the story of Jesus—even mega-

Evangelist Billy Graham called parts of the musical "blasphemous."[138] Unsurprisingly, the film

adaptation by Universal Pictures also received condemnation in certain Christian circles, and in

particular from African American churches who complained to Universal about the casting of a

black actor to play Judas—the only African American amongst the disciples onscreen.[139] Yet the

film's largest and most vocal condemnation came from the Anti-Defamation League (A.D.L.)

and the American Jewish Committee, both of whom claimed the film reinforced the destructive

myth that the Jews killed Jesus. According to Benjamin R. Epstein, then national director of

A.D.L., the "movie's sharp and vivid emphasis on a Jewish mob's demand to kill Jesus can feed

into the kind of disparagement of Jews and Judaism which has always nurtured anti-Jewish

prejudice and bigotry."[140] Director Norman Jewison and the studio both vehemently denied any

anti-Semitic intentions, and the controversy did not seem to have an impact of the film's healthy

box office. However, in later years, Jewison would attribute the film's lack of domestic awards

recognition in 1973 to the anti-Semitic accusations, stating in an interview with *NPR*, "[I]t was

really astounding, the amount of controversy that eventually started to rise up in such a way that

the film was not nominated for an Academy Award and all of those things. And it won awards

all over the world."[141]

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[138] "Billy Graham Doesn't Care For 'Superstar,'" *Lodi-News Sentinal* (October 24, 1971), 7.
[139] Phillips, *Controversial Cinema*, 167.
[140] Linda Greenhouse, "'SUPERSTAR' FILM RENEWS DISPUTES: Jewish Groups Say Opening Could Stir Anti-Semitism Reasons Given Company Issues Statement," *The New York Times* (August 8, 1973), accessed online, November 11, 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9904e3dd103de63abc4053dfbe668388669ede>.
[141] Lynn Neary, "Jesus in America," *NPR Radio* (February 12, 2004), Interview with Norman Jewison, accessed online, November 11, 2011 <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1672581>.

While the condemnation of *Jesus Christ Superstar* may have seemed significant to its filmmakers, and may have raised some eyebrows in Hollywood, it pales in comparison to the religious ire generated six years later by Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*. The film presents an overt satire of the Christ narrative, following the character of Brian (who was born next door to Jesus) as he continues throughout his life to be mistaken for the savior of the Jews. Upon its release in the US, the film was universally condemned by both Christian and Jewish watchdog groups, being one of the few films to bring together Catholics, Protestants, and Jews in shared outrage. While Robert Lee of the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. labeled the film outright "blasphemous," the Catholic Archdiocese of New York actually called for a inter-denomination boycott of the film, publicly urging "religious persons and all persons of cultivation who respect religion to recognize contemptuous antireligious sentiment of this sort and to separate themselves from it personally as a matter of principle."[142] Many within the Jewish community felt equally attacked by the film. At a public press conference, Rabbi Benjamin Hecht, speaking for the Rabbinical Alliance, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada, and the Rabbinical Council of Syrian and Near Eastern Sephardic Communities of America, condemned the film as "a vicious attack upon Judaism and the Bible and a cruel mockery of the religious feelings of Christians as well" and worried that screening of the film may lead to violence, although he did not elaborate as to the reasons violence could incur.[143] While no violence was reported, there were indeed mass protests in front of theaters across the nation.

Beyond mere protest and condemnation, religious groups across the nation also lobbied for political and legal action in order to block the film's release. For example, South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond became inundated by complaints from Christian voters, even to the

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[142] "Religious Leaders Agree: 'Brian' Film Is Blasphemy," *The New York Times* (September 4, 1979): III, 7:1, and Eleanor Blau, "Catholics Deplore New Python Movie," *The New York Times* (August 30, 1979): sec C.
[143] "Three Jewish Groups Condemn 'Monty Python's Life of Brian,'" *The New York Times* (August 28, 1979): 65.

point of voters relaying messages through his wife. In the end, Thurmond contacted South

Carolina's largest theater chain, General Cinemas Corporation, to request they stop exhibiting

the film within the state. According to Seymour Evans, the company's vice president for public

relations, Sen. Thurmond informed them "that there was overwhelming sentiment against the

showing of the movie in South Carolina and suggested that we suspend showing it in the state."

In the end, the theater chain did indeed capitulate to the political and religious pressure.[144]

Likewise in Georgia, superior court judge Roy Lilly responded to Christian pressure groups by

banning Ashley Cinemas from playing *Life of Brian*, only to quickly reverse the order without

comment.[145]

Although *Life of Brian* was produced independently in the United Kingdom, with Warner

Brothers only acting as the film's domestic distributor in the US, the Hollywood studio still faced

constant and direct criticism from religious circles and watchdog groups. While some groups

attacked the Monty Python filmmakers, most complaints within the US were directed squarely at

Warner Brothers for supporting the film. As just one example, the "interfaith antiobscenity (sic)

organization" Morality Media, which counted the director of the Archdiocese of New York as a

member, labeled the film a "direct, aggressive, deliberate violation of the rights of believing

persons by Warner Communications."[146] In addressing all of these public attacks, Warner

Brothers adopted a remarkably simple response, especially by today's standards. The studio

released the following public statement, which they continued to reissue whenever asked for

comment by the press:

> The public has been enthusiastic, having flocked to every theater now playing the picture. It is
> entertainment and to many, Monty Python's 'Life of Brian' is an enjoyable movie experience. It was never

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[144] Wendell Rawls Jr., "'Life of Brian' Stirs Carolina Controversy," *The New York Times* (October 24, 1979): 69.
[145] "Judge in Georgia Lifts Ban on a Film Satirizing Jesus," *The New York Times* (October 31, 1979): A18.
[146] "'Life of Brian' Film Attacked By Clergymen," *The Washington Post* (September 7, 1979): C15.

our intention to offend anyone's beliefs and we certainly regret having done so. The film is a satire and it should be viewed in that context.[147]

However, in the midst of this public outcry and studio stonewalling, it's intriguing to note that one organization took aim beyond merely blaming Warner Brothers. The Catholic Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting (OFB), which was in the process of subsuming the National Legion of Decency, actually ignored the studio and instead attacked the bureaucratic and industrial changes within the film industry that now allowed films like *Life of Brian* to play in theaters. Indeed, in an overt nod to the pre-ratings era, the OFB submitted an official complaint to the MPAA for granting *Life of Brian* a "code seal." Although the Production Code had now been defunct for more than a decade, a complaint regarding a "code seal" acted not only as a protest against the offending film, but against the whole post-Code system that Catholics now found themselves forced to live under. While other organizations focused on condemning the filmmakers or the studio, Rev. Patrick J. Sullivan, OFB director, would foreshadow future "culture war" protests by attacking the actual mores of the larger Hollywood establishment as a whole:

> [A] film as offensive to religious sensibilities as [*Life of Brian*] would not, under former MPAA standards of production [or, the Production Code], have been granted a seal…. The code as a yardstick has long been abandoned, leaving nothing more than a convenient ratings system. In this case we still would have expected that at least the spirit of the old code would have been operative. We would have expected an X rating. The MPAA's tactic approval has something definite to say about perceptions of the film industry leaders as to where the country's religious values really are. One would have thought they would be more sensitive to the concerns of those who do believe. It seems to confirm the attitude that they'll do anything for a buck as long as it doesn't land them in jail.[148]

THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST

Martin Scorsese passion project came from a religious desire to put a more human face on Jesus. And while Universal Studios expected some religious objections when they green lit the film—

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[147] Lee Grant, "Interfaith Protest Against 'Life of Brian': Jews, Catholics Raise Objections Interfaith Protest Over Monty Python's Latest Film," *Los Angeles Times* (August 31, 1979): h1.
[148] Ibid.

even expecting a little controversy would make for good publicity—the studio actually tried to contain the worst of the blowback by courting Christian leaders and dialoguing about the film content. Universal executives thought the film might even have appeal with most Christians. And yet, despite these simple motives, the finished film would prove one of the most divisive events in the history of American cinema, and certainly the most significant moment in Hollywood's relationship to Christianity up to that time.

Due to the source novel's controversial background, Martin Scorsese had struggled since the 1970s to bring *Last Temptation* to the screen. The film is based on the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, which portrays a much more human version of Jesus. He begins with doubts and fears, but slowly becomes divine throughout the course of the film. The most controversial sequence involves Jesus' final temptation while dying on the cross. In a dream, he imagines coming down off the cross and living a full human life. He marries Mary Magdalene, has sex with her for procreation, and then, after her death, has many children with the sisters Mary and Martha. In the end, however, Jesus turns away from this temptation and dies on the cross, thus completing his mission. Scorsese was raised Roman Catholic and saw the film as an expression of faith. To him, it was not intended as a literal retelling of the Gospels, but instead as a counter-example to the traditional depictions of Jesus, which overly emphasized his divinity.[149] Some Christians, obviously, interpreted these ideas as sacrilegious.

Paramount Pictures had almost made the film in 1983, but protest from religious groups and theater exhibitors killed the project.[150] Universal Studios picked up the film as part of a multi-picture deal with Scorsese, hoping that, if they funded his passion project, he would in

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[149] Audio commentary on *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) dir. Martin Scorsese, Criterion Collection (DVD).
[150] Thomas R. Lindlof, *Hollywood Under Siege: Martin Scorsese, the Religious Right, and the Culture Wars* (University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 80-82, and Steve Oney, "The Forces That Fired 'Last Temptation,'" *The Washington Post* (August 4, 1988), G1.

return direct more commercial films.[151] (Incidentally, Scorsese's next film for Universal would be *Cape Fear* in 1991, a more blatantly genre picture and his only box-office hit until *The Aviator* in 2004.)

Unlike Paramount, Universal decided to be proactive in addressing the film controversial subject matter. They took two approaches (both of which would be significant in how the conflict played out). First, they decided to court the religious community. At the beginning of 1988, they contacted five prominent evangelical leaders from the Christian community: Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, Lloyd Ogilvie, James Dobson, and Donald Wildmon. All of these men were conservative Protestant Evangelicals, vocal advocates for Christian morals in the media, and likely to be antagonistic towards *Last Temptation*. Universal offered them all a deal: the studio would screen the film for them in June of 1988, three months before its September release date, and in return they would refrain from publically condemning the film until at least after that screening. All five men agreed.[152] At the same time, Universal also prepared a second and more aggressive approach. In the unlikely case that they had to publicly defend the film, they decided to take the moral high ground of freedom of speech. However, most within Universal felt that these defensive measures would probably be unnecessary.[153] After establishing a momentary truce with well-known Christian leaders, some executives actually wondered aloud if the film would be controversial enough.[154]

Despite a few quiet months, controversy surrounding the film started to build slowly through a chain of events. In February of 1988, several Christian radio stations began tracking

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[151] Wolf Schneider, "Uni nabs Scorsese's 'Last Temptation,'" *Hollywood Reporter* (December 15, 1987), 1, and James Greenberg, "Scorsese and U Enter Long-Term, Multi-Pic Deal," *Daily Variety* (February 9, 1988), 1.
[152] Steve Rabey, "Producer Tries to Dim Fears Over Movie," *Christianity Today* (March 4, 1988), and Larry Poland, *The Last Temptation of Hollywood* (Highland, CA: Mastermedia International, 1988), 18, and Lindlof, 141.
[153] Lindlof, 151.
[154] Lindlof, 139.

the film's progress.[155] A few months later, an early draft of the screenplay leaked out to several

Christian organizations. Hundreds of copies were made and distributed amongst churches.[156]

This script had many controversial details that would not end up in the final film, but which

greatly alarm Christian leaders—such as a scene at the Last Supper where the disciples cough up

the bloody flesh of the first Eucharist, and the film's lovemaking scene between Jesus and Mary

Magdalene, but with extra dialogue that would not make the final film—like Jesus professing: "I

worship you. God sleeps between your legs."[157]

As controversy spread slowly about the film, the truce came under threat. In June,

postproduction delays forced Universal to postpone the preview screening for religious leaders

until July. The leaders asked that the release date be postponed as well, so that they would still

have three months to mount a protest if needed. Universal refused and the truce broke down.[158]

On July 11, Mastermedia International purchased a full-page ad in the *Hollywood Reporter*

claiming that *Last Temptation* "maligns the character, blasphemes the diety [sic], and distorts the

message of Jesus." The ad, signed by 61 Christians working in the film industry, demanded that

the film not be released.[159]

The debate became even more public when a coalition of southern Californian pastors

held a press conference on July 12 and condemned *Last Temptation* as "the most serious misuse

of film craft in the history of movie making," claiming that it portrayed Jesus as a "mentally

deranged and lust-driven man." The pastors called on Christians to boycott Universal and its

parent company MCA, and demand that the studio destroy the film.[160] Bill Bright, head of

[155] Lindlof, 145.
[156] Poland, 48-49.
[157] Lindlof, 153.
[158] John Dart, "Church Upset at Delay in Film Screening," *Los Angeles Times* (June 18, 1988).
[159] Paid advertisement, "I Find No Fault in Him," *Hollywood Reporter* (June 11, 1988).
[160] Pat H. Broeske, "Universal Asked to 'Destroy' Scorsese's Film About Christ," *Los Angeles Times* (July 12, 1988).

Campus Crusade for Christ, even offered to buy the film from Universal for $10 million with the intent of destroying the negative.[161] On July 21, Universal finally responded to the mounting controversy with their prepared second approach. The studio purchased full-page ads in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Variety*, *Hollywood Report*, *The Washington Post*, and *Atlanta Constitution* publicly refusing Bright's offer and espousing their constitutional rights of Freedom of Religion and Expression. The ad compared censorship demands to the rule of totalitarian nations.[162] However, on the very same day, Universal's moral outraged was somewhat diminished when the theaters chains for United Artists, Mann Theaters, and Edwards Cinema publicly refused the play the film.[163]

The controversy grew darker in mid-July when Rev. R.L. Hymers and over 100 members of his church, the Fundamentalist Baptist Tabernacle, picketed outside MCA/Universal headquarters. They carried signs reading "Wasserman Fans Anti-Semitism" (Lew Wasserman being the president of MCA). When asked what the signs meant, Hymers stated, "These Jewish producers with a lot of money are taking a swipe at our religion. Of course it's going to cause a backlash."[164] On July 21, Rev. Jerry Falwell also commented that *Last Temptation* will "create a wave of anti-Semitism."[165] Although Jewish and Christian groups around the nation denounced these statements, they still gained national media coverage and placed even more pressure on the film's release.[166] As a result of these events, Universal found itself in a panic by early August, causing the studio to bump the release date for *Last Temptation* from mid-September to August

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[161] Amy Dawes, "Offer to Buy Pic," *Daily Variety* (July 18, 1988).
[162] "Display Ad 13," *The New York Times* (July 21, 1988), p. A15, and Lindlof, 182.
[163] Craig Modderno, "Theaters May Shun 'Temptation,'" *Los Angeles Times* (July 15, 1988).
[164] Amy Dawes, "Christian Groups Blast Universal over 'Christ' Pic," *Variety* (July 20, 1988), 1.
[165] Aljean Harmetz, "Film on Christ Brings Out Pickets," *The New York Times* (July 21, 1988), C19.
[166] Ibid, and John Dart, "2 Step Back from Film Protest over Anti-Jewish Tone," *Los Angeles Times* (July 23, 1988), part II, 1.

12, mere weeks away, in the hopes of ending the mounting controversies.[167] However, many

Christian leaders saw this move as act of aggression from Universal and retaliated.[168] On August

9, the U.S. Catholic Conference condemned *Last Temptation* with an "O" rating for being

"morally offensive." In addition, Mother Teresa also condemned the film.[169] On August 11, a

rally took place at MCA headquarters with an estimated 25,000 protesters, the largest gathered

protest against a film since *the Birth of a Nation* in 1915.[170]

 The Last Temptation of Christ opened in nine theaters on August 12. Although heavily

picketed, the film played to sold-out houses and eventually expanded to nearly 130 theaters.[171] In

the aftermath, theater chains like United Artists retracted their decision to boycott the film.[172]

After the first initial weeks, protesters diminish quickly. The film, costing $6.5 million to

produce, grossed over just $8 million domestically. By the end of its theatrical run, the film had

been covered nearly non-stop in the press between June and October. The film landed on the

cover Time magazine, it garnered coverage from talk-show hosts like Oprah Winfrey and news

shows like *Nightline*, and it gathered the public opinion of celebrities, politicians, and countless

clergy.

 The controversy dominated most of 1988 and badly frightened Hollywood studios, and

the results were both immediate and long lasting. As a result of the controversies around *Last

Temptation,* no Hollywood studio produced a religiously-based film again until 1998 with *The

Prince of Egypt*—a gap of over ten years. The closest examples before this were the films *Priest*

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[167] Aljean Harmetz, "Scorsese 'Temptation' Gets Early Release," *The New York Times* (August 5, 1988).
[168] Pat H. Broeske, "Universal Moves Up Release Day of Film 'Last Temptation,'" *Los Angeles Times* (August 5, 1988), sec. II, 1.
[169] John Dart, "Church Declares 'Last Temptation' Morally Offensive," *Los Angeles Times* (August 10, 1988).
[170] Russell Chandler, "25,000 Gather at Universal to Protest Film," *Los Angeles Times* (August 12, 1988).
[171] Nina J. Easton, "Slow Release Strategy Pays Big Dividends," *Los Angeles Times* (August 16, 1988), part IV, p.1., and Lindlof, 282.
[172] Amy Dawes, "United Artists Theaters Book 'Last Temptation,'" *Variety* (August 18, 1988), and Claudia Eller, "Loews will yield to 'Temptation,'" *Hollywood Reporter* (August 23, 1988).

(1995) and *Dogma* (1999); both produced by Miramax Films, a subsidiary of the Walt Disney Company.

MIRAMAX: *PRIEST & DOGMA*

The decade between *Last Temptation* and *Prince of Egypt* (roughly 1988 to 1998) proved a **dead zone** in terms of Hollywood approaching any type of overtly religious content. The massive reaction from Christians nationwide against *Last Temptation* only reinforced the old Hollywood belief that filmmakers should steer clear of all things controversial, and especially religion. The one exception to this reactionary trend proved to be a film company that had built their legacy on controversy. In the 1990s, Miramax distributed two films that not only dealt overtly with Christian subject matter, but also overtly challenged Christian theology. Indeed, the content of these films seemed to beg for religious backlash, and so that's precisely how Miramax chose to market them.

Priest (1994) was produced in the UK by the BBC and picked up for distribution the US by Miramax. The indie giant seemed a natural fit for the controversial subject matter of the film, which portrays a homosexual priest who acts out on his sexual desires in private but still tends to his priestly duties in public. Miramax had repeatedly converted controversy into hype with previous films—such as the sexually forward *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, the notoriously violent *Reservoir Dogs*, followed quickly by *Pulp Fiction*, and the infamous *The Crying Game*. In each case Miramax had come out on top and garnered prestige and awards along the way. Based on their marketing approach for *Priest*, the company no doubt believed that it would achieve similar results yet again.

From the start, Miramax devised a marketing campaign bent on stirring up religious outrage and thus generating free coverage in the press. The first and boldest move they made was

to set the release date for Good Friday of 1995, the date commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and just preceding Easter Sunday, one of the holiest days on the Christian calendar.[173] The public backlash, particularly from leaders within the Catholic Church, was as angry as it was inevitable. The Archdiocese of New York held a press conference where Catholic League President William Donohue denounced the film as an example of "deep-seated rage against Catholicism" and described the release date as an attempt by Miramax to "put salt on the wounds" of Christians everywhere. Donohue condemned the film as insulting Catholics everywhere for portraying priests as suffering from a "depraved condition [i.e., homosexuality] as a direct consequence of church teachings."[174] As if following a script, Miramax replied to the outrage with declarations of innocence and surprise. Mark Gill, Miramax's president of marketing, told reporters that the release date was merely intended to coincide with the national feelings of religious reflection associated with Easter. In reply to Catholic protests, Gill stated, "Frankly, we are a little surprised by the vehemence of the [Catholic League's] reaction."[175] And as if reading from the same script, the national press and industry trade publications dutifully reported on every development of the controversy.[176]

Yet, certain developments in the controversy could not be predicted. While Miramax initially seemed on solid, familiar ground—courting controversy and building brand recognition at the same time—the ground beneath their feet was actually completely new, and had been for

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[173] Martin Mahoney, "ARTS: The Confession-Box Controversy," *Irish Voice*, New York (April 4, 1995), 26.
[174] John Dart, "Protest Delays Wide Release of `Priest' Religion: Miramax bows to Catholic group and reschedules controversial film's general distribution till after Easter," *Los Angeles Times* (March 25, 1995), 1.
[175] Laurie Goodstein, "Catholics Protest Irreverent 'Priest': Miramax May Change Good Friday Release," *The Washington Post* (March 24, 1995), C1.
[176] For examples of *Priest* controversy coverage, see: Greg Evans, "'Priest' foes pass over Miramax, boycott Disney," *Daily Variety* (April 3, 1995); and Greg Evans, "Disney stays at arm's length in 'Priest' flap," *Daily Variety* (April 5, 1995); and Charles Fleming, "Are They Happy Together," *Newsweek* (April 10, 1995), 44; and Amy Wallace, "Miramax Chiefs Form Separate Firm to Buy Controversial Film," *Los Angeles Times* (April 8, 1999); and Oliver Jones, "Church urges Disney to jettison Miramax," *Daily Variety* (June 17, 1999), 7.

over a year. In 1993, well before *Priest* had been selected for distribution, the Walt Disney

Company purchased Miramax. Thus, unlike previous controversies where Miramax need only

worry about their own reputation, the film company now had to contend with the reputation of its

parent corporation. And Disney could not have been more different in terms of brand. Indeed, the

Catholic critics quickly picked up on this vulnerability and began directing their outrage at

Disney for owning a company like Miramax. In his weekly newsletter, New York's Cardinal

O'Connor denounced the film as "viciously anti-Catholic," comparing it to profanity scrawled

"across the walls of men's rooms." In particular, he took aim at Disney and declared the so-

called family-friendly company to be "cheap and onerous."[177] Likewise, Donohue explicitly

called Disney out for their association with Miramax and demanded that Michael Eisner, chief

executive officer at Disney, cut Miramax off from his company. Donohue promised that, if

Eisner did not respond, the Catholic League would throw Disney into disarray and "use every

legal method possible to discredit the 'Snow White' image of Disney. I think boycotts are over-

used and overrated, but I'm talking about stockholder revolts, ad campaigns and so on."[178]

Indeed, unlike many instances of tough words from offended viewers, most of these

threats actually came to pass. Within a month of Donohue's threats, the Knights of Columbus, a

fraternal Catholic organization, sold their holdings of Disney stock, worth $3 million, and

canceled their annual trip to Disneyland. Paid advertisements appeared in industry trade

publications declaring "Shame on Disney" and calling for resignations and retribution. Even

worse, according to insiders at Disney and Miramax, was the Catholic League's systemic phone

campaign, which endlessly tied up phone lines at both companies and provided huge amounts of

harassments. While Donohue refused to take the blame for every individual who called the two

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[177] Bernard Weinraub, "Objection to 'Priest' Isn't Creating a Hit," *The New York Times* (April 20, 1995), C15.
[178] Dart, "Protest Delays Wide Release of `Priest' Religion."

companies, he did encourage all Catholics and concerned filmgoers to express their displeasure

with Miramax and Disney. Miramax had ridden the storm of controversy often before, but even

executives there were shocked at the vitriol of the phone calls, letters, and even death threats.

Harvey Weinstein, co-founder of Miramax, recalled being deeply concerned for his safety and

feeling like he misjudged the situation: "Cardinal O'Connor lit the fuse. There's nothing as

frightening as getting these letters that said, 'Dear Jew, Go fuck yourself, I'm going to kill you.'

My mother criticized me on top of everything. You think publicity always fuels the box office—

not that kind of publicity."[179]

From Disney's perspective, the situation was becoming a public relations nightmare.

Although publicly Disney insisted that Miramax was a completely separate and autonomous over

their film own operations, privately Disney executives, including Eisner, began applying

pressure on Miramax to change the release schedule and quell the controversy as quickly as

possible.[180] Eventually, Miramax relented and delayed the release to the following weekend, but

protesters still gathered in front of theaters in New York and Los Angeles.[181] Although generally

well-reviewed, the film barely made back its production costs. Neither Disney nor Miramax

seemed happy with the experience on *Priest*, yet both companies found themselves in a nearly

identical situation just four years later.

Like so many unorthodox and controversial films about religion, *Dogma* (1999) was the

passion project of a Catholic filmmaker.[182] Writer/director Kevin Smith had long wanted to make

a film that explored his Catholic religion with a mocking eye towards Church dogma, but an

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[179] Peter Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005): 212.
[180] Ibid; and Goodstein, "Catholics Protest Irreverent 'Priest.'"
[181] Weinraub, "Objection to 'Priest' Isn't Creating a Hit."
[182] For other examples of controversial religious films by practicing or lapsed Catholic filmmakers, see: Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana* (1961), Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971), Martin Scorsese's The *Last Temptation of Christ*, Antonia Bird's *Priest*, and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

embrace of simple faith. However, the finished film would prove a mine field of offensive

material for the religiously sensitive. By combining his slacker, foul-mouthed brand of humor

with highly critical interrogation of the Catholic Church, Smith brought the most holy and the

most profane under one roof and stood them up side by side: the hero of the story, and a

descendent from Jesus' own bloodline, works for an abortion clinic; the sidekick "prophets" are

stoners who keep trying to "bang" the film's hero; angels love booze and proudly disrobe to

show their Barbie-doll lack of genitalia; the 13th Apostle, played by Chris Rock, accuses the

Bible of excluding him because he's black; fallen angels discover a loophole in Catholic

theology that will get them back into Heaven, but go on a killing spree first; one of God's

servants works as a stripper; a demon sends a poop monster to kill the heroes; God is trapped in

the body of a brain-dead man on life support, who has be unplugged and killed in order to free

God; God is played by singer Alanis Morissette; everyone in the film, sinner or saint, is foul

mouthed to the extreme; and so on.

It might seem strange that Miramax would again associate itself with such obviously

inflammatory film content; so guaranteed to ignite protest and derision. After the courting of

controversy backfired with *Priest,* and incurred such displeasure from their parent company, one

might expect Miramax to back away from another such public storm. And yet, Miramax had a

long history of doing business with Kevin Smith and prided itself on having special relationships

to film talent—particularly talent that helped build the company. Like Steven Soderberg's *Sex,*

Lies, and Videotape and Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, Smith's first

film, *Clerks* (1994) was an early success story for Miramax. Smith continued working for

Miramax during the 1990s and always delivered films for low budgets with decent profitability.

Additionally, Smith's films were usually loved by critics, filled with famous friends like Matt

Damon and Ben Affleck, and embraced by popular culture, all of which added to Miramax's cultural cache. Thus, the Weinstein brothers felt they could not turn down Smith's new project.[183]

In analyzing Miramax's marketing plan for *Dogma*, it appears the company once again embraced their traditional courting of controversy, while this time trying to limit Disney's exposure to religious backlash. Indeed, the easy target of Disney seems to have rested uneasily around the neck of Miramax, who would have preferred to keep the parent company's money while still operating with the cavalier freedom of a truly independent film company. In April 1999, months away from the *Dogma*'s fall release, Disney and Miramax made joint announcements outlining an unconventional distribution plan for the film. Disney announced that it would not fund Miramax's release of film, while Miramax announced that it would form a separate company to handle the *Dogma* release and seek an outside film distributor (LionsGate Entertainment would eventually release the film), thereby completely shielding family-friendly corporation from any association with the film and, hopefully, from any backlash. The Weinstein brothers personally paid $12 million to buy out Disney's investment in the film "out of respect" for the parent company.[184] As Harvey Weinstein told reporters: "We're in a situation where Disney is a target for this kind of protest. They're too easy a target…. Why make trouble? I just thought it was time to pre-empt the situation."[185]

But trouble is exactly what the Weinsteins went after. With this symbolic separation between Miramax and Disney now in place, the Weinsteins proceeded to engage in a classically

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[183] Bruce Orwall, "Miramax Co-Chiefs to Buy Film That Parent Disney Won't Release," *The Wall Street Journal* (April 8, 1999): B10.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid; and Bernard Weinraub, "THE MEDIA BUSINESS; Disney and Miramax Collide Over Church Issues in New Film," *The New York Times* (April 8, 1999), accessed online, November 10, 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/08/business/the-media-business-disney-and-miramax-collide-over-church-issues-in-new-film.html>.

provocative marketing campaign. Posters for the film prominently featured the tagline "Get

'touched' by an angel"—a sexual word play on the title for the then-popular television show,

Touched by an Angel.[186] Deciding to embrace and even mock the inevitable vitriol from

protestors, Miramax set up the website "www.dogmamovie.com" in order to proudly parade

weekly samples of the hate mail.[187] In an even more aggressive move to pre-empt backlash, the

Weinsteins had their lawyers present a letter to the Catholic League, the 350,000-member

organization that had hounded Miramax and Disney during the *Priest* controversy. The letter

made clear that Miramax would "hold the League fully accountable for any wrongdoing, injury

or damages it causes" as a result of any protests against *Dogma*. All of these measures reveal a

film company struggling to place controls on public sentiment and outrage—to both ignite

backlash and simultaneously contain it. Each step of the campaign gained national media

coverage, but each step also appeared measured for effect. Yet, the Catholic League's response

to Miramax's letter proved much more prophetic of the very public dogfight that lay ahead:

"[W]e are going to whip up a media storm about this. This is a fascistic attempt to muzzle our

free speech. It will backfire."[188]

Regardless of any symbolic separation between Disney and Miramax, the Catholic

League had no intention of leaving the Mouse House out of the fight over *Dogma*. Throughout

the summer of 1999, the controversy over *Dogma* continued to mount and the Disney name

remained front and center in the headlines. In June of 1999, the Catholic League delivered their

first major attack through a paid advertisement in *The New York Times*. The headline for the ad

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[186] Paid advertisement, ""Get 'touched' by an angel," *Village Voice* (October 5, 1999), and "Just for Variety," *Daily Variety* (November 17, 1999).
[187] "Marketing News: Blessing in Disguise," *Screen International* (November 26, 1999). 6.
[188] Oliver Jones, "Inside Moves: LEAGUE, MIRAMAX IN 'DOGMA' DOGFIGHT," *Variety* (June 21, 1999), 4.

announced, "APPEAL TO DISNEY: DUMPING DOGMA TOOK GUTS NOW DUMP

MIRAMAX." The text of the ad laid out the League's arguments:

> If Disney wants to recapture its family-friendly image, there is no better way to do this than by severing all ties with the Weinsteins. It was the Weinstein brothers that gave us the anti-Catholic movie, "Priest," in 1995, effectively triggering a boycott of Disney by the Catholic League; other organizations have since joined with us…. Catholics, and people of all religions, are sick and tired of these kinds of assaults. The time has come for Disney to dump Miramax. To that end, the Catholic League will commence a petition drive sending the results directly to Michael Eisner of Disney.[189]

This petition was indeed sent to Eisner, signed with over 300,000 signatures, all demanding that

Disney break off business dealings with the Weinstein brothers.[190] In addition, the Catholic

League released a newsletter calling on politicians like Hilary Clinton to cut ties with "anti-

Catholic" donors like the Weinsteins and Michael Eisner, to "summon the courage to slam

'Dogma,' with its filthy humor targeted at Catholics," and also directing all Catholics to place

calls to Disney and Miramax to let their displeasure be known.[191] The Catholic League also set

up their own website in response to Miramax's "hate mail" site, which featured reviews and

script pages as "proof of the anti-Catholic nature of [*Dogma*]" and further calls to contact

Disney.[192] Unsurprisingly, Miramax and Disney were once again flooded with angry phone calls

and hate mail, and once again the occasional death threats.[193] Tensions ran high between the two

companies.

Indeed, the attacks on Disney became so prevalent over the summer, and reported on so

widely, that a few reporters noted the conspicuous lack of attack on the creator of the film, Kevin

Smith, or the film's actual distributor, LionsGate. Smith evidently noticed this as well. When

questioned in an online message board about the odd situation of creating a hugely controversial

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[189] "Display Ad 15," *The New York Times* (June 23, 1999), A19.
[190] "In the Know / A LOOK AT THE WEEK AHEAD; 'Dogma' Looking for Public's Blessing," *Los Angeles Times* (November 8, 1999), 2.
[191] Dave Kehrcannes, "Deflator of the Faith? Director Begs to Differ." *The New York Times* (Aug 01, 1999), AR7.
[192] Roger Armbrust, "In Focus: Catholic League Webs "Dogma"," *Back Stage - the Performing Arts Weekly* 40, no. 32 (August 1999), 4.
[193] Cliff Rothman, "'Dogma' Opens in New York to Protesters' Jeers, Audience Cheers," *Los Angeles Times* (Oct 06, 1999), 2.

film and yet being forgotten in the attacks, Smith proved an astute analyzer of public relations

tactics:

> It's about publicity, friends. You want national attention, you don't attack the *Clerks* guy; you go after the head of one of the most widely recognized corporations in the world. And even when the wind's been taken out of your sails (i.e. – Disney no longer has anything to do with *Dogma* domestically), you create some other new issue (like, 'Well…. Disney should dump Miramax! Yeah! That's it!)... I grow weary from talking this to death… Can't we talk about dick and fart jokes, and even the Lord instead? Oh right – that's what got me into this position in the first place.[194]

Upon release, *Dogma* initially seemed destined to remain controversial, even through its

theatrical run. The film premiere in New York was greeted by 1,500 Catholic League protestors

and a public denouncement by the city's then-mayor, Rudolph Giuliani.[195] However, the public

demonstrations ended thereafter. The film went on to earn a respectable $30 million off of a $10

million budget, but certain signs of discomfort, if not outright trauma, from the situation

remained. Not only did Miramax never again approach a controversial religious film, the

company's future slate of film would become decidedly more audience friendly and

conventional. And relations between Disney and Miramax would remain frosty until the

Weinstein brothers' eventual departure five years later.

TENTATIVE BEGINNINGS: *THE PRINCE OF EGYPT*

Outside of these isolated instances with Miramax, the traumatic shockwave of *Last Temptation*

of Christ resonated in Hollywood for a solid decade. After 1988, there were no overtly religious

films made in Hollywood until DreamWorks' *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), an animated film that

retold a familiar Hollywood narrative—the Biblical story of Moses delivering the Israelites out

of slavery in Egypt. At a time when Disney's kid-centered animation dominated the marketplace,

the choice of subject matter was rather daring for the newly founded DreamWorks SKG,

especially considering *Prince of Egypt* was launching the new studio's entire animation division.

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[194] "RUSHES," *Sight and Sound* 9, no. 8 (August 1, 1999), 4.
[195] Rothman, "'Dogma' Opens in New York to Protesters' Jeers, Audience Cheers."

As Jeffrey Katzenberg, head of DreamWorks Animation, admitted to the press: "I'm sure that there are people who think we are nuts for choosing a Bible story as our first animated feature."[196] However, *Prince of Egypt* was not merely the first Hollywood film since *Last Temptation* to present a Biblical narrative; it would also become the first film since *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) to specifically court Christian audiences through marketing.

Based on DreamWorks' approach to the production of *Prince of Egypt*, the studio was deeply invested in preemptively eliminating the religious controversies and protests that plagued so many Biblical films of the past. The first step they took towards this aim was to seek out hundreds of religious leaders and experts to advise on and, eventually, endorse the film. DreamWorks seemed to embrace outside consultation concerning the film's historic and religious content, inviting over 200 historians, Egyptologists, archeologists, educators, and, most importantly, religious scholars from all three religions of "The Book" (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) to consult on the narrative. News stories on the film prominently featured the names of famous consultants, such as Evangelical superstar Billy Graham, black rights activist Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rev. Jerry Falwell from the ultra-conservative Liberty University, Talmudic scholar Burton Visotzky of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Ibrahim Hooper of the Council on American-Islamic Relations.[197] In front page write-ups in the *Los Angeles Times* and *Variety*, as well as cover stories in *Time* and *Boxoffice*, DreamWorks repeatedly emphasized how crucial these consultants had been, particularly the religious ones, and the different changes the

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[196] Catherine Edwards, "The Prince of Egypt," *Human Events*, 54.49 (Dec 25, 1998), 16.
[197] See: Melissa Morrison, "The Pharaoh of Them All," *Boxoffice*, 134.12 (December 1, 1998), 16-18; and Edwards, "The Prince of Egypt;" and Glen Whipp, "'Prince of Egypt' Kept Under Wraps; DreamWorks Markets Bible-Based Story As Entertainment, Not Religion," *Los Angeles Daily News* (December 13, 1998), accessed online, November 10, 2011 <http://web.kitsapsun.com/archive/1998/12-17/0094__the_prince_of_egypt__creators_ca.html>; and Teresa Watanabe, "An Ecumenical 'Prince of Egypt'," *Los Angeles Times* (December 12, 1998), accessed online, November 12, 2011 <http://articles.latimes.com/1998/dec/12/local/me-53174>.

filmmakers had made to the movie based on the feedback.[198] As just one example, when the film

presents the God's Tenth Plague upon Egypt—the death of the first born of Egypt—the film

originally had Moses refer to putting a "mark upon the door" of the Hebrew dwellings. However,

Evangelical Christian leaders requested that Moses specifically say "blood upon the door,"

which more closely fits Christian theology's prophetic connection of the Passover to the

sacrificial blood of Jesus. DreamWorks accommodated, even having Val Kilmer, the voice of

Moses, return to redub the lines.[199] Another change occurred when Dr. Brandt Gustavson of the

National Religious Broadcasters and six rabbis objected to DreamWorks plan to have Moses kill

his sister Miriam before fleeing into the desert, instead of the Biblical story of Moses killing an

anonymous Egyptian. DreamWorks once again reworked their screenplay.[200] These public

consultations with these religions scholars and figureheads, as well as the publicly known

changes DreamWorks made based on their recommendations, allowed DreamWorks to borrow

these leaders' religious credibility and attached spiritual authority to their work of film

entertainment. It also allowed these religious figureheads to gain public credibility by being

treated as respected experts by a major Hollywood studio. But DreamWorks did not offer that

type of publicized, name-brand exposure for free.

In return for being consultants on the film, the religious leaders were asked to give public

endorsements of the finished film and encourage their respective followers to support the film at

the box office. After meeting with the many religious celebrities, Terry Press, executive of

strategic marketing for DreamWorks, predicted strong endorsements and especially from sectors

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[198] See: Amy Wallace, "A Big Gamble in the Making; Movies: DreamWorks is betting that it can redefine the animation feature genre with 'Prince of Egypt,'" *Los Angeles Times* (April 6, 1998), 1; and Andrew Hindes, "DreamWorks displays its Nile guile," *Variety*, 373.2 (November 23, 1998), 1, 63; and Richard Corliss, "Can A Prince Be A Movie King," *Time*, Vol. 152, No. 24 (December 14, 1998); and Morrison, "The Pharaoh of Them All."
[199] Wallace, "A Big Gamble in the Making."
[200] Edwards, "The Prince of Egypt."

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of faith-based market that were normally averse to Hollywood product: "This movie will bring out people who think movies have fallen into Sodom and Gomorrah. For every 18-year-old boy I don't get, I may get somebody who's been so turned off by Hollywood that they don't go to the movies at all."[201] Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority and tireless champion of injecting Christian values into government and federal law, certainly represented this segment when he offered his praise of the film: "I'm not a movie-goer, and I've never recommended a movie to anyone in 40 years. However, Hollywood got this one right." Famed Evangelist Billy Graham encouraged Christians to attend the film as well, noting his pleasure over the onscreen representation of the Passover miracle and God's sparing of the Hebrews.[202] Several endorsements also underlined Hollywood's fractious history with Christianity-on-film, and noted the refreshing change *Prince of Egypt* brought to Hollywood filmmaking. As Ronald Nash, professor of philosophy and theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, stated, "This is the first film to come out of modern Hollywood to pay respect to conservatives and people of faith."[203] Other leaders were slightly more reserved in their praise, although still endorsing Christian patronage of the film. For example, some figureheads seemed less inclined to support the actual film as to approve the effort by a Hollywood studio to embrace religious topics. Ted Baehr, chairman of the Christian Film and Television Commission, encouraged Christians to focus more on the morally positive movies coming out of Hollywood, rather than just complaining about films with non-Christian morals: "We can do more in Hollywood by commending the good than by condemning the bad."[204] Randy Tate, executive director of the Christian Coalition, hoped the film would find success so that Hollywood would be encouraged

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[201] Wallace, "A Big Gamble in the Making."
[202] Steve Rabey, "The Prince of Egypt," *Lakeland Ledger* (December 18, 1998), D1.
[203] Wallace, "A Big Gamble in the Making."
[204] Steve Rabey, "The Prince of Egypt."

to make more faith-friendly fare: "Religious conservatives should applaud DreamWorks. We should tell Hollywood when they have done something good." At the most tepid end of the endorsements were consultants like Joseph Coleson, an Old Testament scholar at Nazarene Theological Seminary, who stated simply: "There was no violation of the spirit of the scriptural story." [205]

Besides public endorsements, DreamWorks main marketing efforts to religious audiences resided in merchandise tie-ins. Yet the religious nature of *Prince of Egypt* limited the marketing team in ways that most animated films never have to account for. Terry Press fully admitted that a story sacred to three major religions could not be sold as toys inside a "McDonalds Happy Meals" or pictures on the side of Burger King cups or, really, with "anything that gives the remotest sense of disrespect."[206] Indeed, the studio turned towards a few key merchandise items that could speak to some of the different faiths represented in the Exodus story. For Jewish families, DreamWorks sold "The Prince of Egypt Passover Haggadah," advertised on websites like www.familyhaggadah.com with statements like, "this Passover, experience the Exodus like never before!"[207] In an oddly conspicuous manner, Muslim audiences received no marketing products. Instead, and unsurprisingly, Christian Evangelicals received the vast brunt of the marketing effort, mainly through music album tie-ins. Besides the actual film soundtrack featuring music and songs from the film, as well as a rendition of the film's title song "Prince of Egypt (When You Believe)" sung by Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey, DreamWorks also released two additional albums based on the film: one labeled "Inspirational" and the other "Nashville." The Inspirational album featured an assortment of Gospel music "inspired by

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[205] Wallace, "A Big Gamble in the Making."
[206] Hindes, "DreamWorks displays its Nile guile": 63.
[207] Erica Sheen, "Cartoon Wars: *The Prince of Egypt* in Retrospect," in *Religion, Media, and the Marketplace*, Ed. Lynn Schofield Clark (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007): 162-163.

Prince of Egypt," from artists such as Cece Winans and Boyz II Men, as well as songs from Christian rock artists like Carmen, Jars of Clay, and DC Talk. Similarly, the Nashville albums featured original music from a virtual who's-who of country artists, such as Wynonna, Randy Travis, Vince Gill, Clint Black, Reba, and Toby Keith. Based on the artists and musical styles encompassed by both albums, DreamWorks evidently hoped to reach most demographics of the Christian church—African American audiences, mainline and Charismatic audiences, and conservative Evangelicals from the heartland and Bible Belt.

One of the most significant aspects of DreamWorks' campaign for the three albums was the hiring of Provident Music to strategize the marketing to Christian demographics. In the following decade, Provident would become a major player in Christian film marketing—helping to organize all of the faith-based campaigns for Sony and Sherwood Pictures—and *Prince of Egypt* would prove to be the beginning of their film-related work. Provident organized a release of the albums one month before the film's December 18 debut, with releases of multiple singles to radio stations: Alison Krauss' "I Give You To His Heart" and Wynonna's "Freedom" to bluegrass and Christian country stations; the Carey/Houston collaboration, "Prince Of Egypt (When You Believe)" in pop, rhythm-crossover, and RB stations; Boyz II Men's "I Will Get There" to pop, AC, R&B, and rhythm-crossover stations.[208] Additionally, Provident placed large *Prince of Egypt* displays in over 2,000 Christian bookstores across the country, all of which were contractually obligated to place the displays in the first one-third of the store space. Besides the three albums, the displays also sold fourteen different children's books and devotionals based on the film, published through Thomas Nelson and Penguin-Putnam Books. To specialize the products for sales teams, Provident conducted special screenings of *Prince of Egypt* with local owners of Christian retail stores and distributed "Clerk Perks" (free albums and film-related T-

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[208] Catherine Applefeld Olson, "DreamWorks Hopes to Crown 'Three Princes'," *Billboard* October 31, 1998), 1.

shirts, hats, and other merchandise) to store personnel.[209] Since Provident specialized in the

release of Christian and country music to specifically Christian audiences, DreamWorks was

able to utilize this specialized knowledge of "nonsecular" demographics that remained far

outside Hollywood's usual expertise. This became the first instance of Hollywood seeking

outside marketing professionals to reach Christian viewers, a tactic (as will be discussed later)

that would become an industry standard in the decade to come.

Still, despite these examples of religious marketing, DreamWorks placed distinct limits

on how much it allowed the film to associated with overt religion. While the religious content

inherent to the Exodus story caused DreamWorks to take certain steps to accommodate religious

audiences—seeking religious consultation and endorsement, limiting merchandise tie-ins, and

orienting merchandise around already-commoditized religious objects (i.e., Christian music)—in

all other respects the studio sought to sell the film as mainstream entertainment. Terry Press's

statements to *Variety* encapsulated the studio's main marketing ethos: "The overriding issue was

to sell the story, which will be for everybody, whether they're religious or not."[210] Indeed, in

order to keep the film's public appearance accessible to the mainstream, DreamWorks passed on

several ideas that might have further cultivated the support of religious audiences. For example,

Ted Baehr, a religious consultant on the film, actually proposed a radical idea to DreamWorks

that would guarantee Christian profits—to pre-sell blocks of tickets for churches. Though

unknown in 1998, this marketing tool would become instrumental in the huge profits garnered by

Passion of the Christ and the Sherwood films just a few years later, solidifying the sales method

as one of the most common tools for "Holywood" marketing. And yet DreamWorks

emphatically turned down Baehr's idea. As he recalled: "I passed that along to Jeffrey

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[209] Deborah Evans Price, "Provident Takes 'Prince' To Christian Market," *Billboard* (October 31, 1998), 87.
[210] Hindes, "DreamWorks displays its Nile guile," 63.

[Katzenberg] and he kept saying, 'No, no, no, no! We don't want churches to presell tickets.' I think he's making a big mistake but I understand what he's thinking. He wants a bigger audience."[211] Baehr was not alone in this opinion. Although Christian film marketing was in its infancy within Hollywood thinking, some industry insiders publicly took note of DreamWorks' limited and somewhat reluctant strategies. Rich Ingrassia, a movie analyst for the investment firm Paul Kagen and Associates, commented:

> I can't help but feel DreamWorks has missed a big opportunity to market the movie more to the religious community. I don't know why Hollywood is so afraid of religion. If you look at the best-seller lists, you'll see a ton of religious titles. It's a subject people are thinking a lot about these days

Still, DreamWorks dug in its heels against further Christian marketing and even took steps to limit their association with anything smacking of religion as the film neared its release date. In the final week DreamWorks canceled private screenings for religious figures, removed all TV ads that associated the film with its Biblical origins, and refused all newspaper and magazine interviews seeking to address the film from a religious perspective. Although DreamWorks' *The Prince of Egypt* can be certainly credited with implementing Hollywood's first modern religious marketing campaign, especially to Christian audiences, the efforts were still bound to old Hollywood hesitancies of being too much in bed with religion. Past examples had taught industry filmmakers that religion could easily backfire or even isolate mainstream audiences. The ability of a predominantly religious audience to carry the entire box office had not yet been proven in Hollywood's eyes. Indeed, it would not be proven until six years later, with *The Passion of the Christ*.

THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA SERIES

Mel Gibson's *The Passion* hit Hollywood like a seismic quake. Where once Christian audiences had seemed a somewhat manageable yet vaguely threatening entity of unproven filmgoers, now

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[211] Whipp, "'Prince of Egypt Kept Under Wraps."

the faith-based demographic appeared to be an untapped wellspring of financial return, if

properly motivated. And even though every sector of Hollywood—studios, production

companies, major distribution companies, and investment firms—had turned down *The Passion*,

Hollywood still attempted widely, if still tentatively, to repeat the results with their own film

product. Studio films like *The Nativity Story* (2006) sought to duplicate *The Passion* by

producing overtly Christian stories and marketing heavily to church demographics.[212] Yet *The*

Nativity Story failed at the box office despite mostly favorable reviews and a general consensus

that the film honored the Biblical narrative, perhaps even too much.[213] After this rejection by

Christian audiences of a film so closely connected to their religion, Hollywood quickly cooled on

the idea of straight Biblical adaptations as the key to repeating *The Passion*'s success, and

instead turned to other experiments. For example, in 2006, Twentieth Century Fox started

FoxFaith, a direct-to-video division targeting religious consumption in the home with overtly

Christian films, most notably films by director Michael Landon, Jr., like *Love's Abiding Joy*

(2006), *The Last Sin Eater* (2007), and *Saving Sarah Cain* (2007).[214] However, these overtly

Christian works were generally the exceptions to the rule as Hollywood usually felt more

comfortable courting faith-based audiences with mainstream films containing possible Christian

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[212] See: Tara Dooley, "Nativity Story a Christmas Truce for Hollywood, Christians,"
Houston Chronicle (December 1, 2006), accessed online, September 1, 2012
<http://www.chron.com/entertainment/movies/article/Nativity-Story-a-Christmas-truce- for-Hollywood-
1496868.php>; and Eric J. Lyman, "Vatican berth for 'Nativity'," *Variety* (November 27, 2006), accessed online,
September 1, 2012 <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/vatican-berth-nativity-144233>.
[213] For box office analysis, see: Dave McNary, "World not into 'Nativity'," *Variety* (December 21, 2006), accessed
online, November 30, 2012 <http://variety.com/2006/film/box-office/world-not-into-nativity-1117956229>. For film
reception, see: Owen Gleiberman, "The Nativity Story," *Entertainment Weekly* (November 29, 2006), accessed
online, November 30, 2012 <http://www.ew.com/article/2006/11/29/nativity-story>; and Peter T. Chattaway, "The
Nativity Story," *Christianity Today* (December 1, 2006), accessed online, November 29, 2012
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/decemberweb-only/nativitystory.html>.
[214] Michael Landon, Jr. is the son of Michael Landon, the television actor made famous through leading roles on
Bonanza, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *Highway to Heaven*. Although these last two shows in particular
portrayed significant Christian content, Landon Sr. was never himself a Christian. Landon Jr., who worked as an
actor and crewmember on many on his father's sets, would convert to Christianity after Landon Sr.'s death, and then
devote his career to family-friendly and Christian-oriented films.

appeal. Suddenly, if a film was thought to have any potential crossover with Christian audiences, studios implemented a Christian marketing campaign to work in tandem with the mainstream campaign. These films ranged widely in genre and content, from fantasy films based on books by Christian authors—*The Chronicles of Narnia* series—to adult action films with workable religious themes or symbolism—*Constantine* (2005), *The Book of Eli* (2010), and *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011)—to, most commonly, inspirational films and/or true stories featuring Christians as main characters—*Walk the Line* (2005), *Amazing Grace* (2006), and *The Blind Side* (2009). While none of these films contain overt Christian messages or theology, studios nonetheless heavily marketed each of them to Christian demographics using varying strategies and meeting with varying degrees of success.

Amongst the different examples of Hollywood experimenting with Christian marketing, the three films in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series offer an intriguing case studies of differing methods being applied to the same film property. The films were based on the fantasy novels of C.S. Lewis, a noted author and Christian apologist who explicitly confirmed the Christian themes and symbolism within his seven Narnia books. As such, the adapted film series offered Hollywood a rather perfect chance to make and market films that could be interpreted as both secular fantasies for mainstream audiences as well as Christian symbolism for faith-based demographics. Although each of the three films were co-produced by Walden Media, a film production company founded by Christian billionaire Philip Anschutz and devoted to family-friendly entertainment, the partnering studio changed as the series went forward; Disney produced the first two films, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005) and *Prince Caspian* (2008), while Fox produced the most recent episode, *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (2010). Indeed, this last film in particular offers a deeply complicated, high-stakes drama of behind-the-

scenes studio maneuvering and Christian fan management, which was the culmination of the marketing efforts from the first two films. Thus, while the first two films will be briefly touched upon in this section, the marketing campaign for *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* invites deeper discussion.

With the first Narnia film, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Disney heavily courted the Christian market. Following less than a year after the success of *The Passion*, Disney shared Hollywood's new optimism for tapping into Christian dollars and made every effort to conduct a Christian campaign that would run parallel the mainstream marketing thrust. Released during the winter holidays in 2005, the promotional budget for *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was $80 million, of which $10 million was devoted exclusively to reaching conservative Christian audiences. Disney hired Motive Entertainment—a boutique marketing firm that focuses exclusively on religious demographics—to design a multi-platformed campaign that would appeal to Christian moviegoers in a similar fashion to *The Passion*.

Indeed, the campaign designed by Motive would mimic *The Passion* in most respects. The company created an assortment of marketing efforts for Disney that ranged in degree of overt Christian address. At the low end of the scale, Disney used an educational campaign that framed low literacy rates and poor school performance as signs of cultural and moral decline— arguments that would play well with many religious conservatives. On the higher end of the scale, Motive devised a large-scale Christian merchandise campaign that played on the religious symbolism contained in the film story—especially the Christ-like character of Aslan, a powerful lion/demigod that sacrifices himself for the sins of a main character, only to be resurrected at the end of the story just in time to destroy the evil villainess. Motive also created sermon notes and study guides for churches based on the film, clip packages and promotional reels that could be

played at churches with the proper audio/visual equipment (usually "megachurch" congregations in the 400-plus member range), and organized advanced screenings for influential pastors and religious leaders.[215] After the screenings, most of these figures not only endorsed the film to their churches and organizations, but also supplied Motive with official endorsements that could be printed in the Christian press, on websites, and even on certain merchandise. For example, the Mission America Coalition encouraged "churches and ministries to take full advantage of the movie's release by planning outreach opportunities in pulpits, classrooms and communities," while the Billy Graham Center declared:

> We believe God will speak the Gospel of Jesus Christ through this film. We pray that God's people will invite seeking friends to this film, and then tell them the rest of the story.[216]

Beyond simple endorsements, these quotes actually reveal the main thrust of Disney and Motive's campaign towards Christian viewers (and an imitation of the main thrust of *The Passion*'s campaign): the call to evangelism. While some marketing materials connect the Narnia films to overt Christian theology, most instead stress the film's use as an evangelical tool for "unsaved" non-Christian audiences. This approach doubly benefited Disney by allowing the main marketing campaign to remain generally unreligious and appealing to broad demographics, while simultaneously painting this lack of overt religiosity as a benefit to Christians in getting their unsaved friends to movie theaters to see a (spiritually symbolic) message they might have otherwise avoided. In this light, non-religious advertisements could be seen a good thing—as opposed to something Christians should criticize—because they helped get all people to the movie, and thus to the underlying message of the story. Additionally, by selling Christians on the idea that the film was less a religious experience for the faithful and more an evangelistic

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[215] For more details on the marketing campaign, see James Russell, "Narnia as a Site of National Struggle: Marketing, Christianity, and National Purpose in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*," *Cinema Journal* (48, Number 4, Summer 2009), 59-76.
[216] Both quotes obtained from Outreach website, "Church Leader Testimonials," accessed online, December 31, 2008 <www.outreach.com/print/articlef.asp?article_name=p-narnia4testimonials>.

experience for reaching non-Christians, Disney turned the film into a societal ministry that

obligated Christian support. While a somewhat delicate message to express and fine line to walk

by marketers, the results paid off well at the box office. Budgeted at $240,000,000, *The Lion, the*

Witch and the Wardrobe went on to gross $291,710,571 domestically and $ 745,011,272

worldwide.[217] Based on these successful results, Disney quickly greenlit the next book in the

series, *Prince Caspian*.

In spite of Disney's triumph with faith-based audiences the first time around, the

marketing approach to *Prince Caspian* completely shifted away from the religious fan base. In

the broad details, Disney did not hire a faith-based marketing firm to advertise *Prince Caspian* to

Christian viewers, flatly refused to hold previews screenings for pastors, and did not produce

sermon guides or religious teaching materials for churches.[218] However, in the smaller details,

the overall tone and target demographic of the film changed dramatically as well. Whereas *The*

Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe was a Christmas release aimed at the family audience and the

holiday season, *Prince Caspian* opted for a summer release and focused more heavily on teen

audiences. Where *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* had been advertised as a fantasy film

for families, the trailers and posters for *Prince Caspian* highlighted swordplay and battles, and

hinted at darker subject matter with tag lines like, "You may find Narnia a more savage place

than you remember," and "Everything you know is about to change forever." Beyond changes in

marketing and release patterns, Disney also altered the story in key ways that limited the

Christian allegories inherent to the original novel. The biggest change came in a severe reduction

of Aslan's role from the books—especially the return of his magical authority to a Narnia that

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[217] Numbers from BoxOffice.com, accessed online <http://www.boxoffice.com/statistics/movies/the-chronicles-of-narnia-the-lion-the-witch-and-the-wardrobe-2005?q=lion,%20the%20witch%20and%20the%20wardrobe>.
[218] Josh Kimball, "3rd 'Narnia' Film to Set Sail Without Disney," *The Christian Post* (January 7, 2009), accessed online, September 4, 2013 <http://www.christianpost.com/news/3rd-narnia-film-to-set-sail-without-disney-36304/>.

has forgotten him—thus limiting the center of the story's spiritual overtones, as well as the broader conflict of the story between faith and disbelief.[219] Without these elements, the filmmakers created new conflicts based on inventing character flaws, struggles for political power, temptations to compromise with evil for a greater good, and various new subplots, like an invented romance between Caspian and Susan. Overall, the studio positioned the film away from family fantasy and Christian parables and more towards the action-adventure genre.

In general, the Christian fan base acted with horror and derision at Disney's new approach and the changes made to the original story. The C.S Lewis Society of California issued harsh statements about the film, attacking Disney for the lack of preview screenings for pastors and rebuking the changes to the original story with statements like: "Disney … presented Prince Caspian as a strictly secular and violent, fantasy/adventure/romance, and the result was all too predictable."[220] Although unrelated to the spiritual intent of the novels, the new romance between Susan and Caspian brought heated outcries of objection from Narnia purists.[221] Additionally, many bloggers and fan sites complained that the film was too heavily copying the style, and at times even the actual shots, of the more successful *The Lord of the Rings* films.[222] Michael Ward, a prominent Lewis scholar and author of *Planet Narnia: the Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis*, summed up the feelings of many Narnia fans when he wrote:

> In *Caspian*, they [Disney and Walden Media] didn't understand that the story is very largely about what constitutes true chivalrous behavior. All the teenage angst between Peter and Caspian was completely off-key. The overblown siege of the castle, introduced into the middle of the film, made it feel like Lord-of-the-Rings-lite. The director didn't seem to understand that Lewis' books have their own integrity and their own very precise internal logic, which is different from that of Tolkien's saga. Narnia is not simply Middle Earth

[219] Peter T. Chattaway, "The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian" film review, *Christianity Today* (May 16, 2008), accessed online, September 4, 2013
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/movies/reviews/2008/princecaspian.html?start=1>.
[220] Kimball, "3rd 'Narnia' Film to Set Sail Without Disney."
[221] Mark Moring, "Interview: The Narnia Policeman," *Christianity Today* (December 3, 2010), accessed online, September 5, 2013 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/movies/interviews/2010/narniapoliceman-dec10.html?start=2>.
[222] Chattaway, "The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian."

for preteens. It is its own carefully constructed world—a more delicately and artistically imagined world, and therefore needs to be handled with greater sensitivity.[223]

While Ward was not alone in feeling that the film producers did not understand the spirit of the novels and how to make that spirit translate onto the big screen—a common complaint amongst many fan communities based around book-to-film adaptation—some took this complaint to an even farther extent. Author Mark Joseph posted a ten-point online guide for saving the franchise, with the first point bluntly titled "Start over again with a new producer and director," and later points calling for a return to Christian outreach, like "Let faith leaders see the film in its entirety months before its release" and "Don't be ashamed of the themes in the film or the audience it appeals to."[224] This feeling of being ignored and mistreated seemed to characterize the responses of many Narnia fans and, unsurprisingly, much of Christian audience stayed home for *Prince Caspian*—as did much of the general audience as well. Positioned on the summer release calendar between *Iron Man* and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, the film fought unsuccessfully for relevance on the larger cultural stage, and without the support of its core audience. Budgeted at $295,000,000, *Prince Caspian* took in only $141,621,918 domestically and $419,651,413 worldwide.[225] More significantly, it left the many in the core Christian audience feeling disillusioned towards the franchise, insulted by Hollywood's attitudes towards Christians, and highly skeptical of the studios and filmmakers behind the series.

Coming off the heavily mixed results of *Prince Caspian*, the development of *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* began shakily on several fronts. In June 2008, an anonymous source posted a

[223] Michael Ward quoted in Mark Moring, "Will 'The Dawn Treader' Float?" *Christianity Today* (February 2, 2010), accessed online, September 5, 2013
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/movies/news/2010/willdawntreaderfloat.html?start=3>.
[224] Mark Joseph, "Saving Narnia," *Bully!Pulpit* (January 29, 2009), accessed online, September 5, 2013
<http://bullypulpit.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=418:saving-narnia&catid=46:bully-pulpit-blog&Itemid=70>.
[225] Numbers from BoxOffice.com, accessed online <http://www.boxoffice.com/statistics/movies/the-chronicles-of-narnia-prince-caspian-2008?q=prince%20caspian>.

leaked script for *Voyage*. On the surface, this event seemed like a non-event. In the age of the Internet and new media, leaked materials from major Hollywood films have found their way online with increased rapidity, and the major media outlets all but ignored the story. However, underneath the surface of the mainstream—in the electronic corridors and hallways of the alternative news sources, spreading steadily through the message boards, blogs, and minor news services on the web—the event gradually spiraled into the type of nightmare situation that Hollywood studios dread, especially when it comes to a film franchise: a fan-base rebellion. The leaked script took significant liberties with the original story by C.S. Lewis, and many fans of the book reacted with shock and outrage. In the message boards, remarks varied from violent reactions like, "THOSE IDIOTS...I WANT TO STRANGLE THEM!!!!"[226] to more even-tempered assessments like, "… a LOT has been changed from the book, not much of it for the better."[227] In the video blogosphere, fans tracking the film's progress posted hundreds of unhappy reactions on YouTube.[228]

In retrospect, the general complaints from fans were rather common when it comes to film adaptations of popular novels—namely, that the film changed the original plot and characters too drastically. To illustrate, the source novel is basically an episodic adventure story wherein a band of explorers sail the oceans of the fantastical world of Narnia aboard a ship called the Dawn Treader, boldly seeking the edge of the world (Narnia is flat world and has an actual edge). The explorers are made up of old characters from the previous books (Prince Caspian, Lucy, some of the crew) and a few new ones (Lucy's spoiled cousin Eustace). There is

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[226] Posted by user "barleypassing4sane" on NarniaFanFiction.com, <http://narniafanfiction.com/forum/index.php?topic=22.115;wap2>. [Capitalization done by the author]
[227] Stepliana (blogger name), "Leaked Voyage of the Dawn Treader script pages," *Oh No They Didn't* (20 June 2008), accessed online <http://ohnotheydidnt.livejournal.com/24810141.html>. [Capitalization done by the author]
[228] See videos by "Minotaur's Journey", <http://youtu.be/oilYyz91LPw> and <http://youtu.be/SF4ZvWzjESs>, and by "Voyage of a Narnia Fan", <http://youtu.be/nqOIe5GCLF8>.

no motive for the adventure except that it's an adventure story, and there are very few

psychological developments with the characters. In contrast, the leaked script abandons the idea

of adventure for adventure's sakes and instead presents a looming threat from a powerful green

witch (a character from the next book, *The Silver Chair*) who is enslaving the outlying peoples of

Narnia. In the film version, the voyage is now a quest to stop her. Additionally, a romantic

subplot between Caspian and Lucy was added and many sidekick characters from the fourth

Narnia book, *The Silver Chair*, were also placed on board the Dawn Treader—more than enough

alterations to outrage a Narnia purist.[229] However, beyond substantial plot changes, a deeper set

of changes to the film's themes and message disturbed many fans even more. Like all of the

Narnia books written by C.S. Lewis, *Voyage* is steeped in Christian allegory. The most

prominent example in the books comes from the transformation of Eustace from a spoiled,

selfish child into a caring, redeemed young man. This occurs through a very literal

transformation, when Eustace is magically turned into a dragon—a change that humbles him

severely and that he cannot undo himself—followed later by the lion Aslan (the overt Christ

figure of Narnia) changing him back out of mercy. This episode is filled with Christian

symbolism, as Eustace can only be changed through Aslan's pure grace, which is furthered

sealed through a literal baptism in magic waters. Yet, in the leaked script, Eustace's

transformation into a dragon turns him into an action hero. His dragon fights a sea serpent at the

end of the film, which in turn earns Eustace his transformation back to human form.[230] This

ability to earn grace contradicts the Christian belief that grace and eternal salvation comes from

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[229] A detailed discussion of the leaked script, and how it compares to the final film, can be found at NarniaWeb's Community Forum, <http://forum.narniaweb.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=2389>.

[230] Sørina Higgins, "The Failure of *Dawn Treader*," *Curator Magazine* (December 31, 2010), accessed online, December 11, 2011 <http://www.curatormagazine.com/sorinahiggins/the-failure-of-the-dawn-treader>.

God alone, which Lewis kept true to in the book. Thus, a change in plot became a change to the Christian theology, and this change disturbed Christian fans the most.

On one level, this event became a large but temporary disturbance to the production of the film. In a swift series of defensive public relations moves, Disney and their co-finance partner Walden Media flatly denied that the leaked script was authentic, pressured prominent fan sites to close discussion boards and postings related to it, and quietly delayed film production for over four months to rework the script and eliminate the major causes of offense. The uproar slowly died away. Yet, on another level, such a large fan controversy over a few narrative changes did little to ease growing doubts regarding the Narnia franchise. Just a few months after this incident more trouble struck *Voyage* when the Walt Disney Company pulled out of the production deal with Walden Media, causing the film to go into turn around. Disney cited "budgetary considerations and other logistics" as the reason for exiting the series, which could be true given the small return on *Prince Caspian* versus *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and the suspicion by many pundits that Narnia was now a franchise in decline.[231] However, in early 2009, Twentieth Century Fox stepped in to pick up the series and, after a budget reduction, the film went into production that summer.[232]

The marketing for *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* demonstrated a marked return to Christian outreach. Singing a chorus of mea culpas, the filmmakers repeatedly took to the press to publicly repent for abandoning the Christian base. To *Christianity Today*, producer Mark Johnson plainly admitted, "We made some mistakes with Prince Caspian, and I don't want to make them again."[233] To the *Los Angeles Times*, Johnson claimed, "We strayed from our core

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[231] Kimball, "3rd 'Narnia' Film to Set Sail Without Disney."
[232] "Fox agrees to step in on next 'Narnia' movie," *Los Angeles Times* (January 28, 2009), accessed online, December 11, 2011 <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/entertainmentnewsbuzz/2009/01/twentieth-centu.html>.
[233] Moring, "Will 'The Dawn Treader' Float?"

audience." Using even stronger terms, David Weil, chief executive of Walden Media's parent

company, Anschutz Film Group, promised that the new film would appeal again to that Christian

core: "We're reaching out to faith contingencies around the world where C.S. Lewis' works are

well known and resonate strongly."[234] Even the film's new director, Michael Apted, a publicly

declared agnostic, told *The New York Times*:

> They got a little careless by taking the faith group for granted — and by neglecting it paid the price…. We realized we can't make the same mistake…. We've got to sell the film to everybody.[235]

The filmmakers began putting this new marketing philosophy into action nearly a year before the

film's release date (now returned to the Christmas season), with an action that greatly resembled

Mel Gibson's first marketing step with *The Passion*, when the filmmaker went to Colorado

Springs and met with hundreds of Christian pastors and figureheads. In this case, Fox brought

over a hundred pastors and Christian leaders together in Los Angeles for the "Narnia Summit."

More than just an advanced screening of early footage (although much footage was certainly

shown), the summit was an all-expenses-paid three-day meeting where the filmmaking team and

production executives could personally field questions about the film, discuss behind-the-scenes

details of the production, and go through each page of the script, explaining how choices and

changes were made. Different sectors of the Christian fan community were presented, from

mega-churches (New York's Redeemer Presbyterian and Los Angeles' Bel Air Presbyterian) to

parachurch organizations (Young Life, Focus on the Family, and Youth for Christ) to Lewis

experts (Stan Mattson of the C. S. Lewis Foundation) to the powerful and newly respected

contingent of fan websites (NarniaWeb and NarniaFans). Michael Flaherty, president of Walden

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[234] Claudia Eller and John Horn, "Producers hope 'Dawn Treader' has magic of first 'Narnia' film," *Los Angeles Times* (3 Dec 2010), accessed online <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/dec/03/news/la-ct-narnia-20101203>.
[235] Apted quoted in Brook Barnes, "Studios Battle to Save Narnia (From Grip of Sequel Fatigue)," *The New York Times* (5 Dec 2010), accessed online <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/06/business/06narnia.html?_r=1&hpw>.

Media, called the gathering the "world's largest accountability group."[236] Based on the initial

response from the leaders, Fox/Walden had good reason to feel their efforts would be successful.

Most attendees reported back to their constituencies with great enthusiasm about the summit.

Steve Bell, executive vice president of the Willow Creek Association, summed up the general

mood when he said:

> What we saw on film, and some of the behind-the-scenes stuff, was pretty exciting…. There seems to be a high level of respect for the material. My sense was that they really want to go to the authenticity of C. S. Lewis, maybe more so than ever. They're very aware that they have to turn the corner from Prince Caspian. They know that the ball got dropped, and they're trying to recapture that momentum.[237]

While public apologies and early screenings attempted to heal certain divides between

Hollywood and the faith community, the main thrust of Fox's Christian marketing occurred

outside of traditional print media and personal meetings—through transmedia outreach. Fox

hired faith-based advertising firm Grace Hill Media to design an expansive and interactive

website exclusively tailored to Christian fans and pastors—like the ministry websites design by

Outreach Inc. for *The Passion*, except on steriods. Not merely a site exploring the *Dawn Treader*

film, NarniaFaith.com used the film as a launching for a variety of Christian themed-information

and ministry resources. The website was divided into three sections: Learn, Teach, and Engage.

"Learn" was devoted to the films release and information on C.S. Lewis, like the essay "The

Jack I Knew," written by Lewis' stepson Douglas Gresham. "Teach" offered a resource haven

for pastors and churches, with extensive postings of original sermon outlines, study guides, and

event planners, all connected to the film and all available with downloadable clips from the film.

Sermon titles varied from the theological (like "Experiencing and Overcoming Temptation") to

the church promotional (like "The Hollywood Connection: How The Chronicles of Narnia Can

Expand Your Message To A Greater Audience"). There were even several five-part lessons that

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[236] Moring, "Will 'The Dawn Treader' Float?"
[237] Ibid.

the pastors could use in the lead-up to Christmas—such as "The Voyage: Sailing the High Seas at Christmas, Parts 1-5" and "Further Up and Further In - Five Lessons from C.S. Lewis"— which allowed the film to be front and center in the church consciousness for over a month. Many of the study materials were written by prominent megachurch pastors and media leaders like Ken Foreman, senior pastor of Cathedral of Faith; Jim Burgen, senior pastor of Flatirons Community Church; evangelist Luis Palau; and filmmaker and author Dr. Phil Cooke. Lastly, the "Engage" section took the film outside of inner-church ministry and used it as a launching pad for outer-church outreach. The section mainly promoted Operation Narnia, a Christmas gift drive for disenfranchised children around the world, as well as Samaritan's Purse, a similar charity run by the Franklin Graham, son and heir to the Billy Graham's evangelical empire. Beyond merely offering resources, each of these NarniaFaith sections opened with a video endorsement from a prominent Christian leader, all of whom expressly underlined the connection between the Narnia series and Christian religion. In the video for "Learn," Douglas Gresham called C.S. Lewis a "master of Christian thought and theology" and ended the video with a benediction of "May God bless you and keep you, now and forever." The video for "Teach" featured Fuller Theological Seminary president Dr. Richard Mouw endorsing the sermons on the website as an opportunity "to deepen the church's understanding of temptation, grace, forgiveness and transformation all through the prism of C S Lewis' vivid and deeply theological imagery." He expressed hopes that the materials would help churches and non-Christians alike "to know Aslan by another name," meaning the name of Jesus Christ. The "Engage" section featured Franklin Graham endorsing Samaritan's Purse and the film itself as tools "to share the gospel of Jesus Christ." As with other Christian campaigns come before, Fox used these figurers to lend the website and its materials religious legitimacy amongst its target audience.

Obviously, these transmedia materials were by no means random in their design. They attempted to speak directly to Christian communities and to plainly equate the *Dawn Treader* film with Christian theology and ministries. By consciously placing the film within the context of church education and growth, community outreach, and evangelism to non-Christians, the marketing campaign encouraged Christian audiences to see the film not just as family entertainment, but also as a spiritual cause for good Christians to support. In this light, the film ceases to be a media object and transforms into an object of ritual and devotion. The film becomes not merely a reflection of Christian thought, or a safe space for religious viewers and families to be entertained, but an active ministry that deserves active support from like-minded individuals.

Although these online offerings reflect a significant effort to court and engage with the Christian base, and to counteract early debates surrounding the film, they did not successfully prevent the threat of controversy. One area of trouble with religious fans emerged from the contradictory nature of the film's mainstream campaign, and specifically from the remarks made by cast and crew during the film's more conventional press tour. While the studio openly endorsed a Christian interpretation of the film on NarniaFaith, spokespeople for film openly contradicted this interpretation to the major press. Actor Liam Neeson, the voice of Aslan, told *The Telegraph* that his character was by no means exclusively Christian, saying, "Aslan symbolizes a Christ-like figure, but he also symbolizes for me Mohammed, Buddha and all the great spiritual leaders and prophets over the centuries."[238] Additionally, producer Mark Johnson seemed to be reversing his previous statements to Christian leaders when he told *The Hollywood Reporter,* "We don't want to favor one group over another ... whether these books are Christian, I

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[238] Roya Nikkhah, "Liam Neeson angers Narnia fans by suggesting Aslan is Mohammed," *The Telegraph* (4 Dec 2010), accessed online <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/8180884/Liam-Neeson-angers-Narnia-fans-by-suggesting-Aslan-is-Mohammed.html>.

don't know." Addressing the topic of Aslan's Christ symbolism as a sacrificial savior raised from the dead, Johnson asserted that "resurrection exists in so many different religions in one form or another, so it's hardly exclusively Christian."[239] These remarks received heavy attention within the Christian press and fan boards, as did the film's inevitable deviations from the book's plot. While the film abandoned early concepts of a green witch, it kept the quest concept by presenting the new menace as a green mist, which required the collection of seven magical swords—all story ideas absent from the source novel. Aslan remained mostly absent, and the more Christian-specific messages of the story (specifically Eustace's salvation through Aslan's grace and not his own works) were watered down into non-denominational, moral lessons. The only overtly religious quote spoken by Aslan occurs at the end of the story, where he tells the children that he exists in their own world by a different name (the obvious indication being the name of Jesus Christ) and that they must learn to know him there as well.

After all the effort and marketing tactics, the end results for *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* remained mixed, both critically among fans and at the box office. The combination of conflicting messages in the marketing, story changes in the script, and water-down theology in the film left many Christian bloggers and critics with mixed-to-hostile feelings about the final product. The reviewer for *Christianity Today* accepted many of the film's changes, but complained that the added quest story gave the film

> no time for character development or more intelligent plotting. The focus is primarily on the big swashbuckling climax at Dark Island, as if it can't arrive there quick enough. If only filmmakers had taken 15 minutes more to better explore the sights, wonders, and characters of Narnia, we might have a better movie.[240]

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[239] Paul Bond, "'Dawn Treader' Studios Reach Out to Influential Christians With 'NarniaFaith' Website, Screenings," *The Hollywood Reporter* (7 Dec 2010), accessed online <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/dawn-treader-studios-reach-influential-57307>.

[240] Russ Breimeier, "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader," *Christianity Today* (9 Dec 2010), accessed online <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/movies/reviews/2010/dawntreader.html>.

Writing for *The Journal of Religion and Film*, Jason Staples also criticized the quest narrative in

practical terms, stating:

> Ironically, it seems the attempt to insert a simplified and cohesive quest while also retaining important scenes actually resulted in a *more* fragmented and arbitrary narrative, with the audience never quite sure of the rationale for anything happening on screen.[241]

Staples also brought up old hostilities regarding the leaked script and studio assurances of its

non-authenticity:

> It is apparent that fan backlash to the controversial leaked script in 2008 led to substantial compromises and changes but not wholesale abandon of that script, resulting in a middling film containing enough "litmus test" scenes and lines to satisfy many Lewis fans while still attempting to plot a wholly new course for the film.

These feelings were shared by many commenters on various message boards as film viewers

continued to find the final film very similar to the dreaded leaked draft. Now ignoring studio

threats to not discuss the leaked draft, NarniaWeb.com devoted a whole message board to

unflattering comparisons between the leaked draft and the final version.[242] In the end, for

whatever combination of reasons, the film failed to spark much enthusiasm from the core

audience it so heavily courted without quite marrying. This apathy seemed to extend to the box

office, as the film grossed $104,386,950 domestically and $417,090,528 worldwide—figures

comparable to *Prince Caspian*, though on a significantly smaller budget, but again not numbers

that reached the heights of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.[243] A sequel to *Voyage of the

Dawn Treader* had not yet been announced by the middle of 2016, and Disney appeared

validated in suspecting the franchise was in decline. Meanwhile, industry pundits debate whether

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[241] Jason Staples, "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader," *The Journal of Religion and Film* (Vol. 15, No. 1, April 2011), accessed online
<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol15.no1/Reviews/DawnTreader.html>.
[242] "Leaked Script vs. Final Movie," NarniaWeb.com, accessed online
<http://forum.narniaweb.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=2389>.
[243] Number taken from BoxOffice.com, accessed online <http://www.boxoffice.com/statistics/movies/the-chronicles-of-narnia-the-voyage-of-the-dawn-treader-2010?q=voyage%20of%20the%20dawn>.

Dawn Treader stands an example of the unpredictability of the faith-based market or the difficulties of winning back a core audiences once they are offended.[244]

Regardless of the answer, the film most definitely stands as an example of marketing trends and tensions in the transmedia sphere—the way relationships between producers and consumers becomes interactive, sometimes through marketing efforts, and sometimes in response to market demands and aggressions. Courting any type fandom or igniting a fan base can reap huge rewards for studios, and new media platforms now grant unprecedented access into core demographics. But with this new access also comes increased entanglements, as a previously one-sided relationship steadily transforms into a constant interaction of give-and-take. Adding religion to any relationship only increases the complications and the stakes. While hardcore fans of any media object are often described as having near-religious fervor for their desired objects of fandom, many Narnia fans expressed actual religious fervor. And when Fox decided to court and negotiate with this zeal in the promotion of their films, the odd courtship had to take place in the realm of new media spaces and transmedia marketing. Indeed, while Fox used the mainstream media to promote *Voyage* as secular and inclusive, the studio conversely used transmedia networks to promote the film as to Christian fans as overtly religious. These solicitations were not simply innocent salesmanship. Indeed, the marketing strategies towards Christian fans attempted to transform the film into a Christian ministry that obligated Christian support. The very act of participating in the Narnia brand and its new transmedia universe becomes an act of participating in religious ministry. Unfortunately, the studio and film property could not maintain Christian credibility in the eyes of these fans.

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[244] Barnes, "Studios Battle to Save Narnia" and Julia Duin, "Narnia's "Voyage of the Dawn Treader" and the follies of faith on film," *The Washington Post* (10 Jan 2011), accessed online <http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/undergod/2011/01/narnias_voyage_of_the_dawn_treader_and_the_follies_of_faith_on_film.html>.

CONCLUSION

The films discussed in this chapter offer several lessons regarding Hollywood's interaction with Christianity. First, Hollywood's record of engagement with Christianity since 1968 has been mostly negative at best, and disastrous at worst. History has instructed Hollywood that Christian audiences and religious controversy cannot be controlled, and that studios seem to lack the delicate touch necessary to handle such problematic cultural matters as spirituality and theological discussion. Second, while modern events have demonstrated the financial viability of Christian audiences, and while studios greatly desire Christian dollars at the box office, Hollywood still feels deeply apprehensive about directly engaging with Christian film culture. Hollywood has a general abhorrence of controversial subject matter, such as overt discussions of religion, and especially over endorsements of one religion over another. This unease is paired equally with a general lack of experience in engaging with religious subcultures of any kind, as well as a lack of understanding of Christian sensibilities. Thus, while Hollywood is perfectly happy to take the money of any demographic in exchange for film entertainment, they want this transaction to occur with the least amount of cultural disturbance or backlash possible. This leads to the last lesson, which is that Hollywood would prefer to market mainstream films to Christians rather than make films that appeal more specifically to that faith-based audiences. While many low-budget "Holywood" filmmakers have enjoyed amazing success with church audiences by making overtly Christian films and marketing these movies as both inner-church ministry and outer-church evangelism, Hollywood would prefer to make mainstream films that do not have to rely on Christians as the main source of economic support, but that can still be marketed to Christians as ministry in a similar fashion as "Holywood" product. This arms-length courtship of Hollywood towards faith-based audiences led to an inevitable need for outside help in terms of

outreach. With a wealth of Hollywood product that could be marketed towards Christians, and yet a strong industry-wide reticence towards actually dealing with Christianity, someone needed to step into the gap on Hollywood's behalf. And indeed, as Chapter 4 will discuss, some individuals have done just that. The need for Christian insiders to handle Christian courtship on behalf of studios would give rise to an entirely new cottage industry within Hollywood: Christian middlemen marketing firms.

Chapter 3 – "Holywood" Case Study:

Fireproof and the Rise of Sherwood Pictures

On September 26, 2008, *Fireproof* was released in 839 theaters across the United States.

Although this was a small release in comparison to the other films competing at the box office

that weekend—Paramount's big-budget thriller *Eagle Eye* debuted in over 3500 theaters and

even *Burn After Reading*, an indie comedy by the famed Coen Brothers, was still maintaining

2600 theaters in its third week. Still, 839 theaters was a deeply impressive release for a film like

Fireproof—an overtly Christian film produced for $500,000 by a church-based production

company out of Albany, Georgia and starring former Hollywood child-star Kirk Cameron.

Indeed, the film seemed more destined for Christian television stations than for the multiplexes,

and it arrived without any sort traditional marketing, press tour, or even mainstream national

awareness.

And yet, unbeknownst to the public and most of the press, the filmmakers at Sherwood

Pictures had a solid track record with taking low (almost no) budget films and finding a large,

enthusiastic Christian audience. Their first film, *Flywheel*, was made for less than $20,000 but

still made several hundred thousand dollars at local theaters, and likely several millions on

DVD.[245] For a follow-up, Sherwood made *Facing the Giants* for $200,000 and obtained a

distribution deal with Provident Films.[246] After the company gave Sherwood a marketing budget

of $4 million (20 times the production budget) and released the film in 400 theaters, *Facing the*

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[245] Keegan, "*Fireproof*: When Filmmakers Believe in Miracles."
[246] Provident Films is the film division of Nashville-based Provident Label Group, which is owned by Sony
Entertainment. Sony actually pushed Provident to start releasing low-budget Christian films, and *Facing the Giants*
was their first find. See James Russell, "In Hollywood, But Not of Hollywood," *American Independent Cinema:
Indie, Indiewood, and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York, NY: Routledge,
2013), 194.

Giants went on to make over $10 million domestically. With that type of audience response, Provident did not hesitate to grab Sherwood's next film, *Fireproof*, and to double both the marketing budget and the theater count.[247] For a low-budget, overtly Christian film made by Christians for the purposes of ministering to other Christians, a release in over 800 theaters was historic.[248]

Still, Sherwood's string of previous successes had raised little attention in Hollywood. Few industry insiders and trade journalists had even heard of Sherwood Pictures or *Fireproof* when it hit theaters. No one seemed to notice that *Fireproof* was taking up 41% of Fandango pre-sale ticket business in the lead up to release. No seemed to notice that *The Love Dare*, a marriage counseling book based on the film, had sold over half-a-million copies on Amazon and currently held the seventh spot on *The New York Times Best Sellers* list, and all before the film had even reached audiences. When Kirk Cameron brought up these facts on *The Today Show* a week before the film's premiere, the hosts seemed genuinely baffled, and simply continued asking Cameron about his Christian faith and unusual stance to only kiss his actual wife on screen.[249] When discussing that weekend's box office hopefuls, *The Hollywood Reporter* mentioned the film in one sentence at the very end of the article, and incorrectly cut its theater numbers in half. [250] And yet, despite lack of industry interest or awareness, when the film opened at number four on the box office top-ten with $6.8 million and eventually went on to gross $33 million—earning

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[247] Paul Bond, "Who Made 'Courageous' a Hit?" *The Hollywood Reporter* (Octover 11, 2011), accessed online, August 3, 2013 <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/who-made-courageous-a-hit-246306>.
[248] The only independent Christian film to have a larger release (3034 screens) was Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*—a film with a $30 million budget, a large national marketing campaign, overwhelming cultural awareness due to the controversies surrounding the film's content, and one of Hollywood's biggest stars as the writer/producer/director. Although technically a "Holywood" film, *The Passion* obviously represents an anomaly on many levels when compared to typical "Holywood" releases.
[249] Mike Celzic, "Kirk Cameron: I'll only kiss my wife," *USAToday* (September 23, 2008), accessed online, August 2, 2013 <http://www.today.com/id/26851749/ns/today-entertainment/t/kirk-cameron-ill-only-kiss-my-wife/#.VNAS1V7F8_M>. Video embedded in the article.
[250] Ibid.

it the distinction of highest grossing independent film of 2008—everyone in Hollywood seemed to take notice and to scramble for explanations. [251] Rebecca Winter Keegan in *Time* attributed *Fireproof*'s success to the "very overt depiction of [Christian] faith" in the film, as opposed to token "family films" targeted at Christian audiences and that merely "cleaned up the language."[252] Although *The Wall Street Journal* offered a detailed analysis of film and its production company, Sherwood Pictures, and even echoed *Time*'s chastisement of cynical Hollywood family fare, writer Dale Buss still seemed unsure as to why *Fireproof* found success.[253] *Deadline Hollywood* seemed to strike at the heart of the situation with their headline "Hollywood Wonders Why 'Fireproof' Did So Well When Other Christian Pics Don't." [254] Why indeed?

This chapter will propose an explanation for *Fireproof*'s success and in the process provide a history of Sherwood Pictures, their unique filmmaking processes, the development of their highly sophisticated and successful marketing methodologies, and their impact on the larger "Holywood" filmmaking community. To this end, the chapter places interviews and first-hand accounts from Sherwood's film team into dialogue with cultural, industrial, and economic analysis. Not only do Sherwood's films offer a clear illustration of the issues in Christian filmmaking discussed in the previous chapter, they also provide a possible glimpse of successful models of Christian filmmaking in the years to come.

SHERWOOD BAPTIST CHURCH

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[251] All box office numbers, unless otherwise specified, come from Boxofficemojo.com.
[252] Keegan, "*Fireproof*: When filmmakers believe in miracles."
[253] Dale Buss, "What Christians Watch," *The Wall Street Journal* (January 21, 2009), accessed online, August 3, 2013 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123249904737100583>.
[254] Nikki Finke, "Hollywood Wonders Why 'Fireproof' Did So Well When Other Christian Pics Don't," *Deadline Hollywood* (September 28, 2008), accessed online, August 3, 2013 <http://deadline.com/2008/09/hollywood-wonders-why-fireproof-did-so-well-7075>.

In order to understand Sherwood Pictures, it is necessary to first briefly discuss the church that created the production company. Sherwood Baptist Church was founded in Albany, Georgia in 1955 and has mostly thrived and steadily grown since that time.[255] By the late 1980s, when their current pastor Michael Catt assumed church leadership, Sherwood had reached nearly 1,000 members. Through continued various construction projects and community outreach programs under Catt, that number more than double by 1998 when the church opened a new 2500-seat sanctuary, officially placing Sherwood Baptist in the category of "megachurch." In the past decade, and coinciding with the success of their filmmaking ventures, Sherwood's numbers have ballooned even further. The church now sits on over 180-acres of property across several campuses, a recently purchased city park, and a private Christian elementary school.

Like most megachurches, Sherwood Baptist claims to be Evangelical, or subscribing to strictly conservative interpretations of the Bible and actively pursuing the conversion of non-Christians. In terms of specific Christian theology, Sherwood is officially Southern Baptist and claims to hold to the precepts laid out in the "Baptist Faith and Message." This document is a rather notorious and controversial statement of faith and specific doctrine ratified by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1925 and subsequently revised or amended in 1963, 1998, and 2000.[256] Most Protestant churches hold many of these chief doctrines, such the belief in a triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), the virgin birth, the death/resurrection/ascension into Heaven of Jesus Christ, and salvation through faith. More specific to the Southern Baptist denomination, and to most conservative Evangelical denominations within the US, is the belief in the infallibility and inerrancy of the Protestant Christian Bible, the literal and visible return of Christ

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[255] Unless otherwise specified, all information about Sherwood Baptist Church comes from the church website, accessed online, October 5, 2014 <http://sherwoodbaptist.net/about-us>.
[256] Unless otherwise specified, all information about the "Baptist Faith and Message" comes from the website for the Southern Baptist Convention, accessed online, July 5, 2014 <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>.

one day, salvation through faith in Christ alone, and an oppositional stand on certain cultural

issues, like homosexuality, gay marriage, and abortion. Sherwood affirms this dogma, as well as

two more specific tenants in the Southern Baptist doctrine that will continually reverberate

through their filmmaking efforts. First, Sherwood subscribes to a belief in a "Great Commission"

from God to evangelize, specifically:

> It is the duty and privilege of every follower of Christ and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to endeavor to make disciples of all nations…. The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations. It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ.[257]

Second, Sherwood holds conservative religious views on gender roles. In terms of church life,

Sherwood affirms that "while both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the

office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."[258] This role of male leadership also

extends to the home:

> The marriage relationship models the way God relates to His people. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation.[259]

Indeed, as this chapter will demonstrate, these dual beliefs in evangelism and traditional

marriage will provide the very foundation of the films of Sherwood Pictures.

INITIAL OFFERINGS: *FLYWHEEL* AND *FACING THE GIANTS*

Although modern megachurches are typically highly sophisticated in terms of multimedia

technology for teaching and presentation purposes, few churches ever venture into narrative

feature filmmaking. In the case of Sherwood Baptist, the move into filmmaking was also

reluctant. The church's "Pastor of Media Ministry," Alex Kendrick, had wanted to make

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[257] Ibid.
[258] Ibid.
[259] Ibid.

Christian movies for several years and in 2003 he proposed a low budget, feature-film project to Catt.[260] Kendrick's film story was a simple but effective rehashing of old plot devises, combining the change-of-heart elements of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* with Christian salvation theology: an unhappy used car salesman who regularly cheats his customers and avoids his family life is challenged by the graciousness of a Christian client. The car dealer reaffirms his lost faith, which ends up making him an honest dealer, a better father and husband, and, in the end, very financially prosperous. Although the film would only cost $20,000, including the expense of a new Canon XL1 camera, the church deemed the venture too risky for the investment of church funds. The budget would come about through private donors within the church, and through volunteer labor from various congregants.

Besides daily prayer meetings, the production of *Flywheel* mirrored those of most first-time independent films. The cast and crew were not paid, had no experience making films, and learned their duties on the job. Indeed, often the cast was the crew, as Alex Kendrick starred as the lead character on top of his duties as director and writer, and most of the supporting players were also volunteering as crew. There was usually never more than a dozen people crewing the film, and Kendrick recalls a few shots where no one was available besides the cast and he would have to lock down the camera on a tripod, push record himself, and then walk into frame and perform the scene. Since they could not afford filmmaking supplies, like dollies and camera tracks, different church volunteers would make the equipment themselves out of whatever materials were available. The post-production work was mostly achieved on Final Cut Pro.

Kendrick claims he originally only intended *Flywheel* to be shown only at churches for the sake of ministry but then felt God prompting him to show the film in theaters as well. He

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[260] Unless otherwise specified, details on the making of *Flywheel* and *Facing the Giants* come from the "Facing Your Giants" featurette. See *Facing the Giants* (2006) dir. Alex Kendrick, Sony Entertainment [DVD].

obtained the permission of a local multiplex in Albany to screen the film for one week only. Not only did Kendrick press his own congregation to see the film, but also spoke at other local churches in Albany and neighboring areas in the lead up to the film's release, urging the church members to support the film as act of support for alternative Christian media. Kendrick also adopted a new marketing method, pioneered by *The Passion*, wherein the film is advertised to Christians as an unconventional form of evangelism to non-believers. As discussed in Chapter 1, this method encourages church members to buy tickets for unsaved friends and family who might never go to church but could be persuaded to hear a salvation message through a movie.

After the first week, the film did such good business that the theater asked to the church to screen the film for another five weeks. Kendrick, along with his brother and producing partner, Stephen, then shopped the film to other communities and theaters around the "Bible Belt" of Georgia and Florida. Although the film only grossed $37,000 theatrically, the church earned most of its profit on *Flywheel* through DVD sales, both at the churches where Kendrick and Catt would speak and, even more significantly, through deals with local Walmarts in the region. In the end, the film sold over 300,000 DVDs at an average price of ten dollars. Understandably, the church decided to make another movie.

After *Flywheel*'s success, the board members of Sherwood Baptist now eagerly agreed to fund the next film project, and to even up the budget considerably. Although the new film would only cost $100,000—still a pittance in comparison with other low-budget indie films—the budget increase would allow the Kendrick brothers to expand on the scope and appeal of *Flywheel* while still retaining the basic plot elements and thematic concerns of that first film. This time, instead of a failing car dealership and the dealer's broken family being saved through turning to Christianity, it would be a failing high school football team and the coach's broken

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family that would be saved. The film follows a coach (again played by Kendrick) on the brink of being fired who reaffirms his faith and decides to pray with his team before and after each game, win or lose, which ends up turning his team around through implied divine intervention, as well as fixing the coach's marriage. Indeed, *Facing the Giants* would begin a pattern in Sherwood films of recycling of the same plot tropes and story themes into new settings that offer larger scope.

Unlike the plot, the production process of *Facing the Giants* would differ from *Flywheel* in several key ways. First, while *Flywheel* turned to church volunteers as a matter of economic necessity and understandably struggled to recruit this free labor, *Facing the Giants* would be overwhelmed with eager volunteers to pick and chose from. Second, the brothers hired five industry professionals to handle key crew positions. The selection of these crewmembers was highly strategic. The church chose key personnel that could bring extensive below-the-line experience from Hollywood films, but who never held above-the-line positions before and therefore would cost much less. For example, while Bob Scott, the cinematographer on *Facing the Giants* and subsequently all of Sherwood Pictures future films, had never been a director of photography before, he had worked as a camera operator on Hollywood films since the 1970s, even working second unit for films like *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003) and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007). Even more to the needs of the Kendrick brothers, he had worked crews on previous football films like *Any Given Sunday* (1999) and *Friday Night Lights* (2004) and would know how to film the different drama and action elements of a football game. As assistant director—and future producer and director of his own Christian films—David Nixon remarked on the film's DVD featurette, "We brought the Hollywood assembly line method to Sherwood Pictures and their volunteers." The finished film would indeed look highly more

professionally polished than *Flywheel*, and the Kendrick brothers now have a generally

embarrassed and apologetic attitude towards their first film effort, like many filmmakers.[261]

However, the most crucial difference between *Facing the Giants* and its predecessor

occurred at the level of marketing and distribution. While Alex Kendrick and his producers are

rather uniform in attributing the film's success to divine favor directly from God, this vertical

gaze usually overlooks the role of Sony Pictures in horizontally reaching the masses. To give the

filmmakers some credit, the road to the studio's involvement was indeed full of chance and freak

happenstance. Stephen Kendrick had contacted Provident Music Group, a Nashville-based

Christian music label and subsidiary of Sony Entertainment, to inquire about the obtaining the

rights to use a particular Christian song for *Facing the Giants*. Unbeknownst to Kendrick,

Provident had recently been urged by Sony to tap into the Christian film market in response to

the success of *The Passion* and to start acquiring and distributing Christian films, if possible—a

task for which Provident had no experience. Seeing Christian material possibly being dropped in

their laps, the Provident executives asked to screen the film, and then subsequently offered to

market and distribute the film in a limited nation-wide release. Understandably, Sherwood

Pictures could hardly believe their good fortune.[262]

Still, although the filmmakers now had the support of industry talent, the marketing

remained mostly at a grassroots level. Provident only provided $4 million for marketing—an

astronomical amount for Sherwood, but still miniscule in comparison to other films.[263] During

marketing meetings, Provident emphasized the need for a grassroots campaign similar to the

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[261] On the audio commentary for *Flywheel*, the Kendrick brothers apologize for the amateurish look of the film and ask people to keep their first effort in perspective. See *Flywheel* (2003) dir. Alex Kendrick, Affirm Films (DVD).
[262] Interview with Kendrick. See also: Tim Newcomb, "Faith-Based Filmmaking: The Sherwood Pictures Crusade," *Time* (August 25, 2011), accessed online, August 3, 2013:
<http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,2090429,00.html>.
[263] Bond, "Who Made 'Courageous' a Hit?"

church outreach pioneered by Mel Gibson's team for *The Passion*. When interviewed, Kendrick

gave full credit to Provident for devising the initial campaigns and coaching them to think like

marketers:

> For promoting films to churches and getting the grassroots system going, that has traditionally been Provident. They started doing that with facing the giants. And what did was, we all sort of sat together in a room—and to be honest I'm not a marketing person, I just ell the stories, direct the films, you know—so we sat in a room and they said, "This is what we're going to do. We're not going to do a traditional marketing campaign. We're not going to put big posters in the newspapers, and we're not going to have massive TV ads. Instead, we're going to do 100 to 200 screenings of the movie at various cities where we invite as many pastors as possible to come and watch the screening and to ask questions about the movie. And you guys want to show up to them or as many as you can to respond to those questions, to let them see the movie in its entirely."[264]

Although Kendrick expressed weariness when recalling the amount of work and travel involved

in church-to-church campaigning, he fully acknowledged its necessity in building grassroots

support with pastors. As Kendrick described it:

> When Christian movies began to be made—and I'm going back to *The Passion of the Christ* being the first really key one—pastors would not stand up and say, "We should all as a church go see this film" until they had seen it themselves. And so we offered pastors the chance to see the whole film, ask any questions, so that if they wanted to get to a point where they thought our film was a good Christian film and they wanted to support it, they could do it whole heartedly. So we did 200 and some odd screenings of *Facing the Giants*, to the point that it was ad-nauseam for us and we were so tired of the movie by the time it came out that year. But that's what got the groundswell going.[265]

Kendrick's statements confirm the role of the pastor as gatekeepers to church audiences.

Although all "Holywood" filmmakers would love their movies to be endorsed from the pulpit,

the pastors must first be convinced of the theological and moral imperative for doing so. Thus,

while pastor endorsement is indeed cost effective, it is still persuasion dependent.

While the Kendrick brothers attempted to marshal the faithful through pastors, the actual

brunt of Provident's marketing dollars went towards new media marketing. Provident's team

connected *Facing the Giants* to social media through Facebook and YouTube, in addition to

designing a professional website that acted as a platform for ministry as much as for film

advertisement. From the film website, pastors could download an eight-lesson study guide based

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[264] Interview with Alex Kendrick.
[265] Ibid.

on the film, along with high-quality video clips from the film for illustration.[266] The website also

offered a written endorsement from bestselling Christian author Max Lucado, who mentions the

coincidental timing of the film with the release of his own book, *Facing Your Giant*. Most

significantly for the film's financial success, the website also offers official channels for

churches to license the film for church events and screenings and to buy tickets for the film in

bulk. As with *Flywheel*, the Kendrick brothers strongly encouraged Christian audiences to see

Facing the Giants not just as a film, but also as inner-church ministry and outer-church

Evangelism. Like before, churches were overtly encouraged to buy out whole theaters and to

give the tickets away to non-Christian friends and family, who might hear the Christian messages

in the film and even possibly convert to Christianity as a result. Only this time, the website

allowed the filmmakers to advertise these ministry methodologies to churches and communities

across the nation, as well as give them a specific route for taking action and buying those tickets.

Despite all this funding and marketing help from Sony and its subsidiaries, Sherwood

Pictures was still quick to separate itself from Hollywood and to exploit notions of a "culture

war" between Hollywood and Christianity for publicity when the opportunity arose. Since

Facing the Giants was a national release, Sherwood was obliged to submit the film to the Motion

Picture Association of America (MPAA) for a film rating. When the MPAA gave the film a "PG:

Parental Guidance Suggested" rating instead of a "G: General Audience" rating, the filmmakers

went to the press to publicly declare their outrage. The Kendrick brothers claimed that MPAA

said the film "was heavily laden with messages from one religion and that this might offend

people from other religions," which warranted a PG rating—a claim the MPAA has repeatedly

disputed. Regardless, the filmmakers argued that the film contained no profanity or sexual

content, and only team-sports levels of violence, and thus the overt presence of religion in the

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[266] *Facing the Giants* website, accessed online, March 22, 2012 <http://www.facingthegiants.com>.

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film must be the only explanation. In public expressions of indignation, the filmmakers

consciously framed the issue as an example of Hollywood prejudice towards Christianity and

steadily gained national media publicity for the film. On an interview with ABC News, Alex

Kendrick declared: "It's interesting that the Bible, which used to be the standard for what is good

and right and virtuous and true is now taboo and we have to warn people about it."[267] This

statement deliberately positioned Christian beliefs at the center of traditional values, while

positioning the Hollywood establishment outside of common decency. Kendrick went on to ask

Christians for their support, both in expressing their opinions to the MPAA and in supporting the

film upon release. Indeed, masses of conservative Christians seemed to agree with this culture

war divide and responded to Kendrick's call-to-arms—the MPAA received over 15,000 email

complaints, more than ten times any previous record for complaint volume. Several years after

the film's release, producer David Nixon would openly credit the controversy as a key-

contributing factor to the film's box office success.[268]

Indeed, the film's box office success went beyond anyone's expectations. Riding of a

wave of press coverage and higher than usual pre-ticket sales, *Facing the Giants* debuted at

number twelve at the box office with $1.3 million. The following weeks saw only slight declines

and by the end of its theatrical run, the $100,000 film had netted over $10 million. Although it

did not achieve the wild success of *The Passion*, it more succeeded expectations based on the

small-sized release and tiny marketing campaign. It also provided small-scale proof that *The

Passion* was not a complete anomaly. As Kendrick recalled:

> In 2006, there weren't a lot of Christian films. Like last year [2014], there were 10 or 11, this year there are
> going to be a dozen coming out. But back in 2006, there just weren't very many. People back then in
> Hollywood and on the Christian side were still trying to figure out how to reach that *Passion of the Christ*

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[267] "Film Rating Upsets Christian Groups," *ABCNews.com* (June 22, 2006), accessed April 4, 2012:
http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=2105871&page=1.
[268] Ibid, and interview with Nixon.

audience. But *Facing the Giants* worked, in that it was supposed to do $2-3 million based on the 400 theaters it came out in. And when it did over $10 million, Sony was delighted and surprised.[269]

Sony's delight no doubt continued through their successful handling of the DVD release of the film. They gave the film a more polished presence on home video than *Flywheel*, as well as a wider retail distribution. Hardcopy media sales would eventually raise the film's profits by another $39 million.[270] However, beyond the film's own financial success, *Facing the Giants* had set the stage for the success of Sherwood's future projects. An isolated church in Albany, Georgia now had a model for production and marketing and, most crucially, a distribution relationship that could ensure wide theatrical and home video releases. Their next project would bring all of these elements together.

FIREPROOF

Alex Kendrick claims that the God gave him the story for *Fireproof* after much thought and prayer, and that the evidence for this is the fact that he was not interested in doing a film about marriage. While this type of claim is impossible to verify, even a cursory analysis of the Kendrick's first two films would demonstrate *Fireproof* to actually be a natural extension and continuation of previous themes and story tropes Kendrick had already explored. Once again, Kendrick focuses on an everyman protagonist, in a traditionally male-centered profession, going through a crisis in his life, and who finds external redemption of his worldlier problems through the internal salvation of Jesus Christ. Instead of being a used car salesman or a football coach, now the protagonist is a firefighter. Instead of being a man in crisis in both his job and his family, now the protagonist is merely in crisis in his family, and specifically his marriage,

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[269] Interview with Alex Kendrick.
[270] DVD sales figures come from The Numbers website: <www.the-numbers.com>.

although Kendrick would use the firefighting job for a series of dramatic events throughout the film.[271]

In contrast to these familiar story elements, the true evolution of the Kendrick brothers and Sherwood Pictures would come through the *Fireproof*'s production and marketing. Just as *Facing the Giants* was a deliberate and incremental advancement on *Flywheel*, so *Fireproof* would take certain incremental steps of its own. The budget would now be $500,000, or five times that of the previous Sherwood production.[272] Once again the crew would be entirely staffed by volunteer free labor from the church body, except for 12 key roles and the addition of a Christian star.[273] Kirk Cameron offered the production one of the only widely recognizable stars within the Christian film community. As a former child star on the 1980s sitcom *Growing Pains*, Cameron still contained some notoriety amongst the general public. As a born-again Christian who left Hollywood to work exclusively for Christian projects, Cameron was also a known quantity within Evangelical circles. Cameron had already starred in the *Left Behind* film series, and his personal faith was well known within most church communities. While his salary on the *Fireproof* is unknown, Cameron did claim that he was inspired by the volunteer ethos of Sherwood Pictures and asked them to donate the salary to his personal charity, Camp Firefly, a camp retreat for families with a terminally ill child.[274]

A second key advancement in *Fireproof* was the use of movie merchandise in the guise of a movie ministry tie-in. As discussed in the previous chapter, "Holywood" filmmakers often connect their films to the purposes of church ministries, either through associating with external

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[271] Alex Kendrick's next film, *Courageous* (2011), would again follow this pattern. In this case, an everyman protagonist (Kendrick again) in a male-centered profession (now a police officer) would go through a crisis of faith and renewal in his role within the family (fatherhood).

[272] Unless otherwise stated, details about the *Fireproof*'s production come from the "Making of FIREPROOF: TV Special," found of the film's DVD release. See *Fireproof* (2008) dir. Alex Kendrick, Sony Picture Home Entertainment (DVD).

[273] Interview with Kendrick.

[274] Finke, "Hollywood Wonders Why 'Fireproof' Did So Well When Other Christian Pics Don't."

causes (*Letter to God* and the Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children) or through appeal to existing

church ministries and priorities, such as evangelism. By linking their films to higher causes,

Christian filmmakers hope to create a support base that will rally behind the film and see movie

attendance and financial support as an extension of their personal faith. This support can also

help to mask any technical deficiencies in the low budget filmmaking. In the case of *Fireproof,*

the Kendrick brothers devised a marriage therapy book called *The Love Dare* as a narrative tool

that helps the film's protagonist reconnect with his wife and his faith. While this book did not

exist before the film, the brothers, along with their pastor Catt, wrote an actual version of *The*

Love Dare and then sold the book side-by-side with film. According to Nixon:

> With the movie *Fireproof* it was a book that came out with it called *The Love Dare* and
> that became an excellent counseling tool. Now a lot of churches use it in their marriage
> counseling for young couples. They have them watch the movie and go through the book,
> which is a forty-day process. They call it ministry in a box.[275]

As noted above, the book sold over 500,000 copies before the film was even released, and

continued to sell strong as a ministry component with the film's DVD release. These efforts

overtly tied the film to the Christian ministry to save marriages. By the end of 2008, *The Love*

Dare would sell over 2.3 million copies and continues to sell well today, long after interest the

film has subsided.[276]

Along with the book, other elements of the film's advertising also heavily emphasized the

film as a ministry tool for Christian marriages. As noted in the introduction, Sherwood had

Provident create two websites for *Fireproof*, one centered strictly on film promotion

(www.fireproofthemovie.com), with cast and crew bios trailers, and behind-the-scenes clips, and

another website devoted exclusively to the principles of Christian marriage therapy advocated by

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[275] Interview with Nixon.
[276] "Love Dare Goes Platinum," *ChristianCinema.com* (May 13, 2009), accessed online, August 3, 2013
<http://www.christiancinema.com/catalog/newsdesk_info.php?newsdesk_id=1038&src=dc20090515&mc_cid=8c6f
b6545d&mc_eid=19c4c41fbf>.

the film (www.fireproofmymarriage.com). Additionally, churches could find links for bulk ticket

purchases and the standard cause to support Christian evangelism.[277] While Sherwood and

Provident Films utilized the church networks of Outreach Inc. to tout the film and the book—

following the textbook established by Gibson's *The Passion* of grassroots, church-to-church

marketing and private screenings for megachurch pastors—they also expanded into the television

territory established by Gener8tion. Sherwood created a multipart television documentary on the

making of *Fireproof,* complete with regularly designated breaks for sponsorship. Kendrick then

premiered the making-of film on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, the nations largest Christian

media station, and appeared for an interview in between segments.[278] This promotional tactic is

significant because Southern Baptist doctrine is so often in conflict with the more Charismatic

dogma taught on TBN, and yet Kendrick appealed to the station's common cause to support

Christian marriages and evangelize non-Christians. Conveniently, and following the example of

film studios, the TV making-of special ended up doing double duty as the making-of featurette

on *Fireproof*'s eventual DVD.

While the box office returns of the film have been discussed above, the continued life of

Fireproof on DVD warrants some observations. Indeed, *Fireproof*'s DVD would embody all the

properties laid out by producer Nixon regarding home video's capability to be a "ministry in a

box." Besides the actual film and the TV special, the *Fireproof* DVD contains a wealth of

ministry-oriented special features, such as "Marriage Matters" featurette about the difficulties of

marriage in a hostile American-secular culture (and how *The Love Dare* can help), a full

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[277] *Fireproof* was produced cheaply by Sherwood Pictures for around $500,000, largely through the volunteer work of the congregants of Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, GA. It was distributed nation wide by Samuel Goldwyn Pictures and went on to gross over $33 million at the box office. *Fireproof* became the highest grossing independent film of 2008. See Tim Newcomb, "Faith-Based Filmmaking: The Sherwood Pictures Crusade," *Time* (Aug 25, 2011), accessed March 14, 2012 <http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,2090429-1,00.html>.
[278] See: "TBN Programs Guide," accessed online, January 28, 2011, <http://www.tbn.org/watch-us/our-programs/making-of-fireproof>.

promotion for *The Love Dare*, and DVD-ROM content filled with discussion guides, quizzes, and film clips geared towards the healing of Christian marriages.[279] Much of this material was produced cost effectively by directly porting over or slightly expanding on the material already available on *Fireproof*'s ministry-centered website. This allowed the dollars used to market the film to also be used for extra value on hardcopy media. The filmmakers continue to actively encourage churches to buy the DVD and the book together as a method for ministering to Christian marriages, and churches continue to oblige. According to the industry tracking website *The Numbers*, *Fireproof* earned an additional $29 million in DVD revenue during its first three months on home video, and has continued having steady sales up to today, with DVD revenues currently circling $50 million.[280] These profits are, of course, in addition to previous theatrical ticket sales and profits from the book. Overall, Sherwood Pictures, and the church that founded the company, has made well over $100 million from *Fireproof* alone, surely one of the best returns on investments of any film property. The fact that *Fireproof* can be labeled a film property and not just a singular film is itself a crucial development for Christian cinema.

 Fireproof as a property also continued the establishment of Sherwood Pictures and the Kendrick brothers as a brand. Much like Hollywood studios, which seek to create a recognizable brand relationship with consumers built on entertainment value, "Holywood" filmmakers attempt to create brand recognition amongst Evangelical audiences built on spiritual value. Indeed, Sherwood Pictures has led the path and established the template for Christian branding in filmmaking. Outside of the overt religious content of *Fireproof* and the film's multiple ministry tie-ins, Sherwood went out of its way to create brand through three methodologies: 1) stressing the personal, spiritual credibility of its filmmakers and crew; 2) emphasizing the God's direct

[279] *Fireproof*, directed by Alex Kedrick, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2009. [DVD]
[280] "Fireproof – Video Sales," *The Numbers*, accessed online, January 29, 2015 <http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Fireproof#tab=video-sales>.

relationship to and blessing over the film project; and 3) highlighting the divide between "Holywood" and Hollywood films through "culture war" rhetoric. Indeed, the first method can be seen at every level of the marketing for *Fireproof*. The very first scenes of the *Fireproof* "Making-of" documentary show all the filmmakers (except the one holding the camera) on their knees dedicating the film to God, and claiming boldly "This is God's movie!"[281] Throughout the featurette, the filmmakers testify to the daily group prayer that consecrates each workday (with evidential footage) and the "prayer warriors" from the church that also pray daily for the production. In interviews leading up to the film's release, both Kendrick brothers repeatedly stressed the personal time they devote to their faith and church. For example, when asked by *Christian Cinema* how he stays grounded in the midst of success, Stephen Kendrick replied:

> Spending time with the Lord. You cannot be close to God and be prideful at the same time. It's hard to be in His presence and not want to be on your knees. Walking with the Lord is always the most important thing any one of us can do. We also have authorities over us. Pastor Michael and Pastor Jim love us and support us, and they also speak truth into our lives. God has been good to surround us with some great people.[282]

Even the website for *Fireproof* takes pains to stress the uniqueness of the filmmakers and their personal connection to God. On the "Actors' Stories" page, the main actors all respond to a set of Christian-oriented questions, such as "Since the movie was filmed, how have you seen God's hand at work in your life?" Erin Bethea, the leading actress of the film, exemplifies the answers when she replied:

> I have learned what when I trust Him [God] with every area of my life, He runs it much better than I could! Since the filming of FIREPROOF, I have seen so many of my personal dreams come true…. And all because I trusted Him, did what He asked me to do by being a part of FIREPROOF and the rest followed…. To see how the movie is changing lives and marriages everywhere has been so exciting and so humbling. I look forward to what else God has for me and what he will continue to do through the film.[283]

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[281] *Fireproof*, DVD release.
[282] "Fireproof: Discussing Filmmaking with Brothers, Writers, Producers, and Director Alex and Stephen Kendrick," *Christian Cinema* (September 1, 2008), accessed online January 11, 2015, <http://www.christiancinema.com/catalog/newsdesk_info.php?newsdesk_id=747>.
[283] *Fireproof* website, accessed January 11, 2015, <http://www.fireproofthemovie.com/dvd_stories.php>.

Bethea's answer not only communicates her personal relationship towards God, but also another key point of Christian film branding: God's personal relationship to the film. Her answer implies that God had a very personal interest in the film's success—God personally prompted Bethea's to make the film, blessed her for being obedient, and continues to bless others and, in particular, marriages through the film. This type of direct association with God's will and blessing covers the marketing materials. On the DVD "Making-of" featurette, Alex Kendrick describes the success of Sherwood's first two films as directly caused by God's blessing, and goes on to contribute the inspiration of the screenplay as also coming directly from God. As confirmation, the featurette highlights God's continued blessings throughout the making of the film, even in the form of miracles. For example, one production day was nearly halted by the need of a forklift, only to be divinely rescued by a random stranger living nearby with just such a forklift ready to go, which the filmmakers stress was actually God's direct hand saving the production day.[284] The Kendrick brothers reiterate this belief in God's connection to the film in nearly every interview they give. As Alex Kendrick stated to *Georgia Magazine*:

> It's really obvious to everyone that God chose to bless the movies, and the response and the success is because of Him and not us. You take what you learn, and you do your best on the next one, but you also recognize if the Lord wants it to succeed, it will, and if it doesn't succeed and we did our best, we have nothing to be ashamed of.[285]

This remark exemplifies the way Sherwood has approached the significant successes of their films. Instead of taking credit for solid, low budget filmmaking and savvy marketing campaigns, all participants pass the true credit to divine favor and blessing. While this attitude certainly falls in line with Christian humility and may be completely sincere, it also achieves other beneficial effects for Sherwood. As with the other "Holywood" films discussed in Chapter 1, this direct linking between a film production and God's holy favor creates an implied pressure for

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[284] *Fireproof*, DVD release.
[285] Doug Debolt, "Georgia's giant-killer," *Georgia Magazine* (December 2008), accessed online March 5, 2014, <http://www.georgiamagazine.org/archives_view.asp?mon=12&yr=2008&ID=2048>.

Christians to support the film as part of their own spiritual righteousness. If a Christian believes

that God is truly involved in Sherwood films, as the Kendrick brothers (who are also pastors)

adamantly argue at every turn, then that Christian has a duty to support God's will.

Lastly, this Christian branding is also framed in "culture war" rhetoric, not only meant to

separate the Sherwood filmmakers from secular Hollywood filmmakers. Indeed, the very origin

of Sherwood films is steeped in cultural divide. As explained by Michael Catts, the head pastor

of Sherwood Baptist Church and executive producer of Sherwood Pictures:

> After reading an article from George Barna [of the Barna Research Group] listing the top cultural influences, we learned that church was sliding down the scale while movies, media and music were becoming the predominant means of influence. Since the church was listed behind sports, education and movies we concluded we could either complain about this or address it. This mindset has been the key initiative behind … Sherwood Pictures.[286]

Through this oft repeated narrative, Sherwood positions itself as a response to the dwindling

influence of the church in the face of secular media and entertainment, and indeed as a strategic

plan to use the tools of popular culture against popular culture in the service of returning the

church to its rightful place. Sentiments of a cultural divide pervade Sherwood's attitude towards

Hollywood and secular popular culture and the filmmakers communicate this cultural divide in a

number of ways. For example, when speaking to *The New York Times*, Kendrick stressed not

only his separation from Hollywood as a Christian filmmaker, but also Christianity's regional

separation from Hollywood within the geography of the United States:

> Well it's important to keep in mind we're not Hollywood, we're not trying to be Hollywood. We're first a ministry…. We would say a large portion of Southern and Middle America is still a faith audience. They know there is a God and they have a sense of morality that they would like to see honored and they tend to gravitate toward our movies.[287]

Kendrick expressed these regional stereotypes even more bluntly in his remarks about *Fireproof*

to *ABC News*:

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[286] Sherwood Pictures website, "Our Beginning," accessed online March 5, 2014, <http://sherwoodpictures.com/how-we-do-it>.
[287] Julie Bloom, "Praying, Then Producing a Hit," *The New York Times* (October 8, 2011), accessed online, January 11, 2015, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/08/praying-then-producing-a-hit>.

We tried to make a movie that speaks to your middle-American family and couple facing all the common issues in marriage. Hollywood is good at reflecting the values and lifestyles of people in California and New York. But there are so many of us who have a standard of morality and faith that is rarely reflected in films coming out of Hollywood.[288]

Such comments clearly reinforce "culture war" conceptions about New York and California embodying the liberal, secular poles of the US, while Middle America and the South still carry the torch for real morality and values. Additionally, these sentiments also create a sense of overt hostility from Hollywood towards the Christian religion. When asked by *The Hollywood Reporter* he ever experiences "personal bias against [himself] or Christianity," Alex Kendrick did a remarkable job of both condemning Hollywood and affirming his own Christian identity:

I'd say you already know the answer to that question, but you're wanting names and I can't do that. The answer is an emphatic 'yes,' but that's not a fight I want to pick. There are people who have called us vile names, told us we need to stop making films, and have ugly names for Christians. I'm not going to give you names, I'd rather reach out and minister them.[289]

This portrayal of an anti-Christian Hollywood is laced throughout many interviews, and even appears in marketing materials. For example, on the *Fireproof* DVD "Making Of," Director of Photography Bob Scott, a veteran of many Hollywood films, exclaims that a "producer on a Hollywood set would melt" if he or she saw crewmembers praying and devoting their filmmaking to God.[290] Through these repeated notions, Sherwood consistently underlines its own spiritual credibility; not just as a faith-based, counter industry to Holywood, but also as a defender of the faith against Hollywood's attacks. Even amongst other "Hollywood" production companies, few have cultivated this brand of spiritual credibility as relentlessly as Sherwood Pictures.

SHERWOOD AND HOLLYWOOD

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[288] Luchina Fisher, "'Fireproof' Shows Christian Movies Sell," *ABCNews* (Oct 3, 2008), accessed online January 15, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=5941016&page=1>.

[289] Paul Bond, "'War Room' Filmmaker: "The God of Hollywood Is Political Correctness" (Q&A)," *The Hollywood Reporter* (September 17, 2015), accessed online, December 10, 2015, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/war-room-filmmaker-god-hollywood-823440>.

[290] *Fireproof*, DVD release.

The relationship between Sherwood Pictures and Hollywood has been complicated from the beginning, and continues to be so. Since their second film in 2006, Sherwood has engaged in hiring Hollywood professionals for key production positions, accepting industry investment and funding for marketing campaigns, conducting story meetings with studio executives to obtain the studio funding, and receiving nationwide theatrical launches through studio distribution. However, Sherwood and the Kendrick brothers have never felt completely comfortable with these close ties to Hollywood and often distance themselves from their own industry connections. In interviews with the press, as well as interviews conducted for this project, the Kendrick brothers consistently present themselves as outsiders to the Hollywood system. Unlike most independent filmmakers, this outsider status is not based on the scale and artistic motives of the films, but instead on the spiritual motives of Sherwood Pictures in contrast to Hollywood. Indeed, the filmmakers portray Hollywood as a place with both questionable morality and pure business motivation, while painting Sherwood's films as spiritually motivated first, and business oriented as a far-second goal. While the core relationship between Sherwood and Hollywood remains stable thus far—despite Sherwood rhetoric that ranges from amicable to "culture war" hostile—it is obviously a highly negotiated relationship on Sherwood's part, and every level of connection. These methods of negotiation and the possible reasons behind them deserve some further probing.

For example, the most prominent interaction between Sherwood and Hollywood happens in the actual meetings between the filmmakers and the studio chiefs. For the last three Kendrick Brothers' films—*Fireproof*, *Courageous*, and *The War Room*—the brothers flew out to LA to meet with Sony executives in order to gain the studio's financial backing for marketing and distribution. Since Sony often utilizes its subsidiaries to handle faith-based productions,

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representatives from those companies are often present as well. According to Alex Kendrick, meetings usually consist of "the president from Affirm Entertainment and Provident Media and the vice presidents of those companies and several executives from Sony too, all in this big room."[291] Since Sony currently has standard a first look deal with Sherwood and the brothers, they get to accept or pass on each film project before it can be offered to any other studio or film company. Thus for each project, the Kendricks must present a story breakdown, the message and themes of the film, the proposed cast, and a budget breakdown, and then discuss all studio concerns. Although these first look meetings are not the only direct point of contact with studio executives—Kendrick also described a handful set visits where "Sony would fly down with one or two of their executives and just kind of observe and watch the production," as well as follow up meetings once the film has been edited into a first cut—the studio-based meetings are the main point of negotiation over film content and message.[292] Although Sony has never passed on a Kendrick Brothers film, the main concerns of the studio are often those most unique to a Christian production. Indeed, Alex Kendrick didn't hesitate to confirm conflicts between Sherwood and Sony when I questioned him about the meetings, stating quickly:

> If you want to know if our films ever made Sony antsy, you betcha. Yeah, they totally did. They were never jerks about it but they were always, "We're concerned about what you're saying here. Or alienating someone here. Or discriminating against someone. Or whatever." And so we would have to walk them through what we're saying in the film and how it would be presented onscreen.[293]

As these meetings represent the financial intersection between "Holywood" and Hollywood at its most concrete—and indeed since inside information on such types of Hollywood meetings is often so hard for researchers to access—the issues most negotiated, as disclosed by Kendrick, require examination.

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[291] Interview with Alex Kendrick.
[292] Ibid.
[293] Ibid.

Unsurprisingly, Sony's chief concern for each Sherwood film, according to Kendrick, usually revolves around each film's overt portrayal and approval of Christian theology. In particular, the studio often questions the two key Christian elements that Sherwood places into every movie they produce: 1) an overt endorsement of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith as the only way to eternal salvation; and 2) a character in each film going through (and thus demonstrating for the audience) the Evangelical "steps for salvation," whereby the character confesses their sinfulness to God, asks for forgiveness, and asks that Jesus save them and cause them to be "born again" as a Christian.[294] As a secular entertainment company, Sony has been understandably reticent about offending the public through supporting the exclusionary messages of one single religion over others. On the other hand, Sherwood and Christian audiences have returned large profits for Sony on minimal investment, so they are always reticent to break relationship with the Sherwood. According to Kendrick, Sony often questions whether each film's Christian agenda needs to be stated so overtly, to which the Kendrick brothers thus far have remained adamant and unchanged:

> When they were to ask us about the Christianity in the films, and whether salvation only comes through Jesus Christ, we would say, "That's absolutely right. That's what we believe. We think there is no other name under heaven by which man can be saved. That's exactly what we believe and we can't change that."[295]

Additionally, Sony often questions the overt theology of the films from a business perspective, in terms of not alienating non-Christian audience from seeing the films or recommending them to others. However, Kendrick seems to treat those objections as always secondary to his ministry focus:

> In how we present Christianity—are we going to smash someone in the face with that message in the film? Absolutely not. But are we going to be very sincere about people needing a relationship with the Lord,

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[294] Ibid.
[295] Ibid.

about turning to the Lord, about forgiveness coming through Christ? We tell them, "Yes, that's going to be in the film."[296]

When pressed in the interview, Kendrick admitted that he might take some notes concerning narrative clarity and pacing, but refused to ever budge on issues of religious depiction for the sake of not offending. Kendrick framed his reasoning for never compromising on major issues in terms of God's sovereign involvement in the film:

> Of course we're going to make the film we feel led to make regardless. For us, we want good business, but the business is the second priority and ministry impact is our first priority. In terms of changing anything based on their notes, we have made minor changes to clarify certain things, but we've never changed the plot or our message from what it needed to be. After praying about it, if we felt like the Lord was prompting us to do a certain thing, we would not change it.[297]

While this message is obviously reflective of Alex Kendrick's personal faith, it also remains completely consistent with the Christian branding Sherwood has painstakingly developed in regards to their company and its individual filmmakers. The Kendrick brothers regard the spiritual messages of their own films as paramount, as indeed they have been a lynchpin in the branding of their films and central to their success in rallying Christians to movie theaters in support.

The reasons for these conflicts over religion could be easily explained in business terms—Sony has its own brand to protect, and wants that brand to be as inclusive as possible to all demographics—and indeed, Kendrick has stated many times that Sony's main incentive is money. And yet, Kendrick also offered an additional explanation for the disputes. Although he could not remember the names of most of the executives, Kendrick assumed they subscribed to different faiths or religious backgrounds, and believed this to be one of the main causes for the disagreements over exclusionary Christian theology onscreen. In this regard, Kendrick relied heavily on stereotypes concerning the ethnic and religious makeup of Hollywood:

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[296] Ibid.
[297] Ibid.

It is a very interesting meeting to say the least. The executives are always very courteous and nice to us, but most of them are Jewish, and that's fine with us, but most of them are not Christians and they are very concerned about the reputation of their company, they're very concerned about what we're saying with our films.[298]

Besides being an offensive and tired Hollywood label, treating Jewish backgrounds in Hollywood as the main cause for objections over religious content seems even more extreme given the heavy presence, by Kendrick's own admission, of Provident Films and Affirm Films in the room—two companies that specialize exclusively in faith-based and family media content. It seems highly unlikely that executives of such companies, who have handled dozens of Christian films, would lack an understanding of the Christian faith and how it can be incorporated into film narratives.

Outside of religious objections, Sony has expressed concerns over issues related to cultural and even racial sensitivity. Although Kendrick alluded to several encounters across multiple films, he would only discuss the most recent debates with Sony executives over the racial material of his latest film, *The War Room* (2015). Like previous Kendrick Brother films, *The War Room* portrays a family crisis between a husband and wife that gets resolved through the pair turning to Christianity and prayer. However, the film veers significantly from previous Kendrick films by centering of black characters and presenting the film through the perspective of a black narrator, Miss Clara—an elderly, southern black woman who neighbors the couple and helps heal the fragile marriage through her own prayers and the spiritual advise she offers to the wife. According to the Kendrick brothers, the choice of focusing on black protagonists raised concerns from Sony executives who feared both financial ramifications and racial controversy. According to Stephen Kendrick, the filmmakers had "had some raised eyebrows with our distributors saying this [the black, female protagonist] could really limit the success of the film,

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[298] Ibid.

if it marginalizes our core audience, who would arguably be primarily white."[299] In addition to

concerns over alienating white audiences, Sony also worried about creating controversies

amongst black audiences and social critics. As described by Alex Kendrick:

> They [the Sony executives] said, "Tell us why you're choosing to tell the story from a black female perspective when you're two white guys from the south." And they said, "Well you know, there's going to be a little bit of a risk." And we said, "We understand." They said, "If the word gets out the Kendricks, two white guys, are making a quote/unquote "black movie," it may not be accepted." And I said, "We understand, but you know what? We're going to make the best movie we can and do what we believe God's prompted us to do and leave the results up to him." And so, that's what we've done.[300]

While Sony would not comment on these claims by the brothers, the two concerns would appear

to be in line with traditional studio mindsets concerning representations of race on film. In

general, studios shy away from racially diverse protagonists if the intended audience for the film

is white, believing that white audiences only want to see themselves onscreen. At the same time,

if the subject matter of a film has to deal with race, the studios also fear reactions from social

critics over the need for minorities to speak for themselves and not be represented through white

perspectives. However, Kendrick generally dismissed both objections:

> So we walked them through about how we prayed about it, and how we felt that our chosen protagonist was the most sincere and accurate expression of desperate prayer. And that after praying about it, we were at peace with that. And that we were interviewing tons of people to speak about that perspective, primarily black females. That we had written it and allowed a lot of people to give counsel on it.[301]

While Sony's racial politics seem steeped the unfortunate-yet-typical motives of film

studios—namely, financial gain with as little public blowback as possible—the racial politics of

the Kendrick brothers, and their decision to focus on a black protagonist, are more elusive. For

example, when questioned about his choice phrase, Alex Kendrick would not elaborate further as

to a how a black, female perspective offered the "most sincere and accurate expression of

desperate prayer." However, in other interviews, Stephen Kendrick expressed certain

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[299] Peter T. Chattaway, "Interview with Stephen Kendrick (*War Room*, 2015)," *Patheos* (September 24, 2015), accessed online, December 10, 2015 <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/filmchat/2015/09/interview-stephen-kendrick-war-room-2015.html>.
[300] Interview with Alex Kendrick.
[301] Ibid.

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explanations that seemed steeped in the problematic stereotypes. In speaking to *Patheos*,

Kendrick remarked: "Miss Clara just had to be black: the passion, the humor, the wit, all of that,

we just felt like would be much more powerful and authentic when spoken through the lens of an

African-American elderly woman."[302] Kendrick underlined this perspective about African

American humor and expressions of heightened feeling when talking with *Scene Creek*: "It was

absolutely the right decision to tell the story of *War Room* through the lens of a black

family. The drama levels are heightened by the passion, humor, and wit they can bring to the

table."[303] This repeated reading of African Americans as possessing appealing comedy elements

and emotionality is troubling, especially given the history in American popular culture of black

representation being reduced to simplistic, purely entertaining stereotypes that both appeases

white fears of the black populace and implicitly reinforced white superiority. The implications

become even more problematic when taking into account the Kendrick brothers' explicit lack of

interest in representing any issues specific to race or the black experience in the US. Indeed, both

brothers have proudly boasted of sidestepping racial concerns by writing the black characters as

affluent and sticking to issues white audiences can relate to. As Stephen Kendrick expressed:

> We knew it seemed odd that two white men in South Georgia would be writing a movie about an affluent
> African-American family, but the ideas, scenes, and images in Alex's head were from that context all
> along. We intentionally tried not to make *War Room* about racial issues or things only relevant within a
> black culture. We wanted to deal with universal issues surrounding prayer that anyone could relate to.[304]

By emphasizing elements appealing to white audiences (stereotypes of black humor and

passions) and deemphasizing all elements that might turn off white audiences (anything

predominantly relevant to black culture), the Kendrick end up using to race and black identity as

a means for white entertainment and engagement.

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[302] Chattaway, "Interview with Stephen Kendrick."
[303] Charles Trapunski, "5 Questions With Stephen Kendrick of War Room," *Scene Creek* (September 17, 2015), accessed online, December 10, 2015 <http://scenecreek.com/interviews/5-questions-with-stephen-kendrick-of-war-room>.
[304] Ibid.

While these issues may not have concerned Sony executives, their fears of alienating white audiences and creating racial controversy apparently persisted, even after they gave the Kendrick brothers their approval to begin production. After production wrapped and an initial edit of the film was completed, Sony insisted on testing the film amongst different audiences to gauge possible reactions to the film. Kendrick described the testing process and the subsequent audience reaction as a validation of his intentions:

> Sony would pay to have companies do test screenings, they would hand pick the audience and my brother I were not invited. We would have nothing to do with it. They did a test screening in Birmingham, Alabama and in Dallas, Texas. And the movie got 98/100, which is the highest they've ever had on a film. I mean, the only other 98 in recent history was *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King. Courageous* got a 96, and so they didn't think that could be beat. So when we got a 98 from an African American audience, they called us up and said, "We're not worried. We're good. So let's just see what happens with the film."[305]

Indeed, after the film's remarkable debut of $11 million in its opening weekend, as well as second place at the nationwide box office, Sony displayed nothing but enthusiasm. In talking to *Variety*, Sony's distribution chief, Rory Bruer, showed no evidence of previous concerns and instead praised the Kendrick brothers to the heavens: "There's so much love for this film…. It starts with the Kendricks. They're visionaries in this genre."[306] Although critics were not kind to the film, and many noted broad racial stereotypes in the film, especially around the character of Miss Clara, African American audiences still supported the film.[307] *Variety,* citing Pew Research, even credited the film's appeal to both white and black Christian audiences equally, despite being a film about predominantly black characters, as the largest reason for *War Room*'s momentous financial success.[308] And Sony was more than happy to claim full support. When *The*

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[305] Interview with Alex Kendrick.
[306] Brent Lang, "Box Office: 'War Room' Stuns With $11 Million, Zac Efron's 'We Are Your Friends' Tanks," *Variety* (August 30, 2015), accessed online, December 10, 2015 <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/war-room-box-office-zac-efron-1201581462>.
[307] *The War Room* holds a 34% Fresh rating on Rottentomatoes.com. For typical negative reviews, see: Jordan Hoffman, "War Room review: shut up and pray he quits," *The Guardian* (August 28, 2015) and Vadim Rizov, "The filmmakers who helped Kirk Cameron battle porn want to pray racial tension away," *A.V. Club* (August 28, 2015).
[308] Brent Lang, "How 'War Room' Became a Biblical Box Office Smash," *Variety* (August 30, 2015), accessed online, December 10, 2015 <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/war-room-box-office-religious-1201581455>.

War Room placed number 1 at the box office in its second week (displacing *Straight Outta*

Compton) and earning $12 million, Rory Stuer exclaimed, "[T]his sort of result is just

stunning!... I think it truly shows the Kendrick brothers really know how to speak to audiences in

a way that resonates."[309]

Given this consistent track record of success, Alex Kendrick displays a deep lack of

concern regarding past and possible-future conflicts with Sony and whether they could derail

future projects. Although he acknowledges Sony's ability to pass on any Sherwood film of their

choosing, he believes (probably correctly) that Sherwood's record of high return on minimal

investment would make it easy to find another studio or film company to distribute their product.

Still, Kendrick doesn't see this as a likely possibility, given Sony's primary business motive:

> You know, in our agreement, it's stated that if they feel like a particular film we do is too religious for
> them, and they can't handle it and want to bail, well they can. And to be honest, we're okay with that
> because we're going to tell the stories we need to tell. And we're so grateful for Sony but if they said,
> "Guys, you're getting a bit too politically incorrect here, and we need to bail on you." We would say, "God
> bless you, and we can go pick up another distributor." But I mean, Sony has been the primary beneficiary
> of the success of the films, financially speaking, so they're very happy with us.[310]

Although the remark is somewhat complimentary, it reflects Kendrick's other comments cited

above in consistently dividing his filmmaking operations from the Hollywood community.

Sherwood and the Kendrick brothers have a strong history of utilizing "culture war" language

and posturing to always distinguish themselves as outside the Hollywood system, which they

often paint as (or at least imply being) a morally corrupt, secular, money-first focused, Jewish,

West Coast, liberal establishment that helps to decay the "Christian values" of the United States.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, even Sherwood's founding narrative is steeped in "culture

war" divides, and presented as a direct response to secular cinema's displacement of the church

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[309] Saba Hamedy, "Faith-based 'War Room' pushes 'Straight Outta Compton' out of top spot," *Los Angeles Times* (September 6, 2015), accessed online, December 10, 2015
<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/cotown/la-et-ct-box-office-labor-day-weekend-war-room-straight-outta-compton-a-walk-in-the-woods-transporter-refueled-20150906-story.html>.
[310] Ibid.

as a main influence on the population. The "culture war" debates are in the very DNA of Sherwood, as they are in most of contemporary "Holywood" and the Christian marketing for each film. Thus, no matter how indebted, entangled, and embedded Sherwood and the Kendricks have become with Sony or other Hollywood players, Sherwood still feels the need to portray a distanced, even slightly strained, relationship. In this narrative, Sherwood remains singularly focused on Christian ministry regardless of Hollywood protestations; listening to God and following his direct instructions; triumphing over all the politically-correct studio objections because of implied executive greed and the not-so-implied direction and favor of God; and needed by the Sony far more than ever needing them in return.

Outside of big picture meetings and negotiations with studio heads, Sherwood also negotiates its relationship to Hollywood on the ground level during production. One key example is labor, such as Sherwood's process for hiring Hollywood professionals versus unpaid nonprofessionals, which for them often equates to hiring non-Christians or unpaid Christian volunteers. As a production company was founded a production company by Christian pastors for the purposes of Evangelism and initially crewed by all-church volunteers, Sherwood's origins their views on the production process established much of their ongoing tensions between the process and the higher purpose of filmmaking. While their first film, *Flywheel*, was made solely by Christian nonprofessionals, the Kendrick brothers wanted a more professional appearance for their second film, *Facing the Giants*. Thus, the question of whether or not to hire seasoned Hollywood professionals quickly became a question of whether or not they should be hiring non-Christians. For *Facing the Giants*, director Alex Kendrick claims they bypassed the problem by only hiring Christian professionals, but by the time they filmed *Fireproof* in 2008, the problem

finally had to be confronted. In the end, the eventual justification for hiring non-Christians would

follow in line with the Evangelical intent of the films themselves. According to Kendrick:

> Now on the crew, we want primarily Christian [crew members] but we are ok if we strategically have a few that are not, knowing that they'll be in a Christian atmosphere. But they're never in a primary leadership position. They're always in a, you know—they're doing lighting or they're running the dolly track or something like that. And we love on them throughout the shoot, we serve them, pray for them, and so far on the last three films we've done, some of the non-Christians, if not all of them, have gotten saved on our crew. And when I say saved, I mean they've become a Christian and turned their life over to the Lord through Jesus Christ…. By the time we got to *Fireproof*, I think we had twelve professionals, and I'm pretty sure two or three of those were not Christians. But a couple of them became Christians by the end of the film, just being around us all summer. But we are very careful and particular about who we invite to be on our sets and in the films.[311]

The reasoning behind this decision is rather ingenious. By presenting the film sets as places

where non-believing crewmembers actually covert to Christianity, Kendrick transforms the

making of an Evangelical film into a method of pure evangelism. By this logic, hiring non-

Christians becomes part of the ultimate mission to save lost souls, and decidedly not a

compromise by Christian filmmakers seeking expertise their volunteers may lack. Additionally,

by limiting the non-Christians crewmembers to non-leadership positions, where no creative

decisions will take place, the Kendrick brothers can continue to ascribe film authorship to

Christian filmmakers, and even at times directly to God through the vessels of these filmmakers.

Implying God's inspiration and blessing on a film—which is a key marketing tactic in

"Holywood" and especially with Sherwood Pictures—would not work nearly as well if the film

was made by non-Christians. Indeed, each piece of the reasoning both supports the overall

Evangelistic mission of the films and implicitly negates any criticism from Christian circles who

might see non-Christian professionals as a compromise.

    In keeping with this logic, Sherwood held a much higher standard when it came to hiring

non-Christians in front of the camera. Since the actors represent a lead creative role in the

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[311] Ibid.

filmmaking, Kendrick and company believed that each on-screen face must belong to a

Christian. As Kendrick affirmed:

> For us, and I'm only speaking for us, because I know a lot of filmmakers do it different ways—if you're acting on the screen, we want you to be a Christian…. We don't feel comfortable giving a non-Christian actor the main voice of our films knowing that they don't really believe it in real life.[312]

Besides simply being an internal policy of Sherwood Pictures, Kendrick argued that non-

Christian performers often lived lives that were outwardly antithetical to Christian beliefs, which

could hurt the chances of Christians supporting a particular film. Indeed, Kendrick offered many

examples of "Holywood" films that had hired non-Christian performers and in the end been hurt

financially by the performers private behavior or personal beliefs:

> And there have been numerous previous Christian films where the filmmakers had great intentions but they wanted quality [with their actors], and I certainly understand that. But they wanted quality and they hired non-Christian actors and the actors did a great job. But then when it came to promoting the movie, something happened where the actors would be a mess or they would come out and say, "I don't believe in any of this crap. I just did it as a gig." Or whatever. And it just really hurt the ministry of the movie. *The Nativity Story* is one of them, where the young girl actually got pregnant out of wedlock when she was like, 15 or 16 years old. And then *End of the Spear* was another one, where the lead actor did a fantastic job across the movie but really harmed the ministry of the movie because he was very open about his homosexuality and beliefs. He was a [homosexual] activist and of course he was playing a strong Christian missionary…. So we just kind of said, because the ministry impact of our films is the number one goal for us, we want to make sure that the people in the film are living it [a Christian life and values]. That they can speak to these things. Not perfectly, because none of are, but certainly that they believe in it and agree with it. And so if you ask me or Kirk Cameron or Ken Bevel or some of the people acting in our films, they can say, "You know what? I agree with this film and I believe in what they say in the film."[313]

Through this reasoning, Kendrick connects himself with the larger principles behind

"Holywood" filmmaking discussed in Chapter 1, namely the importance of spiritual message

over filmmaking quality. Even though Kendrick admires the quality of performances by non-

Christians in other "Holywood" films, and implies that certain professional actors might bring

better quality performances to his own films, he still does not want to risk the faces of his films

being associated with overt, non-Evangelical lifestyles.

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[312] Ibid.
[313] Ibid.

This emphasis on "non-Evangelical" must be clarified, for even though Kendrick frames the issue as Christian versus non-Christian, his true implication seems to be Evangelical versus non-Evangelical—a much narrower, conservative, doctrinal definition of Christianity, as discussed in the Introduction. Indeed, there are many self-identified Christians working in Hollywood, both above and below the line, but Kendrick's history thus far is to cast church members or outside actors, like Kirk Cameron, who identify specifically with Evangelical Christian theology. By regulating not only the religion but also the actual theology subscribed to by his cast, Kendrick accomplishes several things. First, he aligns the faces of his films with the core audience for the films. Since Evangelicals overwhelmingly provide the largest box office support for Sherwood's films, and therefore receive the largest marketing focus from Sherwood, keeping the cast within that demographic supports the overall appeal of the films. Second, and following this point, casting Evangelicals keeps the actors on message. When Kendrick and his cast give interviews, everyone can be uniform in their support of the film, the film's theological message, and their own personal faiths. Of course, these two issues also tie back to the concept of Christian branding and spiritual credibility, which Sherwood has been tenacious in cultivating. The entire crew may not be Evangelical, and key technical positions may be operated by Hollywood outsiders, but by keeping the public faces of Sherwood's films entirely Evangelical, the film company can present a uniform Evangelical brand—in message, in ministry, and in cast and crew. This brand allows Sherwood to establish credibility with their target audience by being a pure reflection of the target audience.

Additionally, keeping the cast limited to Evangelical Christian helps to mitigate any "scandal" of personal behavior, although not because Evangelicals are actually less prone to scandalous actions, as Kendrick implies. Indeed, a survey of the scandals attached to prominent

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Evangelical leaders in the United States could dissuade anyone from think Evangelical theology is a recipe for perfect Christian morality. Even beyond anecdotal evidence, multiple studies by Christian-based Barna Research Group shook the Evangelical world when they revealed almost no discernable difference between the actual moral behaviors of Christians and non-Christians in US society.[314] Thus, regardless of Kendrick's implications, one of the genuine mitigations offered by casting Evangelicals is the different reception of their non-Christian behavior, if any occurs, by Evangelical audiences. Indeed, from an Evangelical perspective, the solution for sin ("non-Christian behavior") amongst non-Christians is to become Christian, while the solution for sin amongst Christians is merely repentance. Although Kendrick may criticize an actor's homosexuality or out-of-wedlock pregnancy, he and other Christian critics are much more silent about the behaviors of Mel Gibson, someone they assume to be Christian.

Outside of religious considerations, Sherwood's hiring practices also have very practical and financial considerations. Sherwood bypasses film union involvement and oversight through the use of largely volunteer crews and local acting talent. The cast and crew are all largely unpaid and donating their time and labor as an act of Christian service for greater good of the spiritual ministry of the films. This novel method of keeping production costs low would not work if Sherwood had to hire union crews or work under union stipulations. Although Sherwood has worked with a few Hollywood professionals repeatedly in crewmember capacities, it has only worked with a professional actor once—Kirk Cameron in *Fireproof*—which did end up finally drawing the attention of the unions. According to Alex Kendrick, the unions actually kept Cameron from starring in Sherwood's next, *Courageous*:

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[314] George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 1998), p. 6.

> The unions came down on Kirk really hard because *Fireproof* was a nonunion movie. And so by the time we did *Courageous*, we actually talked to Cameron about do it, and the unions said "No way, not unless Sherwood becomes a union movie." And we weren't about to do that.[315]

It must be noted that the Kendrick brothers are not unique amongst independent filmmakers in seeking to bypass unions. Many indie productions rely on the help of low paid or unpaid friends and crewmembers struggling to mount productions that cannot account for regular working hours or conditions. For many such films, hiring union crews at union wages and working hours is a costly accommodation that could never be afforded. However, it is irregular for a production company like Sherwood—with such huge financial returns, as well as close studio ties—to continue working with nonunion crews after repeated, large-scale successes. Besides the obvious financial incentives to keep crews nonunion, another cause can be attributed, again, to Christian branding. Simply put, if the Kendrick Brothers started hiring union crews, they would no longer be able to guarantee to Evangelical audiences that their films are handmade by (mostly) Evangelicals. To threaten this narrative in any way would be to threaten the central thread of every narrative Sherwood has fashioned: that the films are created by people that love God; that God is personally invested in the films, partially because they're being made by these good Christians; that God personally uses the films for inner-church ministry and outer-church Evangelism; that this form of ministry is the most important component of the films, and a key area of differentiation between Sherwood and Hollywood; and thus, that supporting the films financially is the duty of other good Christians.

CONCLUSION

Sherwood Pictures has been by far the most successful and most imitated "Holywood" production company of the past 10 years. Outside of *The Passion*, Alex and Stephen Kendrick have crafted the most profitable blockbusters of this new Christian blockbuster era. And they

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[315] Interview with Alex Kendrick.

have done it consistently. Their methods for production, marketing, and branding are not only studied and copied by other "Holywood" competitors, but, as the next two chapters will demonstrate, by the Hollywood studios as well. And yet, as they move forward in future ventures, the Kendrick brothers may be studying and copying Hollywood methods in return.

Indeed, like most successful filmmakers, the Kendricks are already making efforts to produce bigger films and reap larger financial rewards. Following the success of *Courageous*, Alex and Stephen split away from Sherwood Pictures to form their own production company, Kendrick Brothers Productions. Indeed, *The War Room* was the first film under this new production banner, reaping huge initial rewards for the brothers. Although the profits from Sherwood Pictures significantly grew Sherwood Baptist in terms of size and landholdings, to say nothing of national reputation, Alex Kendrick insists that the split was mutually agreed upon between the brothers and the church's head pastor. Kendrick claims that the success of the films was actually creating bad side effects for the church. For example, while church attendance swelled, many of the people coming on Sundays were merely autograph seekers and people who wanted pictures, and, according to Kendrick, acting "like they're a Universal Studios."[316] Additionally, the church-volunteer-based production model was actually draining the church of volunteer staff for their other departments:

> Our church has a dozen viable, strong ministries. And I'm talking about a Christian school, a counseling center, a crisis pregnancy center, feeding the homeless every week, an athletic field purchased with the movie money where we mentor and coach young kids, an outreach for the elderly. But whenever we're working on a movie, well guess what everyone wants to work on? And so all these great volunteers, who are amazing at our church—but they flock to the movie. It was exciting to work on a movie set! We had 1,700 volunteers help on *Courageous*, which is awesome, but some of our other ministries went into survival mode. So while we're so grateful for all the volunteers, we did not want to hurt all our other viable church ministries.[317]

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[316] Ibid.
[317] Ibid.

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Besides citing negative side effects for the church, Kendrick also framed the split from

Sherwood in terms of ministry. Kendrick expressed a passion to train new talent in Christian

filmmaking, which he didn't see happening through church volunteers:

> My brother and I have a passion for duplicating ourselves. Meaning that we wanted to invest and train the
> next generation of Christian filmmakers. And our volunteers and church, as wonderful as they are, weren't
> going to make Christian films. They were going to go back to their day jobs. They're waiting on me and
> my brother for two years to do the next film. When we realized that, we said, we need to be investing in
> people who want to make Christian films for a living. We need to invest in college students and young
> professionals that say I'm called to do this. We wanted to invest in them so that they will go out and do the
> same. And of course that's a form of discipleship as well.[318]

While both of these reasons—protecting the church and raising up new filmmakers—may be

completely truthful, they also have the novelty of being rooted in Christian service, and thus

protect the Christian credibility so carefully crafted by the Kendricks while operating through

Sherwood Pictures. This reinforcing of Christian branding also helps to insolate the Kendrick

brothers from outside accusations regarding a break with their founding church. Indeed,

Kendrick only offered one reason for the split that seemed completely practical and also

unrelated to ministry:

> We shot four movies in Albany, and we shot at the fire station, the hospital, the police department, and the
> restaurants around our church and the different neighborhoods and even in our church—and we were
> asking ourselves, okay, where can we shoot our fifth movie where we haven't shot before? And the list is
> very small. So we began saying, man, it would be great if we had some mountain ranges. Or some
> skyscrapers. Or just some vistas. And that's when we began looking around outside of Albany.[319]

Still, while founding their own company and leaving Albany offered the Kendrick brothers

greater opportunities for success, it also separated them from them from the ready supply of

volunteer labor to which had grown accustomed. Wherever the next production landed, a new

production model would be required.

In the end, this new model would become an intriguing mix of Hollywood methodology

and Sherwood thriftiness. Indeed, as the brothers settled on *The War Room* for their next project,

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[318] Ibid.
[319] Ibid.

the production decisions proved both traditional and inventive. For example, in choosing their

next shooting location, the brothers followed the tried-and-true Hollywood game plan of hunting

for tax rebates. In settling on Charlotte, North Carolina, the Kendrick brothers could essentially

shoot their film for $5-6 million (more than triple the budget of their last Sherwood film,

Courageous) but only spend $3 million—a savings of nearly half the budget.[320] In keeping with a

more expansive shooting location, the Kendrick's also sought a more polished and professional

look for their new film, and hired around 20 Hollywood professionals—nearly double the

professionals on previous crews. Yet, the church-based, low budget ethos of previous

productions still held true areas of production. The Kendricks put out the call for local church

volunteers from the Charlotte area, which ended up flooding his production office with headshots

and resumes. However, not completely satisfied with the professional output of previous

volunteer crews, the brothers also began experimenting in ingenious ways with gaining Christian

labor that was both free and also more skilled. As Alex Kendrick explained:

> You still want people who are competent. Not just Christian, but competent…. So we called some friends
> in North Carolina help us put the crew together, we went through all those submissions and started filling
> out the crew. And then we started calling Christian colleges—Liberty University, Truett McConnell
> College, Samford University, Ouachita Baptist University, University of Mobile, Alabama, a number of
> others—and we said, "If you have two to three solid students who want to make Christian films that you
> feel like are intelligent and skilled and respected, we would like to give them an opportunity to come work
> on our film crews." So we had our professionals, we had our film students, and then there were some
> peripheral positions that came from 85 churches that helped us during *War Room*. When I say 85 churches I
> mean someone from one of those churches helped us with transportation, bring meals, or supplies or being
> a catalyst for finding a location or a church to film in or a gymnasium or whatever. So when someone says,
> "Well, you staff volunteers." Well, yes and no. This time we used Christian film students from Christian
> universities and they were awesome. It was fantastic.[321]

While the volunteers from 85 churches created novel solutions for the filmmakers, the staffing of

Christian film students combines "Holywood" and Hollywood production models in even more

intriguing ways. By seeking Christian film students, Kendrick can continue to claim Christian

credibility as to the religious makeup of most of his crew, while tapping into filmmaking talents

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320 Ibid.
321 Ibid.

that exceed previous church volunteers. By tapping into the university system, Kendrick Brothers

Productions began exploiting the free internship model Hollywood has been exploiting for years,

offering class credit and on-site job experience in lieu of actual payment. Because of these

combined savings, Kendrick was able to mount on production on a scale he had never

experienced before, and his excitement in recalling the new production luxuries was obvious:

> So most of the $3 million dollar budget went toward paying the professionals, getting the best equipment we could, wonderful lighting, building sets, wardrobe, the makeup department, the lens package, the multiple cameras. On our first three movies we only had one camera. On *Courageous* we had two cameras. This one we had up to five, depending on the scene. So the budget went up, and so did our resources and the quality of the packages for cameras, lighting, everything. But yeah, we definitely took care of all our interns and volunteers. That was very important to us.[322]

As the Kendrick brothers move from success to success and strength to strength, it will be

fascinating to see how their production models change and expand and grow and remain the

same. Will the Kendrick brothers retain their volunteer method or continue moving farther and

farther into professionalization, even at the risk of their Christian brand credibility? Will the

brothers keep budgets at low, reasonable rates for profitability or will the budget continue to

crawl upwards? Or will the brothers even venture into large-scale budget for the risks of even

higher rewards? Will the Kendricks continue preaching to the converted choir or expand their

reach beyond Evangelical audiences and seek mainstream crossover success?

Regardless of the answers, the trajectory of the Kendrick brothers thus far—from

miniscule-scale independents to multi-million-dollar production company—has been revelatory

in proving the viability of Christian film markets. Indeed, their trajectory has reflected the entire

growth of the "Holywood" in the past ten years—moving from struggling, church-based

operations to a movement of national scale and financial power. As these first two chapters have

demonstrated, the Christian film industry has expanded and blossomed since the late 1990s in

truly unprecedented ways. The proliferation of digital technology has lowered the costs of

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[322] Ibid.

independent filmmaking for all interested parties, and certain Christian production companies have taken full advantage. Where once Christian audiences would have been far too amorphous and scattered to attempt concentrated marketing, now new media tools allow for highly effective micro targeting of specific demographics and for relatively low costs. Additionally, the exploitation of pre-existing church contacts in media companies like Outreach Inc. allowed for more effective targeting of megachurch congregations and church-to-church networking. Most crucially, Christian filmmakers realized the desire of church audiences to support films as spiritual causes, whether those causes are framed in terms of "culture war" and voting at the box office or, even more effectively, in terms of inner-church ministry and outer-church evangelism. The most consistently receptive target for this type of appeal—from *The Passion* to *Fireproof* to more recent films like *God's Not Dead*—has been Evangelicals. By its very nature, this denominational demographic desires to engage with popular culture in order to convert popular culture to Christianity, and thus to fulfill their Christian duty to the Great Commission. Tapping into these feelings of religious obligation has not always worked—David Nixon's *Letters to God* did poor box office business despite following the marketing playbook laid out by Sherwood Pictures—and yet, when the strategies do work, they produce overwhelming results.

And the Hollywood studios have noticed. And the Hollywood studios have attempted their own mimicry in recent years. Just as Hollywood had no idea of the box office potential of the general public until a historic string of blockbusters came along in the 1970s, so too has Hollywood been shocked by the box office potential of Christian demographics. And yet Hollywood is not a religiously oriented organization, and in fact often provokes the wrath of Evangelical audiences who view studios as main contributors to the wrong side of the "culture war" within America. Thus, Hollywood's various attempts to copy "Holywood" have met with

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various degrees of both success and failure. How secular media approaches a religious

demographic will be the focus of the next two chapters.

Chapter 4 – Hollywood Case Study:

Grace Hill Media & Warner Bros.' *Man of Steel*

As a counter part to Chapter 3—which offered a case study analysis of a "Holywood" production company, Sherwood Pictures, as well as the Christian marketing campaign for one of their most successful films, *Fireproof*—this chapter will treat similar subject matter from the Hollywood side of the equation. In this case, the analysis will center of the rise of middlemen marketing firms like Grace Hill Media, one of the most significant Christian marketing firms in Hollywood, as well as an in-depth examination of Grace Hill's campaign for the superhero tent poll film, *Man of Steel*.

As repeatedly demonstrated in the Chapter 2, Hollywood's relationship with Christianity since that late 1960s has been often tempestuous and full of missteps. Hollywood often wants to court Christian audiences and/or contain their heated backlash, but has demonstrated a frequent inability to achieve these goals, often rooted in a lack of understanding regarding Christian culture. In the wake of *The Passion of the Christ*, Hollywood's tentative nature and general ignorance towards Christian audiences proved detrimental to capitalizing on this newly identified and apparently viable demographic. As a result, a genuine need for outside consultation arose. Indeed, turning to hired guns is nothing new in Hollywood, especially with regards to niche marketing. Outside of mainstream advertising campaigns, which are usually handled by in-house studio marketing teams working out of in-house studio distribution companies, Hollywood often relies on niche marketing firms to help them speak to and engage with niche audiences. For example, Hollywood often consults with LGBTQ-focused firms like The Karpel Group and

Wolfe Releasing when handling films that can be specifically targeted within LGBTQ communities.

However, in the case of Christian audiences, a distinct problem emerged. By the time Christian audiences started proving their viability in the eyes of Hollywood, generally in the late 1990s/early 2000s, Hollywood had so seldom considered Christian marketing that no actual Christian-oriented, film-marketing firms even existed. And as this problem became noticed, several entrepreneurial Christians stepped into the gap and, over the next 15 years, created a legitimate marketing industry based on selling Hollywood films to Christian demographics. These firms essentially act as middlemen for the studios, offering the industry an extensive list of church networks and an insider knowledge of church culture. Indeed, Hollywood has only recently found certain templates that seem generally reliable for reaching church audiences in a consistent manner, and marketing firms like Grace Hill Media have helped to carve the trail. This chapter argues that Christian marketing firms have directly contributed to the rise of the Christian blockbuster era through their legitimizing of Christian demographics and furthered development of religious marketing techniques. Thus, a case study analysis of these firms is essential towards understanding the entirety of Hollywood's relationship to Christian film culture, as well as for understanding Hollywood's approach and preferences to Christian marketing. As with previous chapters, Chapter 4 will incorporate an interdisciplinary analysis that puts first-hand interviews from the leaders of Grace Hill Media into dialogue with industrial and economic scrutiny.

The second half of the chapter will analyze Hollywood's outreach to Christians in more depth through a case study of the church-based campaign for Warner Bros.' *Man of Steel*. Superman remains one of the sacred cows of the superhero genre, and Warner Bros. devised this

particular film incarnation as the launch of a massive franchise—modeled after the recent Marvel film franchise—that would lead to other films based on DC characters, like Batman, Wonder Woman, and eventually the Justice League. Given these grand aspirations, with billions of potential future dollars in the balance, *Man of Steel* became by far the most significant and powerful Hollywood property to incorporate a Christian marketing campaign. While religious marketing might seem an odd fit for such a mainstream, seemingly-secular film, the Superman mythology had already received some Christian reimagining in past movies, which eventually paved the path for Grace Hill's church marketing for *Man of Steel*. Thus, this last section will briefly discuss the roots of the Superman mythos, how these comic book origins were slanted towards Christian symbolism in the early film adaptations, and finally how Warner Bros. and Grace Hill built upon these changes even further to accommodate faith-based audiences in the Christian blockbuster era.

THE RISE OF GRACE HILL MEDIA

Grace Hill Media was the first, and is arguably still the most significant, marketing firm founded with the distinct mission to help Hollywood reach Christian audiences. As befits a marketing firm working with both Hollywood products and faith-based audiences, the company was founded by a Christian who also happened to be a Hollywood insider. Although Jonathan Bock had majored in religious studies in college, he originally came to Hollywood with hopes of being a comedy writer.[323] However, after spending several years working in the writer's room on several poorly received television comedies, such as ABC's *Hangin' with Mr. Cooper*, Bock took a job in Warner Bros. marketing department while he tried to figure out his next career step. That next step emerged suddenly for Bock when he realized that several films on Warner's

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[323] Rose Pacatte, "Marketing Mainstream Films to Christian Audiences," *SIGNIS* (April 3, 2006), accessed online, August 5, 2013 < http://www.signis.net/index.php?page=imprimer&id_article=464 >.

upcoming slate—specifically, *The Green Mile* (1999) and *My Dog Skip* (2000)—could have real

crossover appeal with Christian audiences. Although his superiors were enthusiastic about

exploring the idea, they quickly discovered a total absence of any Christian marketing firm that

could help them with film advertising. In an interview for this project, Bock described the

situation:

> The company doing that type of work just didn't exist. So I was telling my wife about it one night at dinner and I was saying how unequal it was—when you looked at the number of churches in the country, the number of Christian radio stations and outlets—that no one was marketing to them. It was just insane. And she said, "Well, why don't you do it."[324]

Bock proposed that Warner Bros. release him from his contract, allow him to start his own firm,

and then be hired back by Warner Bros. as private contractor. His bosses agreed. According to

Bock, since founding the company in 2000, "I've worked on 300 movies, every studio in town is

my client."[325] Some of the major Hollywood titles handled by Grace Hill Media include the

Harry Potter series (2001-2011), *The Lord of the Rings* series (2001-2003), *Elf* (2003), *Bruce*

Almighty (2003), *The Notebook* (2004), *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the*

Wardrobe (2005), *Walk the Line* (2005), *Cinderella Man* (2005), *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*

(2005), *The Nativity Story* (2006), *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), *The Blind Side*

(2009), *The Book of Eli* (2010), *The Chronicles of Narnia: Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (2010),

War Horse (2011),*The Conjuring* (2013), *Man of Steel* (2013), *Gravity* (2013), *Noah* (2014), and

Unbroken (2014).

On the surface, Grace Hill Media's marketing approaches are straightforward. Although

Bock insists that every project differs in terms of marketing approach, depending on the type of

film and the size of a studio's budget for Christian marketing, there are some generalities that

can be deduced. First, Grace Hill works exclusively for Hollywood studios and production

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[324] Interview with Jonathan Bock, 2011.
[325] Ibid.

companies, as opposed to "Holywood" productions. This means that Grace Hill rarely handles

films that contain overt Christian theology or exclusionary evangelistic content. Second, the

types of Hollywood films Grace Hill does handle must conform to certain marketable categories

for Christian audiences. Bock has argued that there are three main types of films:

> 1) The family-friendly fun film which are about families having a great time together; this is wholly biblical and appropriate even if there's no altar call in the middle or explicit religious teaching and it's about unicorns. *Elf, Curious George*, or *Kicking and Screaming* are good examples of this type of film.
> 2) Films that have morality issues in them that challenge people to lead better lives, like *The Emperor's Club* and *Walk the Line* about the U.S. singer Johnny Cash. At the core of this film was a guy who at his lowest moment finds God who makes him radically reevaluate his entire life....
> 3) Films that elevate the human spirit rounds out our selection criteria at Grace Hill Media. *The Rookie* is an example of this.[326]

These categories are valuable not just in terms of catering the right marketing method to the right

project, but also in terms of handling the expectations of the target Christian audience. As the

prevalence of faith-based marketing grew since the early 2000s, church audiences also grew

savvier to the marketing pitches. As Bock admits:

> When you've done 300 movies you can't sell every one of them as "This is going to be the next *Passion of the Christ*!" Some of the movies we market are just clean, harmless family fun, and there you go. Some of them are war movies. I mean we do everything from sweet, soft family G-rated films to hard R-rated.[327]

Third, while the field of film marketing is vast, Grace Hill Media specializes in certain distinct

areas. For instance, Grace Hill Media boasts of possessing "a database of over 250,000 pastors

and youth pastors," which they can use to email alerts, promotions, invitations to private

screenings, and other marketing information.[328] Additionally, Grace Hill breaks down their

marketing plan into three separate but often overlapping components. As Charles Nelson, former

Senior Vice President of Grace Hill Media, explained in an interview for this project:

> Let's say we did a 360-degree, whole, well-rounded campaign. There's an advertising component, there's a publicity and promotions component, there's a grassroots component. Like with social media, that would go in the advertising/publicity area. That straddles both areas. And most of the advertising areas are already

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[326] Pacatte, "Marketing Mainstream Films to Christian Audiences."
[327] Interview with Bock.
[328] Ibid.

covered under the general marketing campaign by the studio. So our concentration at Grace Hill is mainly online and radio.[329]

Amongst the methodologies Nelson lists, the online concentration is easily the most known and reported on element of Grace Hill's campaigns, specifically because of the use of sermon downloads.[330] Often, depending on the film property, Grace Hill will hire theologians and seminarians from local universities to write sermon notes based on the film. According to Nelson, Pepperdine University and Fuller Theological Seminary have been the most frequent sources: "Pepperdine does a great job. Their Dean of Media Studies knows exactly the points we're going for. He has a great grasp of film. We also use Fuller Theological Seminary quite a lot."[331] Once compiled, Grace Hill will then post the sermon notes on sermon databank websites like CCLI.com and WingClips, where pastors around the country will access for downloading. Often these sermon notes also include optional video packages, which are filled with clips from the film that pastors can use to illustrate the sermon on their video projector systems. Based on their findings, tens of thousands of pastors around the country are often looking for sermons notes every week, and specifically notes with stylish audio/video components:

> These sites cater to pastors with an average of 200-400 members, with sophisticated audio/visual equipment in the church. So a pastor has to come up with a sermon every week, and he's got this equipment he's paid for and wants to use—is he gonna pay the $12.99 a month for these sermon sites or just try to come with something fresh every week?[332]

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[329] Interview with Charles Nelson, 2011.

[330] For a few examples of reporting on Grace Hill Media's use of sermon downloads, see: Andrew Hampp, "How a Faith-Based Strategy Pushed 'Blind Side' to No. 1 at Box Office," *Advertising Age* (December 8, 2009), accessed online, August 5, 2013 < http://adage.com/print/140944>; and Eric Marrapodi, "Superman: Flying To A Church Near You," *CNN.com* (June 14, 2013), accessed online, August 5, 2013 <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/06/14/superman-coming-to-a-church-near-you/?hpt=hp_c2>; and Chris Lee, "Hollywood finds faith at box office; Recent hit films show courting Christian audiences without pandering can pay off," *Los Angeles Times* (April 13, 2014): A1.

[331] Interview with Nelson.

[332] Ibid.

Bock often boasts of Grace Hill's utilization of audio/visual materials in particular: "We pioneered taking clips from movies and partnering them with detailed sermon outlines, illustrations and resource materials that pastors could utilize at their choosing."[333]

The reasoning for this novel form of Christian marketing is relatively obvious. Much like the myriad of ministry tie-ins utilized by "Holywood" in the promotion of their overtly Christian films, the same idea can apply for Hollywood films. Creating sermon notes for these secular, mainstream films directly connects them to spiritual lessons and inner-church edification, with an implied blessing of support from a congregation's spiritual leader. The procedure elevates the film property from mere mainstream entertainment to spiritual cause deserving of Christian support. Grace Hill is more than aware of these benefits, as Nelson expressed:

> Sermon downloads are always a great option. They're easy to do. They're generally free or very cheap for a pastor. And with the sermons, we hit our core audience, with pastor endorsement. It's an advertisement for our film in church. And based on how long the sermons lasts, the pastors will be endorsing the film for an hour or even an hour and a half.[334]

Indeed, this form of church marketing would easily fall into both the advertising and grassroots components that Nelson described, being both an advertisement and ministry at the same time. And thus far, this methodology has been highly successful. Indeed, Grace Hill's sermon notes have been so successful in increasing internet traffic for CCLI.com and WingClips that the two sites now often partner with Grace Hill in the costs of producing the materials. Additionally, this partnership includes an obligation by the sites to promote the Hollywood movie sermons front and center for several weeks.[335]

A prime example of the effectiveness of this online advertising/grassroots campaign is the film *The Blind Side*. Grace Hill Media still touts their *Blind Side* marketing campaign as one of the most successful examples of sermon downloads ever executed, with over 20,000 pastors

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[333] Lee, "Hollywood finds faith at box office."
[334] Interview with Nelson.
[335] Ibid.

downloading the sermons (again, for churches with an average size of 200-400 congregants).[336]

Although *The Blind Side* contains no overt discussion of Christian teachings or theology, the film fit neatly into Bock's second category of films with characters that learn moral lessons by overcoming obstacles. The film is based on the true story of a white, well-to-do Christian family that adopted an underprivileged, African American teen and supported him to eventual athletic stardom in the NFL. Given this subject matter, the sermons based on film emphasized the need for religious charity and incorporated film clips to illustrate these points. One sermon titled "Turning the Car Around"—a reference to the moment in the film when the family stops their car and offers the teen help—opens with this "sermon starter": "Has God ever nudged your heart? Maybe you've driven past someone and felt a tug, a sudden surge of compassion. The Spirit may have prompted you to act." This sermon later connects the film to the Bible passage from Matthew 25:35-36: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in…."[337]

While these methods obviously take a bold step in connecting Hollywood product to inner-church ministry (a mirroring of "Holywood" marketing tactics), it must be noted that Grace Hill pulls back from taking the next step and marketing their films to outer-church evangelism. While Hollywood may capitulate to churches finding spiritual lessons in their films for personal edification, and indeed exploit this circumstance for profit, Hollywood studios do not want to be perceived as fully endorsing one religion over another. While there may be political or ideological reasoning behind this, there is also certainly financial reasoning, as Hollywood does

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[336] Hampp, "How a Faith-Based Strategy Pushed 'Blind Side' to No. 1 at Box Office;" and Tatiana Siegel, "Cross Marketing," *Variety* (June 21, 2012), accessed online, March 5, 2013 <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118055632>.

[337] "Turning the Car Around" sermon notes (2009), accessed online, March 3, 2013 <http://www.lingk2us.com/NewFiles/bs.notes1.pdf>. See also, Nicole La Porte, "Hollywood's Christian Blockbuster," *The Daily Beast* (January 6, 2010), accessed online, February 1, 2010 <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/01/06/hollywoods-latest-christian-blockbuster.html>.

not want to make a film that solely relies on the patronage Christian audiences. As Bock

explained:

> With *The Blind Side*, we might say, "Oh what a great Christian movie. They're going to church and they're helping this kid." Yeah, but there were plenty of people who just saw it as a true story or as a football movie. Studios don't mind making movies that have strains of Christianity in it, or faint elements in it, or a priest character. They don't mind doing that but they don't want to be pigeonholed into people saying, "Well, this is just a Christian movie." Because studios are only going to be hurt by that financially. There's only going to be a monetary ceiling on that. And I don't think they're necessarily wrong.[338]

Whether or not Grace Hill finds it challenging to market such non-religious material to churches,

the company has certainly learned to adapt and, indeed, even pride itself on their own ingenuity.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button offers a prime example of this. Unlike *The Blind*

Side, David Fincher's film did not have a Christian as the main character. Instead, the film

follows a modern fairy-tale of a man born old and then growing younger as he lives out his life.

He commits to no religion and indeed engages in behavior that contradicts scriptural teaching—

such as frequent drunkenness, promiscuous sexual behavior, and even visiting a brothel. Indeed,

Grace Hill knew the traditional method of adapting sermon notes might easily backfire for the

film, as Nelson admitted: "For a film like *Benjamin Button*, it has to be something subtle. The

film isn't overtly religious so the campaign can't be over-branded when it's going into a church.

It can't be an overt commercial because nobody is going to run that in their church."[339] Instead,

Grace Hill decided to utilize the online sermon databases and the seasonal timing of the film's

release to create an unconventional church promotion:

> We created a video called "Words from the Wise," like how Benjamin Button starts older and gets younger, so "Words from the Wise" because he's already lived it. We went down to Leisure World in San Diego, a retirement community, and we interviewed a whole bunch of people. And it was specifically tailored for churches to use before services started. The video opened with some statement or quote from the Brad Pitt character as an older guy. Transitioned into couples or individuals talking about what they would do differently, what advice would they give their kids, what do they wish they had done that they didn't get to do. It was very inspirational. Very fun. Throughout it, we intersperse three or four clips throughout the video. It was a preview in essence. Just kind of, "Words from the wise this Holiday season," because it came out around Christmas. And these churches often have big screens and they're playing something

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[338] Interview with Bock.
[339] Interview with Nelson.

before church starts, like pictures from the BBQ earlier that week. Well, this time it was "Words from the Wise." We got like 8,000 to 10,000 downloads from that. It was crazy.[340]

This entire marketing concept is masterful in the way it walks the line between church culture and promotional material. As Christians, Bock and Nelson's personal knowledge of church operations (i.e., that churches with big screens usually play content before the official service begins) allowed them to see alternative ways to place advertisements onscreen in churches without associating a non-religious film with religious ministry, such as a sermon. By recognizing a time and space in church that is separate from fully religious association but still a part of weekly fellowship—a moment in church that is in between the world outside and the proceedings inside—Grace Hill found an opening to promote a film that many congregants may want to personally see but would never overtly associate with their actual congregations. The very nature of the video suggests in-between space as well, being neither religious in content but still full of general life lessons and the affirmation of the elderly—things people in church may respond to positively, but still residing outside of church operations. While it may only be an advertising component, and not qualify as also a grassroots component, as sermons do, it is still an advertisement taking place in a grassroots space.

Between the two main concentrations Nelson listed—online and radio—the later definitely gets the least attention in the press. Besides the obviously controversial nature of Hollywood producing sermons for their films, sermon downloads also fit with the focus of new media advertising—a topical darling in both newsprint and scholarly publishing. And yet, according to Grace Hill, the analogue technology of radio still often accomplishes the most for a film. As Nelson puts it, "Radio is our real workhorse. It is still a force to be reckoned with."[341] Bock expounded even deeper, explaining that his company's long association with Christian and

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[340] Ibid.
[341] Ibid.

conservative radio stations, along with the big money support of Hollywood studios, grants them

preferential treatment within that industry:

> We have relationships with media outlets since 2000, and we're an ad firm as well and we've steered millions and millions of dollars towards Christian media outlets from Hollywood studios. For example, Salem Radio Network is a big Christian radio network around the country and I think we've pushed around, last count, $12.5 million to Salem just in the last 8 years or so. So they take my call![342]

Indeed, Bock openly acknowledges that Grace Hill uses this favored-nations status to pressure

the stations into better deals and extra perks for their Hollywood clients:

> Because we started as a PR firm, when we ask for radio buys, we ask for a lot of added value with what we do. So, when I do a radio buy I often attach into the contract things a radio station has to do. So whether it's an obligation to do an interview with the director or whether they have to do ticket giveaways to their own screening, but I always attach things to it.[343]

While the promotion of a radio station may not be as impacting on Christian listeners as the

endorsement of a pastor, the radio still reaches far greater numbers of listeners and, like a good

marketer, Bock attempts to maximize the dollars he spends for all he can squeeze from the deal.

Additionally, the political nature of conservative talk radio can often grant even more value to

marketing dollars if the film happens to align with a host's ideology. Bock explained that he

strives for this merging of interests whenever possible, as the results are incredibly beneficial:

> For example, I worked on a movie, which is this excellent movie if you haven't seen it called *Waiting for Superman*. It's about our horrendous public school system in this country. And the buy we made was very small. Normally when we do a Salem radio buy, we'll spend around $150,000 to $200,000. I think we spent $40,000 on this particular movie. But the movie just so aligned so beautifully with what conservative talk show hosts like to talk about, you know? Terrible unions! And public schools are awful! And government can't do anything right! Blah blah blah blah blah! And they loved saying, "The guy who directed Al Gore's movie [*An Inconvenient Truth*] is now directing this movie!" You know, the stars just all aligned so perfectly. Those radio hosts talked for hours. We got so much more added value out of that buy.[344]

In this case, Grace Hill consciously exploits the conservative politics of talk radio to maximize

their ad buys. Additionally, the strategy offers a tacit acknowledgment of the politics of Grace

Hill's core demographic—Evangelical Christians—and uses the politics as a method for reaching

the audience.

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[342] Interview with Bock.
[343] Ibid.
[344] Ibid.

Of course, like any marketing firm, Grace presses their advantage at every level, particularly their association with Hollywood's resources and cultural cache. Indeed, Bock sees this as a key benefit over their "Holywood" counterparts, who typically work with lower marketing budgets, even when being funded by the studio distribution companies. For example, in the area of Christian print media, Bock admits to using their association with Hollywood to gain favor with the press:

> As nice as some of these Christian filmmakers are—and they've spoken to a lot of Christian media outlets already and get hit up a lot—but I have the benefit of, just because of the types of movies I get to work on, to call and say, "Would you like to go to London and be at the premiere of Narnia?" You know, it's a little easier sell to press outlets than, "Would you like to talk to an actor that you've never heard of on a movie that you've never heard of?"

Bock is referring to commonly understood quid pro quo arrangements that often develop between entertainment press and film studios. Although criticized by many, studios often pay travel expenses for journalists to attend press junkets and premieres, and often in different parts of the globe.[345] While journalists are technically under no obligation to do favors for studios in return for the free trips, a clear conflict of interests can occur, particularly if studios stop inviting journalists who write one-too-many negative reviews or write-ups. Questions of morality aside, Bock is underlining the cultural and economic power of being associated with a major studio film, and how the ability to offer journalists major studio benefits does indeed help the promotional push of a film. Indeed, Bock even claims that studio associations can help Grace Hill promote smaller films as well:

> We work on smaller movies like that from time to time but it's nice to have the bigger films to help with the smaller ones. You tell someone in the press, "Hey, go talk to this no name guy in this small movie, and I'll take you to London for the Narnia movie."

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[345] For a critique of "freebies" for journalists, see: Roger Ebert, "Roger's Little Rule Book," *RogerEbert.com* (October 28, 2008), accessed online, December 11, 2015 <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/rogers-little-rule-book>. Although Ebert advocated a compassionate view of freelance journalists with little-to-no travel budgets, he believed that any journalist from a major publication should pay their own way.

Of course, these types of perks cannot be offered by smaller "Holywood" films, who have no

budget for large press junkets and premieres and no studio pipeline of big-name films to offer as

favors. Still, while working with Hollywood certainly offers Grace Hill many advantages, Bock

and Nelson readily admit that there are disadvantages as well—disadvantages that independent

"Holywood" marketers rarely have to deal with.

One main bone of contention with Grace Hill towards Hollywood is studio apprehension

towards, and often lack of comprehension of, faith-based film culture. Although the studios want

to harvest Christian dollars, and indeed hire marketing firms like Grace Hill to help achieve this,

the studios still repeatedly feel hesitant to be associated with religion. For example, Bock has

often found studios to be hesitant to allow Christian journalists to attend press screenings:

> When we first started working with studios, some of them would be freaked out to have to publicly
> acknowledge that they were doing anything religious with their marketing. We'd have long conversations,
> like, "What if we bring a religious journalist to a press screening?" And it was like they thought the people
> were going to come dressed in Catholic habits, and dragging a big cross.[346]

Although Bock admits that most film studios have gotten used to the accommodation—after

several hundred press junkets—he still encounters resistance depending on the studio or even the

film talent:

> So Fox is a funny beast, because they have a little faith division, and yet they have that kind of discomfort.
> And it's because they don't do a lot of big theatrical marketing campaigns to Christians. They do big
> explosion or cutesy animated animal type films, or stupid frat comedies…. And occasionally we'll have
> film talent who have never been involved in those types of movies that fit with religious press outlets, and
> they're like, "Well, what's their first question going to be? How much do I tithe?" They're just so
> uncomfortable with it.[347]

Beyond mere discomfort with religion, Grace Hill also reports a general lack of understanding of

Christian culture by many within the studios. Nelson confessed to frustrations over working

closely with studio marketing teams for months on end, only to experience elemental lapses in

judgment towards Christian sensibilities:

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[346] Interview with Bock.
[347] Ibid.

An example I always give is that Universal Studios gave us an ad to be run as an html blast-out to all of our database. It was for *Evan Almighty*, so that was 2007. And the quote they had was, "It's the best family film of the summer," taken from *Playboy* magazine. And we were like, really?! We've worked with these guys for like six months. We've told them the issues we have and where we can't use certain content that they can. And they still didn't get it? The Thursday before opening weekend, they're still sending us quotes from *Playboy*?[348]

Bock confirms this fundamental lack of understanding by film studios. Although Christianity remains the largest religious movement in the nation and a continued influence on culture and politics, many in Hollywood still do not understand the basic feelings of many Christians in American society. While this frustrates Bock in terms of gaining the full cooperation of the studios, he also expresses these sentiments as affirmation of continued job security:

Every time I think, "The studios are going to figure this out and not need us anymore," I'll have a meeting with a studio about a movie that they have and I'll tell them, "Look, I need you to take out all the "Jesus Christ's" and "goddamnit's" because a lot of people really don't like that." And they'll go, "Really?! People don't like that?" And I'm like, "No! They really don't." And then I walk away think, "Well, I'm good for another couple years."[349]

While there's no research data on Hollywood's perceptions of Christians and religion, or the reason much of Hollywood seems to lack an understanding faith-based audiences, Bock does have a few personal theories. For Bock, the simplest explanation for Hollywood's rather dim understanding is a lack of Christian representation within the Hollywood system:

While there are plenty of Christians working in media and Hollywood, we're not a huge number of people in the total industry. We don't have thousands of people in the studios and networks in every element of this community. We have maybe hundreds of people in the whole industry, you know? The bench isn't very strong and even at the higher echelons of the studios, there aren't a lot of people who are really comfortable with their faith and advanced in an understanding of theology and their own beliefs, and what works and what doesn't work. And I have to say, "Thank God for that," because then I'd have no job![350]

Bock's joy over job security aside, he does present compelling common sense argument that Christians, like any demographic in any arena of life, are understood when they are better represented. However, Bock also casts some blame on the stratified nature of media conglomerates, and how different parts of the same company generally do not communicate with

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[348] Interview with Nelson.
[349] Interview with Bock.
[350] Ibid.

each other. For example, the cable-based Fox News Channel has a keen understanding of

Christian audiences since they represent a core station demographic, and yet they never

communicate with Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, or vice verse, even though both are

owned by the same conglomerate, Fox Entertainment Group. Bock offered an illustrating story:

> I'll give you a perfect example. A good Narnia example. When *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* was about to come out, Sarah Palin of all people was on Sean Hannity's show. I think this was when Palin's book was coming out, and they had a conversation about books she liked and authors that she reads, and she mentioned C.S. Lewis. And Sean Hannity says he loves C.S. Lewis too. And so they have this big conversation about that. So I call up [Twentieth Century] Fox's film PR guys and say, "Hey, talk to the guys at Fox News, because Sean Hannity is a huge fan of Narnia. So let's set up a screening for him." And they called me back about an hour later and asked if we could do it for them, because they don't anybody at Fox News. Got it? So Fox theatrical does not know anyone at Fox News. They don't interact ever. So, we took care of it for them.[351]

Another challenge for Grace Hill, in terms of working within the Hollywood system, is

the obligation to market certain films that might offend their core Christian demographics. Grace

Hill's campaign for *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), a movie adaptation of the famously controversial

book, remains an obvious and highly successful example. In essence, the original novel by Dan

Brown is a mystery/conspiracy thriller that posits as fact that Jesus married Mary Magdalene,

that modern Christianity is an elaborate hoax created by Emperor Constantine and the Council of

Nicaea, and that the Catholic Church has murdered millions over the centuries to cover up this

truth. While the book was wildly popular around the globe, selling more than $80 million copies

worldwide and currently ranking in the top ten best-selling fiction novels of all time, the film

also met with heavy backlash from Christian readers and theologians around the globe. The years

following the book's release saw hundreds of books and articles published refuting each of

Brown's claims. While a film adaptation of a book so massively popular was a foregone

conclusion—indeed, Sony quickly paid north of $5 million to acquire the rights—Hollywood

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[351] Ibid.

rightly anticipated blow back from conservative Christians and Catholic organizations.[352] Indeed, shortly after beginning preproduction on the film, Sony became inundated with letters from concerned Christians, from old Hollywood foes like the Catholic League, and even from Opus Dei, the Catholic order painted as villains by Brown. Facing a public relations nightmare, Sony turned to Grace Hill Media.

From the beginning, Grace Hill's assignment on *Da Vinci Code* was one of Christian containment, as opposed to their usual role of Christian courtship. Grace Hill's first initiative was to seek advice from Christian organizations regarding changes that could be made to Brown's story that would quell Christian fury. According to Barbara Nicolosi, personal friend of Jonathan Bock and executive director of Act One, an organization that coaches Christian screenwriters attempting to make it in Hollywood, "The question I was asked was, 'Can you give them some things they can do to change it, to make it not offensive to the Christian audience?'" She and Amy Welborn, publisher of a *Da Vinci Code* refutation titled *De-Coding Da Vinci,* came up with three changes: "[a] more ambiguous approach to the central premise, the removal of Opus Dei and amending errors in the book's description of religious elements in art."[353] However, since these changes would have completely altered the central mystery at the heart of the best-selling novel, Sony ignored the requests and asked Grace Hill for other containment solutions. In the end, Grace Hill's proposal was both original and, in hindsight, highly effective. Three months before the film's release, Grace Hill launched the website titled "The Da Vinci Challenge" as a forum for Christian writers to post essays that dissected and refuted the claims of the source

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[352] Sharon Waxman, "Sprinkling Holy Water on 'The Da Vinci Code'," *The New York Times* (August 7, 2005), accessed online, February 5, 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/07/movies/sprinkling-holy-water-on-the-da-vinci-code.html?_r=0>.
[353] Ibid.

book.[354] The website openly encouraged pastors and Christians to participate in the discussion

forums and voice all concerns regarding the validity of the book and/or the film. In addition to

encouraging Christian discussion, the keystone of the website resided in 45 essays commissioned

from some of Dan Brown's harshest critics, including Richard J. Mouw, the president of Fuller

Theological Seminary and longtime associate of Bock; Gordon Robertson, the son of the

television evangelist Pat Robertson and co-host of the television show, *The 700 Club*; Darrell L.

Bock (no relation to Jonathan Bock), a professor of New Testament studies and author of the

refutation text *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*; and George Barna, founder of a polling and research

firm that focuses on evangelicals. Grace Hill also asked Opus Dei to contribute an essay, but the

organization refused.

Still, by most accounts, the website achieved all its aims for Sony. Catholics and

Evangelicals seemed to feel heard in the discussion, and the studio received praise for embracing

its dissenters and even paying for a public forum where knowledgeable critics and the general

public could bash the book and the film.[355] As Peter J. Boyer noted at the time in *The New*

Yorker, the campaign largely succeeded because, "If Christian leaders are speaking of 'dialogue'

and 'engagement,' they are not saying, 'Don't see this film.'"[356] While seeming conflicted about

helping Sony succeed, Bock painted his marketing campaign as less about supporting the film

than about supporting discussions of Christianity:

> I did not come to this decision easily. I hesitate to say I am marketing it because some people will
> immediately misinterpret this... Initially it was in an advisory capacity to Sony and the filmmakers in 2004.
> But the more I got into all of the issues surrounding the story, it became clear that there was a campaign
> that I could do that would be "threading the needle", so to speak, that could lead people to an authentic

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[354] The Da Vinci Challenge website (2006), accessed online, July 2, 2010 <thedavincichallenge.com>.
[355] Laurie Goodstein, "A Pulpit Online for Critics of 'The Da Vinci Code' Film," *The New York Times* (February 9, 2006), accessed online, July 2, 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/09/movies/09davi.html?_r=0>; and John Lippman, "WEEKEND JOURNAL; Hollywood Report: Da Vinci Damage Control; How Sony Hopes to Deflect Book's Religious Critics; Calling In the Scholars," *The Wall Street Journal* (March 7, 2006): W.4; and Peter J. Boyer, "Annals of Religion: Hollywood Heresy," *The New Yorker* (May 22, 2006), 34-39.
[356] Boyer, "Annals of Religion: Hollywood Heresy."

conversation about Jesus…. It is very easy to say that *The DaVinci Code* is blasphemous, that it is terrible. And for a lot of Christians this is absolutely true. But is saying that the best use of that moment by Christians when people will ask us, "What did you think of the film (or the book)"? That moment will be an opportunity.[357]

And yet, of course, not all critics were satisfied. Some commentators noted that most of the commissioned essays were politely corrective of Brown rather than damning, and that even the essays most stridently critical of the book still seemed obligated to encourage Christians to see the film, if only for the purposes of discussion.[358] Indeed, Barbara Nicolosi remained absolutely critical of the both the film and any Christian campaign that supported the film, and Grace Hill's efforts on behalf of Sony personally strained her friendship with Bock. On her website she expressed the general attitude of disgust amongst Christians who didn't view the film as a "moment of conversation" about Christianity:

> Christians being coaxed into writing antiDVC [*Da Vinci Code*] pieces on a stupid web site . . . are meekly accepting that they are being given 'a seat at the table' in some grand cultural discussion. Duped! There is no seat, folks. There is no discussion. What there is, is a few P.R. folks in Hollywood taking mondo big bucks from Sony Pictures, to deliver legions of wellmeaning (sic) Christians into subsidizing a movie that makes their own Savior out to be a sham.[359]

Regardless of motive or reasoning, Grace Hill's campaign for *Da Vinci Code*, one of the most controversial films to be produced by a studio, did much to solidify the marketing firm's status within Hollywood. When compared to Hollywood's disastrous handling of so many religiously controversial films, as discussed earlier in chapter 2, Grace Hill's efforts seemed all the more miraculous. That the campaign came from such a tiny operation, in comparison to studio marketing teams, was not ignored by trade publications. As *Variety* noted, "The fact that studios are dealing with groups like Grace Hill Media represents a sea change of sorts…. Grace Hill is really just two guys, Jonathan Bock and Ted Gartner, who have a large database and some fabulous networking skills, yet are still the reigning market leaders for reaching this

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[357] Pacatte, "Marketing Mainstream Films to Christian Audiences."
[358] Goodstein, "A Pulpit Online for Critics of 'The Da Vinci Code' Film'."
[359] Boyer, "Annals of Religion: Hollywood Heresy."

audience."[360] When interviewed for this project in 2011, Grace Hill had grown to seven members

and counting, and though still small by studio standards, their influence over

Hollywood/Christian relations only continues to expand—as evidence by the case study below.

SON OF KRYPTON/SON OF GOD: MARKETING *MAN OF STEEL*

When Warner Bros. decided to reboot their hallowed Superman franchise with *Man of Steel*, the

studio created two distinct websites to market the blockbuster hopeful. The first offered a

traditional Hollywood movie website with customary promotional content: a film synopsis, cast

and crew biographies, trailers and featurettes, banner wallpaper downloads, soundtrack

downloads, and links to various merchandise.[361] Taken together this web content represents a

model of conventional online marketing. And yet, the second website for *Man of Steel*

abandoned such practices and instead embraced a much more unorthodox sales approach.

Commissioned through Grace Hill Media, the website was titled "Man of Steel Resources" and it

specifically targeted pastors and Christian audiences in an effort to connect the Superman

mythology to Christianity.[362] The website, along with Grace Hill's entire marketing campaign for

the film, marked a significant moment for Christian marketing in Hollywood. A swift 15 years

after Hollywood first dipped its toe into the shallow waters of faith-based courtship with *Prince

of Egypt*, a major studio had now head dived into deep waters with a large-scale Christian

campaign for that most sacred of industry properties: a superhero franchise. Given this

significant moment in Hollywood/Christian relations, *Man of Steel* provides an ideal case study

for Grace Hill's marketing abilities. As such, this section will discuss the film's context for

requiring Christian niche marketing, provide a brief background on the Christian symbolism in

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[360] Steven Kotler, "Breaking 'The Da Vinci Code'," *Variety* (June 2005), 66.
[361] "Man of Steel Warner Bros. Website," (2013), accessed online, August 1, 2013
<http://manofsteel.warnerbros.com/index.html>.
[362] "Man of Steel Resources," (2013), accessed online, August 1, 2013 <http://manofsteelresources.com>.

Man of Steel and its development in earlier Superman films, and offer an analysis of Grace Hill's marketing campaign as well as the textual appeals to Christianity within the actual film.

Indeed, the importance of the superhero franchise for modern studios played a large part in why Warner Bros. spread their marketing nets wide enough to reach church demographics. In particular, *Man of Steel* proved a much more crucial film launch for the studio than even typical tent pole movies. In 2008, just as Warner Bros. was scoring a studio high with the second film in Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy, *The Dark Knight*—a critically adored film that earned over $1 billion worldwide—the newly formed Marvel Studios was launching their own superhero franchises with *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk*. Although Batman would win the day handily, earning more than the two Marvel films combined, these fortunes would change within a matter of years. By 2012, when Warner Bros. finally released Nolan's final Batman film, *The Dark Knight Rises*, Marvel had already released two additional film successes based on comic book properties—*Thor* (2011) and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011)—and they were now taking the unprecedented step of combining all four of their superhero franchises into one film, *The Avengers* (2012). While *Rises* earned Warner Bros. another $1 billion, the film definitively ended the current iteration of Batman films. In contrast, *Avengers* took $1.5 billion and bestowed on Marvel a total of five active film franchises that each allow for unlimited options of future sequels, spinoffs, and merchandise exploitation. Indeed, Warner Bros. had foreseen these problems looming since 2010. With the glory days of their powerful *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* franchises now behind them, and no new franchises in development, the studio had to moved quickly to develop their slate of future tent poles movies. And once again, a comic book property offered the solution.

The game plan devised by Warner Bros. seemed almost directly stolen from the Marvel

playbook. Just as Marvel had created multiple film franchises out of the Avengers comics,

Warners would activate DC's the Justice League—a similar team of superheroes that represented

the highlights of the DC roster: Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Aquaman, the Flash, and

other rotating characters like the Green Lantern and the Green Arrow. Just as Marvel had started

with individual character films and then built to *The Avengers*, Warners would need a central

superhero from the League to act as the cornerstone for the entire enterprise. Since a different

Batman series was just finishing and would need a pause of several years before it could be

rebooted, Superman became the logical choice. Additionally, Warner Bros. faced a ticking clock

with the Superman property. Their last outing with the Son of Krypton had been Bryan Singer's

attempted reboot in 2006, *Superman Returns*, which barely made back its production and

marketing budget and subsequently had stalled future developments. The rights option on the

Superman property would revert back to DC in a few years if Warner Bros. failed to launch a

new film. Thus, the fate of Superman at Warner Bros. and their intended future fortunes via

multiple superhero franchises rested heavily on this next Superman film, now titled *Man of

Steel*.[363] As a result, reaching out to both mainstream audiences and any possible niche audience

made serious financial sense.

All of which still begs the question: why would a Superman film have niche, and

specifically faith-based, marketability? Thus, before discussing the Christian appeals made by

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[363] For more information on Warner Bros.' decision to reboot Superman with *Man of Steel* and plans for *The Justice League* franchise, see: "Superman reboot finds its fanboy," *Daily Variety* (October 5, 2010), 1; and Ben Fritz and Geoff Boucher, "COMPANY TOWN; DC Comics is in need of hero; Warner Bros. unit tries to end a sales slump as superheroes surge on big screen," *Los Angeles Times* (August 23, 2011), B1; and Marc Graser and Dave McNary, "WB heroes on horizon; Studio jump-starts 'Justice' as it refuels DC franchise pipeline," *Daily Variety* (June 8, 2012), 1; and Geoff Boucher, "COMIC-CON; Can Superman still save the day?; With the first glimpse of 'Man of Steel,' some wonder whether a good superhero still has appeal," *Los Angeles Times* (July 13, 2012), D1; and Ben Fritz, "'Man of Steel' Comes Out Swinging, Helping DC Comics Take on Marvel," *Wall Street Journal* (June 17, 2013), B1.

Warner Bros. for *Man of Steel*—both textually and through the marketing—it is first necessary to establish where the Christian connections to the onscreen Superman universe originated. Indeed, when Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman for Action Comics #1 in 1938, they claim that Christianity played no part in influencing the character's origins or makeup—nor any other religion, including their own Jewish upbringing. Siegel and Shuster often played coy about what influences went into the creation of Superman—and often for practical reasons since Action Comics received several plagiarism lawsuits once Superman became a cultural phenomenon—with Siegel only admitting to being influenced by Edgar Rice Burroughs's *John Carter of Mars* stories.[364] However, whether consciously or not, writers and commentators eventually began reading Superman as containing religious symbolism, especially when comics began to be more critically evaluated after the late 1960s. Interestingly, Judaism, and not Christianity, has played the largest part in published religious evaluations of the Superman comics. This makes sense given that Siegel and Shuster were both the children of Jewish European immigrants, and that many details of Superman's origins in the comics do indeed seem to parallel the story of Moses, as many writers have now noted. Just as the baby Moses was placed in basket and sent up river to be saved from death, only to be raised by adopted parents and eventually become the savior of the Jews, so too was the baby Kal-El (which translates to "vessel of God" in Hebrew) placed in a space ship and sent to Earth to be saved from death, only to be raised by adopted parents and eventually become Superman, a super-powered savior for all mankind.[365] While Superman does

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[364] Tom Andrae, Geoffrey Blum, and Gary Coddington, "The Birth of Superman," from *Nemo, the Classic Comics Library*, Ed. Richard Marschall, Vol. 2 (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, Inc., 1983), 7.

[365] For a sample of works analyzing Superman's connections to Judaism, see: Arie Kaplan, "Kings of Comics Part 1: How the Jews Created the Comic Book Industry: The Golden Age (1933-1955)," *Reform Judaism* 32.1 (Fall 2003), 9-8; and Gerald Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 63-86; and Arie Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 9-20; and Harry Brod, *Superman Is Jewish? How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 1-20; and Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (New York: Random House, 2012), 3-34.

have the kind of mythos that might fit Christian narratives as well—i.e., a child sent from the sky to save the Earth—the textual appeals of the original comics and the contextual backgrounds of their creators fall more in line with Jewish influences.

In the end, the strong Christian appeal of *Man of Steel* would actually have less to do with Superman from comic books than with Superman on film. Indeed, Richard Donner's *Superman: The Movie* (1978), with Christopher Reeves as the title character, represented not only the first large-scale movie production of Superman since the character's creation 50 years prior, but also the first major shift of the property towards overt Christian symbolism.[366] Much of this originated from screenwriter Tom Mankiewicz, who contributed major revisions to Mario Puzo's original drafts of the *Superman* screenplay. Mankiewicz divided the film story into three acts that represented his interpretation of the three key aspects of Superman's mythos: Krypton as heavenly origin, Kansas as Andrew Wyeth-style Americana, and Metropolis as vibrant comic strip.[367] Thus, in interviews and commentary tracks, Mankiewicz is completely open about seeing an analogy between Superman and Jesus Christ, and overtly reconstructing the screenplay to draw out the comparisons. For example, the beginning of the film takes place on Krypton just prior the planet's destruction, and Mankiewicz decided to redraft Krypton as a type of heavenly realm in order to emphasize Superman coming from divinity. As he says in DVD making-of documentary:

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[366] The first film of Superman was actually *Superman and the Mole People* (1951), starring George Reeves (no relation to Christopher Reeves). The film is often forgotten about because it was produced as a low budget trial run for the syndicated television series *Adventures of Superman*, and indeed would eventually become the two-part pilot for the series, titled "The Unknown People." See: Leonard Maltin, "Leonard Maltin's Movie Review: Superman and the Mole People," (2007), accessed online, August 3, 2013 <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/91977/Superman-and-the-Mole-Men>; and Noel Murray, "Barely a superhero show, *Adventures of Superman* was a surprise success," *A.V. Club* (June 10, 2013), accessed online <http://www.avclub.com/article/barely-a-superhero-show-iadventures-of-superman-iw-98758>.
[367] Although Mankiewicz only receives a "Creative Consultant" credit on the finished film, director Richard Donner openly states in the film's DVD commentary that Mankiewicz should have received co-writing credit for the major revisions he did to the drafts of the screenplay by the credited screenwriters. See: "Audio Commentary with Director Richard Donner and Creative Consultant Tom Mankiewicz," in *Superman: The Movie*, dir. Richard Donner, DVD (Warner Home Video, 2006).

On Krypton, I was intending it to be almost semi-Biblical. [As a result] the people spoke in very stilted, elegant English. So the metaphor was clearly there. When Jor-El sends Superman to Earth—God sending Christ to save humanity.[368]

Additionally, Mankiewicz added two speeches by Jor-El (famously played by Marlon Brando) to highlight the Christ parallels. In the first, Jor-El bids goodbye to his son Kal-El with the words:

All that I have, all that I've learned, everything I feel, all this and more I bequeath you, my son. You will carry me inside you all the days of your life. You will make my strength your own, and see my life through your own eyes, as your life will be seen through mine. The son becomes the father, and the father, the son.[369]

As Mankiewicz confirms in the film's DVD commentary track, this speech attempts to create a symbolic representation of the paradoxical unity between God and Jesus Christ—as Christian theology subscribes both entities to exist as separate beings and yet the same being.[370]

Furthermore, in the second speech, a hologram of Jor-El instructs his grown son in the Fortress of Solitude:

Live as one of them [humans], Kal-El, to discover where your strength and your power are needed. But always hold in your heart the pride of your special heritage. They can be a great people, Kal-El, if they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you, my only son.[371]

In the commentary track, Mankiewicz labels this speech as one of the most "obvious allusions to God sending Christ to Earth," and indeed the symbolism is readily apparent.[372] The speech highlights Superman's dual nature as resident of Earth, yet holding a special heritage not of Earth—just as Christ was labeled both human and divine in the Gospels. Even more blatant is the use of the phrases "They only lack the light to show them the way" and "I have sent them you, my only son." Both expressions mimic commonly understood descriptions of Jesus in scripture, such as Jesus' self-proclamation in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world…" as well as one of

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[368] "Taking Flight: The Development of Superman," in *Superman: The Movie*, dir. Richard Donner, DVD (Warner Home Video, 2006).
[369] *Superman: The Movie*, dir. Richard Donner, DVD (Warner Home Video, 2006).
[370] "Audio Commentary with Director Richard Donner and Creative Consultant Tom Mankiewicz."
[371] *Superman: The Movie*.
[372] "Audio Commentary with Director Richard Donner and Creative Consultant Tom Mankiewicz."

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the most famous scriptures of the New Testament, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that

he sent his one and only son…." Through all of these collective additions by Mankiewicz, the

screenwriter effectively erases the vague mythological symbolism, mostly tied to Judaism, that

Superman always possessed and replaces it with overt ties to Christian theology. [373] Indeed, his

rewrites of the screenplay actually become a rewrite of the Superman origins. And yet, unlike

future Superman films, this embrace of Christian symbolism seems to have been, by all accounts,

driven purely by artistic motivation on Mankiewicz's part, as opposed to commercial

considerations. *Superman* released well before Hollywood began experimenting with courting

Christian demographics, and indeed the studio did not mount a Christian marketing campaign.

Future iterations would not be able to claim such purity.

Although Christian symbolism mostly receded from the subsequent three Christopher

Reeves *Superman* sequels, it would return even stronger in the text of director Bryan Singer's

Superman Returns (2006), and this time be combined with Christian marketing. As a huge

admirer of Donner's *Superman*, Singer intended his film to be both a reboot (new main cast, new

visual look, new sets, etc) and a semi-sequel (Brando's Jor-El returns through the use of old and

unused footage, events from the previous films are referenced, Christian symbolism returns). In

interviews, Singer affirmed that Donner's *Superman* connected to Christianity much more

openly than the comic books, and that Singer's own embrace of Christian symbolism was a

conscious reflection of the impact Donner's film had on him as a child:

> I also think in a way there is something that started to evolve in the early evolution of the comic but became
> extremely crystallized in Richard Donner's interpretation in 1978. And that was the notion brought forth by
> something Marlon Brando as Jor-El the father said. Which is quite simply, when referring to the people of

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[373] Richard Donner actually complains to Tom Mankiewicz on the commentary track that the collective Christ
parallels were so obvious that he received numerous death threats from religious fanatics who were offended.
Indeed, the religious imagery was also noted at the time in several articles on the film. For examples, see: Jean
Marie Lederman, "Superman, Oedipus and the Myth of the Birth of the Hero," *Journal of Popular Film and
Television* 7.3 (January 1, 1979): 235; and Sarah Kozloff, "Superman as Savior: Christian Allegory in the Superman
Films," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 9.2 (Summer 1981), 78.

Earth, he said, "… It is for this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you…my only son."… It's still Superman. It's supposed to be fun for the whole family. But ever since I heard Marlon Brando utter those words, the character, meant in a celebratory way, had an additional messianic quality to him that he did not have necessarily when I was watching the 1950s television series.[374]

Although Singer expressed his non-Christian roots as a "Jewish kid" growing up in a Catholic neighborhood, he claimed that his lack of strict religious upbringing made the Judeo-Christian influences around him, including Donner's *Superman*, "very potent to me." Indeed, Singer's description of Superman as "the Jesus Christ of superheroes … sort of the American dream combined with a little bit of the myth, the concept of Messiah" perfectly aligned with Donner's vision of Superman's makeup.[375]

As a result of this personal influence, Singer openly recycled certain Christian elements from Donner's film, and then expanded the symbolism even further. The most obvious Christian element Singer pulled from *Superman* was Mankiewicz's use of "Jor-El as God/Superman as Christ" connection, even reusing Brando's delivery of the line: "They can be a great people, Kal-El, if they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you, my only son." In addition, Singer doubled down on textual symbolism, admitting that he filled *Superman Returns* with even more overt Christian imagery than Donner's film: the film begins with Superman crashing to Earth and being held in the arms of his mother in pose resembling the Pieta (Jesus cradled in the arms of Mary); after being weakened by Kryptonite, Superman suffers a scourging by Lex Luthor and his henchmen, which Singer says resembles Jesus' "scourging at the pillar"; Lex Luthor stabs Superman in his left side with a Kryptonite knife, symbolizing to Singer the "spear of destiny" that pierced the side of Christ; after mustering his last strength to save humanity, Superman falls to the Earth in a

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[374] Stephen Skelton, "The Spiritual Side of Superman Returns," *SuperHeroHype* (December 4, 2006), accessed online, August 4, 2013 <http://www.superherohype.com/features/92345-the-spiritual-side-of-superman-returns>.
[375] Stephen Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World's Greatest Superhero* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2006), 151.

blatantly "on the nose" crucifixion pose; Superman appears to have died for several days, only to experience a "resurrection."[376] Even without Singer's open acknowledgment (the interview on spirituality came out months later), the symbolism was not subtle, and most critics seemed to have fun poking at the heavy-handed references—*Time* critic Richard Corliss titled his review "The Gospel of Superman," *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis titled her review "Superman Is Back to Save Mankind From Its Sins," and television critic Richard Roeper claimed the whole film should just be re-titled "The Passion of the Clark."[377]

Yet, even though the film's persistent Christian subtext could be read as commercially calculated, the choice appears to have been artistically motivated on Singer's part, at least originally, just as with Mankiewicz. Indeed, Warner Bros. did not engage in any pre-release Christian marketing for *Superman Returns*, or even hire Grace Hill Media initially—a fact that was noted and praised by one critic *Christianity Today*, who claimed to be fed up with the glut of non-Christian films being marketed to Christians.[378] But when the film opened below expectations at the box office and then dropped by a massive 63% in the second week, Warner

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[376] Ibid.

[377] Richard Corliss, "Movies: The Gospel of Superman," *Time* (June 18, 2006), accessed online, October 5, 2013 <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1205367,00.html>; and Manohla Dargis, "Superman Is Back to Save Mankind From Its Sins," *The New York* Times (June 27, 2006), E1; and Ebert *& Roeper*, Season 7, Episode 5 (July 1, 2006).

[378] "The Second Coming of Superman: Finally, a 'Christian' movie not marketed to churches," *Christianity Today* (June 19, 2006), accessed online August 9, 2013 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2006/june-online-only/second-coming-of-superman-finally-christian-movie-not.html?paging=off>. While the intention is to rebuke Hollywood for its Christian marketing tactics, the actual text of the editorial is illuminating in revealing the tactics to those outside the church. The piece ends with this series of enlightening "thank you's": "And for this I say to Warner Brothers, Brian Singer (sic), and everyone responsible for creating and distributing the movie, THANK YOU! Thank you for not using the church as a money-making vehicle. Thank you for not hijacking my church's mission to make disciples by using it to make consumers. Thank you for not replacing Christian art, symbols, and icons with movie posters and advertisements. Thank you for not trying to interfere with the ministry of preaching God's Word by offering pastors rewards for mentioning your film in a sermon. Thank you for not filling our children's ministry with Superman plush toys and kryptonite bracelets. Thank you for not telling me "Superman Returns" is the greatest outreach opportunity in the galaxy. Thank you for not asking me to rent an entire theater so our members can invite non-Christians to see the film. Thank you for respecting the integrity of my faith. And thank you for letting me enjoy "Superman Returns" simply for what it is - a good night at the movies."

Bros. performed an abrupt about-face and reached out to the one niche audience that the film

seemed obviously tailored for, and the marketing firm that represented them.[379]

As a last minute hire, Grace Hill's marketing approach for *Superman Returns* was

somewhat limited, yet surgically precise. Grace Hill approached author Stephen Skelton, who

was (not coincidentally) promoting a new book on Christian spirituality in relation to Superman,

titled *The Gospel According to the World's Greatest Superhero*. Grace Hill offered Skelton an

exclusive interview with Bryan Singer on the topic of Christian symbolism in *Superman Returns*,

and in return required that the article be made available for prominent Christian news outlets,

like *Dove*, *CrossWalk.com* and *HollywoodJesus.com*.[380] Additionally, instead of farming out the

job of writing sermons to the usual set of universities, Grace Hill saved on time by asking

Skelton to devise sermon outlines for the film. Skelton readily agreed and quickly delivered

notes that could help pastors "prepare an outreach message on *Superman Returns*."[381] In

actuality, the sermon notes were much less an "outreach" ministry for pastors and much more the

typical inner-church sermon of personal edification. Skelton simply covered the key Christian

symbols addressed in his interview with Singer—Superman's version of the Passion Play,

sacrifice for humanity, death, and resurrection. For example, Skelton's sermon notes on the most

obvious imagery easily conveyed a spiritual connection:

> When Superman arrives to stop him, [Lex] Luthor stabs Superman in the right side with a kryptonite
> dagger—which recalls the spear that pierced the right side of Christ. Thereafter, our superhero undergoes a

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[379] Numbers taken from BoxOfficeMojo.com

[380] For examples, see: Annabelle Robertson, "The Second Coming of Superman," *CrossWalk.com* (June 26, 2006), accessed online August 8, 2013 <http://www.crosswalk.com/culture/features/the-second-coming-of-superman-1404583.html>; and Stephen Skelton, "Exclusive Interview with "Superman Returns" Director Bryan Singer," *Dove* (November 29, 2006), accessed online, October 7, 2013 <http://www.dove.org/exclusive-interview-with-superman-returns-director-bryan-singer>.

[381] Finio Rohrer, "Is the new Superman meant to be Jesus?" *BBC News* (July 28, 2006), accessed online, September 21, 2013 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/5223302.stm>; and Bruce Scivally, *Superman on Film, Television, Radio, and Broadway* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 187-189.

brief re-enactment of the march of the Passion. Superman tries to crawl away from his persecutors while struggling under the weight of kryptonite poisoning.[382]

However, at other points in the notes, Skelton seems to be grasping to connect images to something of religious significance, such as Superman's difficult romantic relationship with Lois Lane and the film's inclusion of Lois's son, which is suggested to be Superman's:

> When Superman comes back, he finds a world much worse off than when he left. Most upsetting, Lois Lane has moved on. She has a fiancé and a son named Jason (which is a variation of the name Jesus). There is some imagery here of the Virgin Birth. (Suffice it to say that the movie provides no other explanatory conversation or flashback.)[383]

Momentary quibbles aside, Skelton concludes with the glowing endorsement: "In terms of Gospel imagery, Superman Returns is more than we could have hoped for. Plus, the film has action, eye-popping special effects (some used for Christic effect), and even a little romance."[384] Grace Hill made the sermon notes readily available on sermon databases like Pastor.com. While it is unknown whether these last minute efforts made an impact on the film's box office, *Superman Returns* continued a steady decline and barely made back its production and marketing budget worldwide. Warner Bros. canceled the planned sequel, bided its time, and waited to reboot the franchise at a later date. And when that time arrived in 2013 with *Man of Steel*, the studio would remember Grace Hill's efforts and engage with Christian marketing in a much more proactive manner.

In all aspects, from textual symbolism to church marketing, Warner Bros.' courtship of Christian audiences with Man of Steel appeared much more commercially deliberate and highly planned. While no involved with the film has revealed how much Grace Hill consulted on the film's construction, Warner Bros. did hire the marketing firm during the pre-production process and the film text itself is a litany of Christian appeals and scriptural references. In terms of

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[382] Tim Challies, "Claiming Superman," *Challies.com* (June 29, 2006), accessed online, December 1, 2013 <http://www.challies.com/articles/claiming-superman>.
[383] Ibid.
[384] Ibid.

Christian allegory, *Man of Steel* matched *Superman Returns* in most areas without copying the exact same beats. Following the lead of both Donner and Singer's Superman films, the film uses the character of Jor-El to once again symbolize and communicate Superman's symbolic representation of Jesus. As before, this new Jor-El (played by Russell Crowe) offers multiple speeches laced with figurative spiritual significance, such as telling Superman:

> You will give the people an ideal to strive towards. They will race behind you, they will stumble, they will fall. But in time, they will join you in the sun, Kal. In time, you will help them accomplish wonders.[385]

At another point in the film, as Superman watches Lois Lane in peril from above the Earth, Jor-El intones with heavy significance, "You can save her, Kal. You can save *all of them*."[386] While slightly less on the nose as the scripture-based speeches of Brando's Jor-El, these new Jor-El speeches still place upon Superman the significance of savior for all humanity, just like Christ—the shining ideal that the human race must strive to meet with worshipful adoration. Likewise, *Man of Steel* copies the crucifixion pose from Singer's film, but this time implementing it twice: once when laying unconscious underwater (the water imagery tying Superman to the Sacrament of Baptism) and again after Superman heeds his father's call to "save them all" and begins his decent from space down to Earth. Indeed, this second crucifixion pose was even used in one of the posters for the film.

However, outside of merely copying these textual symbols from the previous films, *Man of Steel* actually goes much further by mirroring Superman's story with that of Jesus. Indeed, on the surface, *Man of Steel*'s narrative appeared novel in offering more of Superman's backstory as a young man, and yet these added elements actually cause Superman's story to coincide with the Christ tale more explicitly than previous films. In his review of the film, *Time* critic Richard

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[385] *Man of Steel*, dir. Zack Snyder (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2013).
[386] Ibid.

Corliss offered a blow-by-blow description of the calculated Christian construction of the entire

film narrative:

> *Man of Steel* takes its cue from Bryan Singer's 2006 *Superman Returns*, which posited our hero as the Christian God come to Earth to save humankind: Jesus Christ Superman. [Screenwriter David] Goyer goes further, giving the character a backstory reminiscent of the Gospels: the all-seeing father from afar (plus a mother); the Earth parents; an important portent at age 12 (Jesus talks with the temple elders; Kal-El saves children in a bus crash); the ascetic wandering in his early maturity (40 days in the desert for Jesus; a dozen years in odd jobs for Kal-El); his public life, in which he performs a series of miracles; and then, at age 33, the ultimate test of his divinity and humanity. "The fate of your planet rests in your hands," says the holy-ghostly Jor-El to his only begotten son, who goes off to face down Zod the anti-God in a Calvary stampede.[387]

Beyond mimicking of the Christ story, the film also adds individual story elements that

stand out as somewhat jarring appeals to Christian audiences. The most glaring occurs when

Superman actually goes to church to seek a pastor's advice about whether or not he should

surrender himself to Zod and essentially sacrifice himself for humanity. As the superhero sits in a

pew talking with the pastor, a stained glass window of Jesus praying to God in the Garden of

Gethsemane is clearly framed directly behind him. The significance of the symbolism is

completely clear to any Bible-literate individual: just as Jesus knelt in the Garden and asked God

to "take the cup" of suffering from his hands so he would not have to die on the cross, only to

rise up and boldly accept his fate, so too does Superman live out his moment of doubt while still

rising to the challenges ahead. Indeed, the pastor solemnly, if generically, advises this soul-

searching Kal-El to "take a leap of faith."[388] According to *Man of Steel*, not only does Superman

represent Christ symbolically, but now the character is also Christian in actuality. Indeed,

screenwriter David Goyer admitted to consciously adding these elements, although he seemed

distinctly less passionate about it than Singer had been:

> … [I]t was very deliberate: I wrote it in the script that he was 33 years old, he surrenders himself to humanity and humanity turns him over to the bad guys. We just thought that for decades people have made those parallels and though I myself am Jewish, we just thought, 'Why ignore it? Why not lean into it?' We

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[387] Richard Corliss, "*Man of Steel*: Super Man … Or Human God?" *Time* (June 12, 2013), accessed online, August 18, 2013 <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/06/12/man-of-steel-super-man-or-human-god/#ixzz2WLUBTs87>.
[388] *Man of Steel*.

are presuming that Clark grew up Methodist or Lutheran or something like that, so it would make sense that in this moment of doubt he'd turn to God. After his mother there are very few people he can talk about it, so he might well go into a church for solace.[389]

Despite Goyer's nonchalance, these story additions actually take Superman into new onscreen territory. While earlier Superman films made slight shifts towards Christian allegory, and even at times Christian theology, *Man of Steel* pushes the character into new realms of overt Christian representation.

Like the film itself, the press campaign promoting the Christian subtext of *Man of Steel* also proves a fascinating example of calculated faith-based appeals. As with *Superman Returns*, Grace Hill Media ran the Christian press promotion and once again turned to the filmmakers—in this case, director Zack Snyder and screenwriter David Goyer—to make the case for the film. Except this time, the press promotion differed from *Superman Returns* in highly telling ways. First, as opposed to the rapid, post-release campaign for *Superman Returns,* Grace Hill started their Christian press tour for *Man of Steel* months before the film's June 16 release date. As early as April 2013, the filmmakers were giving interviews oriented around Superman's representation of Christ and these continued up to the film's opening.[390] Second, again unlike *Superman Returns*, and indeed unlike most Hollywood films marketed to faith-based demographics, the Christian press tour for *Man of Steel* actually occurred exclusively in non-Christian press. Instead of offering interviews with the usual Christian suspects, like *Christianity Today* and *CrossWalk.com*, Goyer and Snyder actually discussed Superman's links to Christianity in

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[389] Ali Plumb and Helen O'Hara, "David S. Goyer and Zack Snyder On Man Of Steel's Secrets," *Empire* (June 18, 2013), accessed online, October 8, 2013 <http://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/man-steel-secrets>.

[390] For examples, see: Noelene Clark, "'Man of Steel': Zack Snyder says Superman 'must be taken seriously'," *Los Angeles Times - Hero Complex* (April 25, 2013), accessed online, November 30, 2013 <http://herocomplex.latimes.com/movies/man-of-steel-zack-snyder-says-superman-must-be-taken-seriously/#/0>; and Nicole Sperling, "A 'Man of Steel' of biblical proportions; The film's studio is playing up the Christian connection to Superman," *Los Angeles Times* (June 19, 2013), D4.

mainstream outlets like the *Los Angeles Times* and *CNN*.[391] This was a highly unusual move on

Grace Hill and Warner Bros.' part. As previous film examples in this chapter demonstrate,

Hollywood studios typically prefer to run a mainstream campaign with the mainstream press and

reserve Christian-oriented discussions for the Christian press, where they assume secular

audiences will take no notice. In this case, the filmmakers openly made their Christian case about

Superman in secular outlets and then let those interviews disseminate as reprints in the Christian

press.[392] While this strategy risked incurring mainstream blowback, it also sought to reach more

Christians than previous campaigns, since most niche demographics still read the mainstream

news.

The third difference with *Man of Steel*'s Christian press campaign resides in the tone and

the premeditation. Unlike Mankiewicz and Singer, Snyder and Goyer's statements reeked of

prearranged talking points. Neither filmmaker ever communicated in any interview a deep pride

in exploring Christian theology or symbolism, as Mankiewicz did; nor did they express some

powerful impact that Donner's *Superman* had made on their lives and psyche, as Singer did.

Instead, Snyder and Goyer expressed unenthused, clipped, and strikingly similar—at times

nearly word-for-word—statements about Superman's connection to Christ. For example, when

talking to the UK outlet *Metro*, Goyer framed the Christian symbolism as such: "We didn't come

up with these allusions of Superman being Christ-like, that's something that's been embedded in

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[391] See: Clark, "'Man of Steel': Zack Snyder says Superman 'must be taken seriously'"; and Jennifer Vineyard, "'Man of Steel' director Zack Snyder on Superman's Christ-like parallels," *CNN* (June 16, 2013), accessed online, June 22, 2013 < http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/14/showbiz/zack-snyder-man-of-steel>.

[392] For examples, see: Alicia Cohn, "Superman Isn't Jesus," *Christianity Today* (June 19, 2013), accessed online, June 22, 2013 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2013/june/superman-isnt-jesus.html?paging=off>; and David Gibbons, "Is 'Man of Steel' Superman Christlike or More Like the AntiChrist?" *Charisma* (June 28, 2013), accessed online August 3, 2013 <http://www.charismanews.com/culture/40058-is-man-of-steel-superman-christ-like-or-more-like-the-anti-christ?tmpl=component&print=1&layout=default&page=>.

the character from the beginning."[393] Then in a later interview with *CNN*, Snyder framed the

symbolism using remarkably similar language:

> The Christ-like parallels, I didn't make that stuff up. We weren't like, 'Hey, let's add this!' That stuff is there, in the mythology. That is the tried-and-true Superman metaphor. So rather than be snarky and say that doesn't exist, we thought it would be fun to allow that mythology to be woven through.[394]

This consistent (and historically incorrect) sentiment by both filmmakers paints Superman's

history as connected to Christian allegory since the beginning of the comic book. The

filmmakers acted like they would be dodging some inherent truth if they left the symbolism out.

Thus, both statements allow the filmmakers to wash their hands of creating Christ like parallels

since they preexisted before the film, when in reality many of the parallels were expressly

invented wholesale by the filmmakers for *Man of Steel*.

Lastly, Grace Hill's strategy for the press campaign actually generated free press for *Man

of Steel*. By starting the Christian campaign months before the film's release, Grace Hill allowed

the filmmakers' interviews and comments to spread and be reprinted. By the time the film

premiered, commentators from all corners of the press were publishing editorials on the topic of

Superman's relationship to Jesus Christ. Unsurprisingly, the opinions and approaches to the

editorials varied widely. *Christianity Today*, which did not receive filmmaker interviews, instead

published the bluntly titled "Superman Isn't Jesus," which critiqued Warner Bros. and Grace Hill

for the heavy-handed marketing, as well as heavy-handed and "explicit parallels drawn between

Kal-El and Jesus," and concluded with the plea to "let Jesus be Christ, Hollywood, and

Superman be a hero."[395] Many Jewish news outlets debated over the true origins of Siegel and

Shuster's creation, with *Forward* publishing "10 Reasons Superman Is Really Jewish" (amongst

the reasons, the author sees Clark Kent/Superman divide as representative of the Old World/New

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[393] Ross McD, "Man of Steel: The top 20 reasons why Superman is Jesus," *Metro* (June 11, 2013), accessed online, June 22, 2013 <http://metro.co.uk/2013/06/11/man-of-steel-the-top-20-reasons-why-superman-is-jesus-3837465>.
[394] Vineyard, "'Man of Steel' director Zack Snyder on Superman's Christ-like parallels."
[395] Cohn, "Superman Isn't Jesus."

World identity divide of Jewish immigrants, concluding, "You can't get more Jewish than that")

and *Jewish Journal* publishing the carefully worded "Six reasons Superman is Jesus in 'Man of

Steel'" (with tongue firmly planted in cheek, the author argues: "Superman is 33 and unmarried.

If he were Jewish, his mom would be ALL over that.").[396] Even mainstream publications added

their voices to the discussion. *Entertainment Weekly* published the Jeff Jenson's opinion piece

"Why the Superman of 'Man of Steel' is the Jesus we wish Jesus would be," which argued for a

counter-textual reading of *Man of Steel* as a movie critique of Christianity and a reflection of

changing social attitudes:

> But this is not your father's Superman, or his metaphorical Jesus. *Man of Steel* is subversive mythology for atheists that exalts a Superman who behaves the way they think God should but doesn't. He also stands for a generation of emerging Christians who are more interested in social justice, redeeming the culture and tending to the here and now, and less interested in preaching turn-or-burn rhetoric, running away from the world, and punching the clock until they can kick the bucket and go to Krypton… *errr*, Heaven.[397]

Regardless of the opinions, Grace Hill managed to get people in the press talking about *Man of*

Steel and repeatedly mentioning the film's connection to Christianity for any reader that might be

interested, and all based on the religious symbolism of the film text and a handful of interviews

by the filmmakers. And these weren't even the true hot button topics associated with *Man of*

Steel's Christian marketing.

More than any other subject, Grace Hill's Christian website for *Man of Steel* received by

far the most press. It might have been the film's most effective Christian marketing tool as well.

Labeled "Man of Steel: Ministry Resource Site," the website described itself as a "Pastor

Resource Site" where ministers could find specific *Man of Steel* content to "educate and uplift

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[396] Larry Tye, "10 Reasons Superman Is Really Jewish," *Forward* (June 12, 2013), accessed online, September 12, 2013 <http://forward.com/culture/178454/10-reasons-superman-is-really-jewish>; and Jay Firestone, "Six reasons Superman is Jesus in 'Man of Steel'," *Jewish Journal* (June 12, 2013), accessed online, September 12, 2013 <http://www.jewishjournal.com/bloggish/item/six_reasons_why_superman_is_jesus_christ_in_man_of_stee>.
[397] Jeff Jenson, "Why the Superman of 'Man of Steel' is the Jesus we wish Jesus would be," *Entertainment Weekly* (June 17, 2013), accessed online, September 12, 2013 <http://www.ew.com/article/2013/06/17/man-of-steel-jesus>.

[their] congregations."[398] These various "ministry resources" included three full lesson downloads written by the American Bible Society and titled "Jesus: The Original Superhero," "Jesus: More than Our Super Man," and "Father's Day: Conversation Guide." As the titles suggest, these lessons range in topic and in audience focus. For example, "Jesus: The Original Superhero" is a fully dictated sermon with nine tightly packed pages that any pastor could simply read for word on Sunday. It covers the general trajectory of *Man of Steel*'s sacrifice story and Christian symbolism (noting that the Christ's "parallels to Superman as depicted in MAN OF STEEL are hard to miss"), as well as intermixing the film text with Bible text, such as:

> Jor-El blesses little Kal-El, "Goodbye, my son. Our hopes and dreams travel with you." His mother rightly worries, "He will be an outcast. They'll kill him." But Jor-El says no, "He'll be a god to them."
> Jesus wasn't just a god, but The God. As it says in Isaiah 9:6: "For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; ... And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."[399]

In contrast, "Jesus: More than Our Super Man" offers a Sunday school discussion guide for children, who must first see the film to answer the group questions. Likewise, "Father's Day: Conversation Guide" is a lesson for fathers and children, instructing parents to "[r]ound up the kids and take them to see Man of Steel (PG-13)" and afterward go through the study guide as a family to "discover new connections to your own life and God's Word."[400] The notes were often laced with sidebar quotes from the film, such as Jor-El declaration:

> You will give the people an ideal to strive towards. They will race behind you, they will stumble, they will fall. But in time, they will join you in the sun, Kal. In time, you will help them accomplish wonders.[401]

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[398] "Man of Steel Warner Bros. Website."
[399] "Jesus: The Original Superhero," *Man of Steel* Sermon Notes, Prepared by Dr. Craig Detweiler, accessed online, July 29, 2015
<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwiB5v
DFlIHLAhVW1WMKHSBgA1wQFgglMAE&url=http%3A%2F%2Fministry-
resources.s3.amazonaws.com%2Fman-of-steel%2FMan-of-Steel_Sermon-
Notes_Final4.pdf&usg=AFQjCNEKGjJoM5U8WK2AtOAp3fwtLGlOUw&sig2=9Mo7yTxVlTiM3gg4nNBvDw>.
[400] "Jesus: More than Our Super Man," *Man of Steel* Sermon Notes, accessed online, July 29, 2015
<http://web.archive.org/web/20130701160449/http://ministry-resources.s3.amazonaws.com/man-of-steel/Jesus-
more-than-our-superman.pdf>; and "Father's Day: Conversation Guide," *Man of Steel* Sermon Notes, accessed
online, July 29, 2015 <http://web.archive.org/web/20130701160449/http://ministry-
resources.s3.amazonaws.com/man-of-steel/MAN-OF-STEEL-Fathers-Day-Conversation-Guide2.pdf>.
[401] "Father's Day: Conversation Guide."

Additionally, pastors and website users could download *Man of Steel* video clips and trailers to illustrate each lesson. The bottom of the website also had links for pastors to register to attend free advanced screenings of the film. In total, Grace Hill's website represented the most concrete union of Superman and Christianity associated with *Man of Steel*, leaving mere symbolism and allegory far behind and venturing fully into the territory of overt Christian theology and church ministry. News outlets around the world not only took note of the website, but upon the film's release also credited the Christian campaign as an essential component of *Man of Steel*'s box office success.[402]

CONCLUSION

Man of Steel's marketing campaign marked a significant milestone of achievement for Grace Hill Media, who received not only full studio cooperation in terms of film advisement, press promotion, and church-based advertising, but also received public acknowledgement for their contribution to the film's success. When compared to the company's beginnings, where Hollywood studios had no frame of reference for any type of faith-based marketing, the achievement seems even more noteworthy.

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[402] *Man of Steel* debuted to $128 million on its opening weekend, a then-record for June openings. For coverage of the "Man of Steel Resources Site," see: Robertson, "The Second Coming of Superman"; and Tom Krattenmaker, "What evangelicals can learn from Superman: Column," *USA Today* (June 13, 2013), accessed online, August 5, 2013 <http://usat.ly/11KtDa1>; and Marrapodi, "Superman: Flying To A Church Near You"; and Pamela McClintock, "The Superman Gospel, According to Warner Bros.," *Hollywood Reporter* (June 18, 2013), accessed online, August 5, 2013 <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/superman-gospel-warner-bros-570668>; and Cohn, "Superman Isn't Jesus"; and Billy Hallowell, "Superman vs. Jesus: The Religious Undertones in 'Man of Steel' (Plus: Is Hollywood Finally Engaging Christians?)," *The Blaze* (June 19, 2013), accessed online, August 6, 2013 <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2013/06/19/superman-vs-jesus-the-religious-undertones-in-man-of-steel-plus-is-hollywood-finally-marketing-to-christians>; and John Burnett, "Superman Takes A Deliberate Christ-Like Turn In New Film," *NPR* (June 21, 2013), accessed online, August 6, 2013 <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=194330396>; and Phillip Sherwell, "US mega churches embrace Jesus Christ Superman," *New Zealand Herald* (June 20, 2013) accessed online, August 6, 2013 <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=10891701>. For praise of Grace Hill Media's marketing campaign, see: Phillip Sherwell, "Man of Steel gets box office boost from Superman's God-fearing fans," *The Telegraph* (June 18, 2013), accessed online, August 5, 2013 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/10128539/Man-of-Steel-gets-box-office-boost-from-Supermans-God-fearing-fans.html>.

Yet, regardless of the growth of the Christian blockbuster era, for both Hollywood and "Holywood," there remain strict limits to Christian filmmaking and Christian marketing. In Hollywood's mind, Christian demographics remain a niche, and still in many ways an uncomfortable niche to deal with directly. Indeed, when interviewed, Grace Hill's president, Jonathan Bock, expressed opposing sentiments at different moments regarding Hollywood's future investment in Christian audiences. On the one hand, Bock showed optimism based on the repeated successes of both "Holywood" films and Hollywood Christian marketing, even expressing a rare moment of Christian identification:

> On a spiritual level, I feel like—and this is going to sound kinda church-y—but I really do feel like God is doing something important in Hollywood. I've been very proud to be part of this burgeoning industry, where studios are making movies for Christians and marketing movies to Christians, and ten years from now it's going to be ridiculous. Every time a *Soul Surfer* does well, or a *Fireproof* does well, it just reinforces it all again. That there's really something here, that there's a real audience here and a business here. So I'm excited for the future.[403]

On the other hand, Bock later expressed deep cynicism regarding Hollywood's courtship of Christians, and how far the studios will ever be willing to associate with Christianity. In an intriguing and somewhat rare disclosure, Bock even brought racial politics into the discussion, comparing Hollywood's view of Christian filmmaking to that of black cinema from the 1970s:

> If I were to compare it to something in Hollywood's past, I would compare it to blaxploitation films. Studios suddenly saw that there was this audience of African Americans that wanted black-made movies. The studios weren't really interested in making those, but they'd help a little with the financing or distribution or something like that—see if there was a way to exploit them in the marketplace. But then some of these films were making real money and you started to see crossover reach with white audiences a little bit. So I think that's what's going on right now with faith-based films. Studios are in for a $1 million, or a $1-2 million dollar movie. They don't mind acquiring it for $100,000 dollars. They're making Godsploitation films, you know? And they're comfortable at that level. They don't want to make that movie, but they'll let other people put up the money for it. They'll distribute it. They'll put it in the window. That's why they hire someone like myself to reach that audience. They still want to make mainstream films. They don't want to make Christian movies.[404]

This use of "Godsploitation" in reference to Christian cinema is problematic in the way it ghettoizes films that largely reflect the white, Christian majority of the nation, and equating this

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[403] Interview with Bock.
[404] Ibid.

cinema of dominantly represented citizens with the blaxploitation cinema of deeply

underrepresented citizens. Yet, in the midst of this explanation, Bock's descriptions of

Hollywood's semi-visceral apprehensions towards Christian demographics ring somewhat true.

For Hollywood is perfectly willing to sell secular films as religious, but only through

middlemen marketers that keep the faith-based audiences at a distinct remove. Hollywood is

willing to collect religious dollars offered as a result of religious marketing, but they are not

willing to make overtly religious cinema. Hollywood is willing to fund religious marketing that

sells secular movies as inner-church ministry, but stops short of funding the promotion of outer-

church church evangelism. Thus, while the relationship between Hollywood and Christianity has

indeed never been so concentrated in the history of cinema, the relationship remains fairly

fragile, built on both economic accommodation and facilitated through intermediaries and

unwritten yet strictly observed guidelines. As Bock lamented:

> If we go 50 miles east of LA, all the way to 50 miles west of New York, no one has any problem or any discomfort with people who are religious. You can bring up religion or church in a conversation or say, "Oh we got a Bible study tonight," and everyone thinks of it as a nonissue. But right here where they make movies, it's very uncomfortable. People in Hollywood think there should be a real separation between film and religion. And it really comes down to the fact that a lot of people in Hollywood don't know a lot of religious people. It's related to that common idea that everyone in Hollywood is a liberal democrat. No one ever votes for anyone other than the left. Which is garbage. It's not true. But they don't want to talk to about it.[405]

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[405] Ibid.

Chapter 5 – Strange Bedfellows:

Conclusions and Complications

As the case studies discussed in this project suggest, the evolution and development of Hollywood's relationship to Christianity is far from over. Indeed, although technically around fifteen years old at the time of this writing, the Christian blockbuster era may still be in its infancy. Every year, new examples and breakthroughs from both "Holywood" and Hollywood continue to emerge, even up to the moment of this writing. Both sides of the filmmaking community continue to reach for Christian patronage at the box office, often using tried-and-true techniques to court these faith-based dollars, and sometimes experimenting with whole new methodologies.

And yet, as things change, certain issues remain the same—at least thus far. On the "Holywood" side, the rise of the Christian blockbuster era only came about through specific changes in Evangelical culture since the 1980s—especially in terms of organizational infrastructure and national "culture war" divides. These issues worked in tandem with changes within marketing technology and advances in new media, and all of these conditions were utilized and revealed through the marketing model established by *The Passion of the Christ*. Although Mel Gibson's Christian campaign arose in response to specific controversies regarding his film, the formula has proven resilient and "Holywood" filmmakers still continue to adopt and adapt Gibson's campaign for Evangelical outreach—specifically, the establishment of spiritual credibility, both personal and through God's divine favor; the application of "culture war" language for the purposes of Christian branding; the need to sell films not just as pure entertainment, but instead as a tools for inner-church ministry and outer-church evangelism; and

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the utilization of online tools for social media advertising, ministry outlets, and block tickets

sales.

On the Hollywood side, fears of close engagement with Christian subcultures remain

strong and necessitate the use of middle-men marketing firms to reach Christian audiences on

behalf of studios. While Hollywood generally balks at making overtly religious product, they

have become more comfortable with producing "softcore Christian" films that offer vague

appreciations of conservative vales and general, nondenominational affirmations of spiritual

faith—usually through storylines based on real-life Christian individuals. In these instances,

Hollywood utilizes the "culture war" divides against liberal establishments—like Hollywood

itself, in the minds of many Evangelical conservatives—to make profits off of conservative

Evangelical demographics. They are also comfortable with selling evangelicals any conventional

film product that might have cross-over appeal—from family-friendly fare to even purely

mainstream films, like *Man of Steel*, that might possess hints of Christian allegory. In all these

cases, Hollywood relies on marketing firms like Grace Hill Media and Motive Entertainment to

sell the "softcore Christian" (or even entirely non-religious) films to Christian audiences in a

manner that mimics "Holywood" marketing: portraying film entertainment as resources for

church ministry or, occasionally for Hollywood, the evangelization of non-Christians.

This closing chapter will address these continuing issues within "Holywood" and

Hollywood, analyzing their persistent presence in the ever-changing and evolving field of

Christian film marketing. For example, the film year 2014 provided a gluttony of faith-based

films from both "Holywood" and Hollywood, and thus offers a snapshot how Christian

audiences are continuing to respond to the models discussed in this project, how "Holywood"

and Hollywood continue to evolve in their Christian outreach, and how the established

methodologies and cultural conditions discussed thus far continue to dominate struggle to profit from Christian patronage at the box office.

Additionally, this chapter will also gesture towards faith-based films that rested outside the scope of the project but deserve critical attention nonetheless. For example, like so many "Holywood" filmmakers, Tyler Perry's film career emerged out of the impact made by *The Passion of the Christ*, and yet his films followed a completely different and more complicated trajectory than his Christian contemporaries. Perry's films have galvanized African American church audiences through narratives that are simultaneously spiritual lessons, social melodramas, and family comedies, and all centered on the particular problems of many black urban communities. In terms of Christian branding, marketing, and spiritual ministry, Perry offers a model that both adheres to the dominant "Holywood" models and completely complicates them at the same time.

2014: "YEAR OF THE CHRISTIAN FILM"

In April of 2014, *Fox News* published a news story with the headline, "Is 2014 the year of the Christian film?"[406] Given the film calendar for that year, the answer might have indeed been in the affirmative. 2014 seemed to be the year when all paths thus far converged and both Hollywood and "Holywood" offered up every tried-and-true example of faith-based cinema in their collective playbooks—from small and overtly theological "Holywood" films to based-on-a-true-story-about-Christians Hollywood films to even a resurgence of Biblical epics. And although there seemed to be a glut of Christianity on the film market, many of these movies succeeded with church audiences—although decidedly not all. Yet, regardless of wins and losses, 2014 definitely proved that the power of Christian audiences is in ascension. Indeed,

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[406] Hollie McKay, "Is 2014 the year of the Christian film?" *Fox News* (April 11, 2014), accessed online <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2014/04/11/is-2014-year-christian-film-noah-son-of-god>.

while the number of films marketed to Christians in 2014 is too many to address here, an

analysis of just the key films from this year might prove helpful in demonstrating the persistence

of the cultural issues, marketing models, audience adaptation, and audience limitations discussed

throughout this project.

On the "Holywood" side, selling narrative films as ministry tools continued to be the

dominant marketing model for the purposes of mobilizing Christian audiences. For example, the

makers of *God's Not Dead*—an overtly Evangelical film follows a Christian college student who

stands up a bullying Atheist professor—followed formula established by *The Passion*, and

refined by the Kendrick Brothers, of advertising the film as a means of proselytizing to non-

Christians. First, the film content overtly endorses Christianity as the one true religion and even

offers an example of how to convert and receive salvation, obviously following in the footsteps

of the Kendrick films. Having the means for Christian salvation as an actual plot point allowed

the filmmakers to advertise the film to churches as an evangelistic ministry. Indeed, the strategy

to encourage churches to buy out theaters—and give the tickets away to non-believers—proved

so successful that *God's Not Dead* earned the third highest box office spot on the Friday it

released, even though it had less than a third of screens of the top two films that weekend.[407] At

the end of its theatrical run, the film reaped an astonishing $64 million from a total production

budget of $2 million. The placement of conversion theology within the film—as the Kendrick

Brothers have so often done—seems to have been essential in allowing the filmmakers to

advertise *God's Not Dead* as a tool for evangelism. This seems even more evident when

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[407] *God's Not Dead* debuted on 780 screens, while the other top two new releases, *Divergent* and *Muppets Most Wanted*, both debuted on 3,200 screens. See: Gary Susman, "Box Office: What's Behind the Surprising Success of 'God's Not Dead'?" *Moviefone* (March 24, 2014), accessed online, May 18, 2015 <http://www.moviefone.com/2014/03/24/box-office-gods-not-dead>.

compared to another "Holywood" film released in 2014, which did not contain the same overt conversion content and yet still attempted a similar conversion-themed marketing campaign.

Indeed, *Left Behind* proved the dangers of straying to far from the traditional paths of "Holywood" film content. For Paul Lalonde's second attempt at adapting the best-selling series of apocalyptic novel to the big screen, the film producer attempted to bring bigger-budget Hollywood spectacle and star power to "Holywood" filmmaking. This time the film cost over $19 million and featured Hollywood star Nicolas Cage in the lead. With these elements in place, Lalonde hoped the film could reach a wider audience than the typical Christian Evangelical core demographic, and shaped the film content to reflect this. As a film about the Rapture, *Left Behind* was unmistakably Christian in orientation, but the filmmakers significantly scaled back on the eschatology and instead highlighted the disaster film aspects of the story, hoping to make the film more non-Christian assessable. According to Lalonde:

> The goal of this movie was to not be preachy. I've been preachy in eight movies already. It was time for a different approach. You get too preachy, it turns people off. That's what's kept faith-based movies in the church basements and out of the theaters.[408]

Indeed, director Vic Armstrong later admitted that he completely missed the fact that it was a Christian film when he first read the script.[409]

Yet, despite the more mainstream appeal of the film content, Lalonde's still approached the marketing through the lens of selling the film as a tool for evangelism. Posters and Facebook ads showed frightened crowds running through post-raptured streets and a quote attributed to Satan reading, "PLEASE DON'T BRING UNBELIEVERS TO SEE THIS MOVIE." Another poster utilized "culture war" fears by featured the silhouette of machine-gun totting Islamic

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[408] Reed Tucker, "Faith-based movies go mainstream with Nicolas Cage in 'Left Behind'," *New York Post* (September 28, 2014), accessed online, May 9, 2015 <http://nypost.com/2014/09/28/faith-based-movies-go-mainstream-with-nicolas-cage-in-left-behind>.

[409] Gwynne Watkins, "Satan Weighs in on the 'Left Behind' Movie," *Yahoo News* (September 20, 2014) accessed online, May 10, 2015 <https://www.yahoo.com/movies/satan-weighs-in-on-the-left-behind-movie-98810743172.html>.

terrorist and a quote from "Pastor Ray Bentley, Maranatha Chapel" declaring, "With everything

that is happening in the world today, THIS IS A MUST SEE!"[410] Indeed, the advertisements for

Left Behind were so provocative that they gained a host of free coverage from news outlets. Yet,

in the end, these tactics did not seem to reach non-Christian audiences or, even more crucially,

core evangelicals. Mainstream critics, Christian critics, and general audiences utterly rejected the

film and it earned less than $17 million at the box office.[411] In particular, most Christian

commentators took the film to task for soft-pedaling the Christian message of the book series and

placing too much importance on the genre elements.[412] Without a core salvation message

embedded in the text of the film, Christians seemed to reject the outer-church ministry model of

the marketing campaign.

Issues of Christian credibility might also be at play in the failure of *Left Behind*. The

film's cast and crew consisted almost entirely of Hollywood veterans who could not advertise the

film as the product of Christian-based intentions, or pepper interviews with backstory accounts

of miracles and crew conversions, which would have evidenced God's sovereign blessing on the

production. Indeed, even the very content of the film story—Rapture theology—might have

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[410] Zach Hoag, "Marketing the Apocalypse: Left Behind and Commercial Indulgence," *Convergent Books* (October 9, 2014), accessed online, May 9, 2015 <http://www.convergentbooks.com/marketing-apocalypse-left-behind>.

[411] For coverage of the poster controversy, see: Alison Willmore, "'Left Behind' Is Marketing Itself With Quotes From Satan," *BuzzFeed* (September 29, 2014), accessed online, May 10, 2015 <http://www.buzzfeed.com/alisonwillmore/left-behind-is-marketing-itself-with-quotes-from-satan#.odGLaEReJ>; and Jonathon Dornbush, "Satan has an opinion on Nicolas Cage's 'Left Behind,' apparently," *Entertainment Weekly* (September 30, 2014), accessed online, May 10, 2015 <http://www.ew.com/article/2014/09/30/nicolas-cage-satan-quote-left-behind>; and "LOL: Satan Is a Movie Critic, Gets Quoted on 'Left Behind' Poster," *SlashFilm* (October 1, 2014), accessed online, May 10, 2015 <http://www.slashfilm.com/lol-left-behind-satan-quote>. For a summary of the mainstream and Christian critical reception of the film, see: Michael Stone, "Rapture-Palooza Fail: 'Left Behind' Flops," *Patheos* (October 10, 2014),), accessed online, May 9, 2015 <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/progressivesecularhumanist/2014/10/rature-palooza-fail-left-behind-flops>.

[412] For a sample of Christian criticism, see: Alissa Wilkinson, "Some Final Notes on 'Left Behind'," *Christianity Today* (October 6, 2014), accessed online, May 8, 2015 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/october-web-only/some-final-notes-on-left-behind.html>; and Drew Zahn, "'Left Behind' Makes Romans 3:23 Blunder," *WND* (October 6, 2014), accessed online, May 8, 2015 <http://www.wnd.com/2014/10/left-behind-makes-romans-323-blunder>.

weakened the credibility of the film in the eyes of many Evangelical Christians, many of whom

view such theology as wrong-headed scriptural interpretation of the Book of Revelations.[413] In

contrast, *God's Not Dead* offered ample spiritual credibility as a means of Christian branding. In

front of the camera, the film's casting of Kevin Sorbo resembled *Fireproof*'s casting of Kirk

Cameron—both being previous mainstream television actors who turned to conservative

Christianity and Christian filmmaking. Indeed, *God's Not Dead* went even further and included

guest spots for Christian celebrities like Willie and Korie Robertson from the reality show *Duck

Dynasty*. Behind the camera, the film was made by a well-known Christian production company,

Pure Flix Entertainment, which has long specialized in direct-to-video Christian releases and

maintains a significant presence in Christian retail stores. The film's actual storyline did not

engage with questionable strains of Christian theology like the Rapture, and instead engaged

directly and bluntly with core Christian messages. Indeed, the film featured a college student

openly arguing for the existence of God in a series of classroom debates against an atheist. With

God's Not Dead, Christian audiences felt authentic Christian credibility at every turn. Indeed,

Pure Flix's model proved so successful that they repeated it beat-for-beat with the sequel *God's

Not Dead 2* (2016), this time starring former *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* actor (and suddenly

vocal-about-her-faith Christian) Melissa Joan Hart.[414]

Similar to "Holywood"'s hits and misses, Hollywood also had both large successes and

massive failure in marketing their mainstream product to Christian audiences. And as with

"Holywood," the Hollywood's victories followed a tried-and-true pattern while the

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[413] Billy Hallowell, "Is the Rapture Biblical—and Will Non-Christians Really Be 'Left Behind'? Theologians Battle Over End Times Prophecy," *The Blaze* (September 29, 2014), accessed online, April 5, 2015 <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2014/09/29/is-the-rapture-really-biblical-theologians-battle-over-end-times-prophecy>.
414 Jeannie Law, "Melissa Joan Hart's Standing Up for Christian Values: 'I Don't Care What People Think'," Christian Post (January 11, 2016), accessed online, February 18, 2016 <http://www.christianpost.com/news/melissa-joan-hart-gods-not-dead-2-movie-christian-values-154371/#yyDhkQpQM0sug5xa.99>.

disappointments were based on more experimental models. For example, all of the film successes were based on following in the footsteps of *The Blind Side*. Like that film, Sony's *Heaven is For Real* and Universal's *Unbroken* both followed stories of adversity and uplift based on real-life Christian characters and brought to life by known Hollywood stars (Greg Kinnear starring in *Heaven is For Real* and Angelina Jolie directing *Unbroken*). For *Unbroken*, Universal hired Grace Hill Media to design a Christian outreach campaign that followed the firm's standard playbook—outreach to Christian pastors, sermon notes based on the film, and a heavy media presence on Christian and conservative talk radio (prominently the Salem Radio network, of course), as well as Christian television shows like *The 700 Club*.[415] The one deviation in Grace Hill's campaign was in regards to the DVD release, which, interestingly enough, somewhat took a page from Sherwood Pictures' "ministry in a box" concept. Indeed, Universal released a "Legacy of Faith" version of the DVD targeted at faith-based consumers and containing 90 minutes of Christian-specific aspects of the true-life story that had been omitted from the film.[416] The film made over $164 million at the box office from a $63 million budget. Likewise, Sony mounted a highly similar Christian campaign for *Heaven is For Real*, except their novelty was to keep the Christian marketing in house instead of hiring a Christian marketing firm. This step is highly significant since Hollywood studios usually recoil at handling Christian demographics with their own marketing departments. However, Sony's Affirm division had gained such strong experience with Sherwood Pictures that the studio decided to use their own people, and very

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[415] Anthony D'Alessandro, "Christmas Box Office: 'Interview' Interesting Wrinkle, But Won't Make Waves," *Deadline Hollywood* (December 24, 2014), accessed online, June 18, 2015 <http://deadline.com/2014/12/christmas-box-office-interview-controversy-unbroken-selma-1201334778>.

[416] Benjamin Lee, "Cross training: Universal releasing Christian edition of Unbroken," *The Guardian* (March 25, 2015), accessed online, June 17, 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/mar/24/cross-training-universal-releasing-christian-edition-of-unbroken>.

successfully.[417] Christian audiences responded strongly to the film and it made over $101 million

from a small $12 million budget. Indeed, these true-life Christian adventures with known

Hollywood stars are so generally reliable that Hollywood continues to put out a few every year.

In contrast, Hollywood's faired less favorably with Christian audiences when ventured

into new territory—and ironically, the new territory was based on the recycling of an old genre.

2014 saw Hollywood return to the Biblical epic with Paramount Pictures' *Noah* and 20th Century

Fox's *Exodus: Gods and Kings*. Both studios hired Grace Hill Media and both films invested in

extensive Christian marketing campaign taken from Grace Hill's standard operating procedures.

However, although both studios seemed initially excited to tap into faith-based profits, both

studios also created huge obstacles for themselves in achieving that goal and, as a result, spent

the majority of the marketing campaign fighting uphill struggles with religious audiences. First,

both studios hired auteur, atheist directors—Darren Aronofsky for *Noah* and Ridley Scott for

Exodus—that were not only uninterested in appeasing the Christian sensibilities, but also vocally

expressed certain levels of hostility for Christianity in general. For example, Aronofsky gleefully

reported to *The New Yorker* that his *Noah* would be "the least biblical biblical film ever made"

and that he didn't "give a fuck about [Christian] test scores" for the film.[418] For his own part,

Scott had said outright in previous interviews that he felt religion was "the biggest source of

evil" in the world—sentiments that were often reprinted in the Christian press in the lead up to

Exodus's release.[419] Thus, the very choice of director for each film harmed the spiritual

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[417] Maane Khatchatourian, "Hollywood's Growing Faith in Christian Movies," *Variety* (April 14, 2014), accessed online, May 10, 2015 <http://variety.com/2014/film/news/sony-shows-faith-with-wide-release-for-heaven-is-for-real-1201157172>.

[418] Tad Friend, "Heavy Weather," *The New Yorker* (March 17, 2014), 46.

[419] Eric Spitznagel, "Q+A: Ridley Scott's Star Wars," *Esquire* (June 4, 2012), accessed online, May 19, 2015 <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/interviews/a14300/ridley-scott-prometheus-interview-9423167>. For examples of reprinting in the Christian press, see: Stoyan Zaimov, "Ridley Scott Talks Plan for Moses Film, Calls Religion 'Source of Evil'," *Christian Post* (June 6, 2012), accessed online, June 18, 2015 <http://www.christianpost.com/news/ridley-scott-talks-plan-for-moses-film-calls-religion-source-of-evil-

credibility of each film in the eyes of Christian audiences. Additionally, both directors were used

to complete creative control of their films and, although the studios utilized Grace Hill during

pre-production and invested great time and effort in consulting with religious experts on biblical

accuracy, neither director was ever going to bend of their creative directions for the films. Which

led to the second obstacle: both films dramatically altered the original biblical narratives. With

Noah, Aronofsky turned the title character into brooding warrior environmentalist who believes

God has doomed all mankind, including his own family, and spends much of film intending to

kill his own grandchild so that the human race will not continue. Similarly, Scott changes Moses

from peaceful liberator to a revolutionary freedom fighter and, in the strangest set of changes,

casts God as petulant child. Unsurprisingly, most Christian Evangelicals were horrified. Even

though Grace Hill had secured some measured support for both films from prominent Christian

leaders, actual Evangelical audiences still vocally protested the changes and watchdog group

Faith Driven Consumer gave both films a "fail" grade in category of "faith friendly."[420] In the

end, both films disappointed at the domestic box office—*Noah* made $101 million domestically

on a budget of $125 million, while *Exodus* only made $65 million on a budget of $140 million.

76176/#50P6zPUxvWKlRVWQ.99>; and Connor Malloy, "The Irreligiosity of Sir Ridley Scott," *The Catholic World Report* (November 29, 2013), accessed online, June 18, 2015 <http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/2751/the_irreligiosity_of_sir_ridley_scott.aspx>.

[420] For Faith Driven Consumer details, see: Chris Stone, "Why 'Exodus' Fails Bible Believing Moviegoers," *Charisma* (December 15, 2014), accessed online, May 4, 2015 <http://www.charismanews.com/20-news/featured-news/46452-why-exodus-fails-bible-believing-moviegoers>.
For samples of Christian condemnation of *Noah*, see: Marc Schenker, "Liberal Hollywood Hates Christians — 'Noah' Just the Latest Example," *Clash Daily* (February 20, 2014), accessed online, May 4, 2015 <http://clashdaily.com/2014/02/liberal-hollywood-hates-christians-noah-just-latest-example>; and Asawin Suebsaeng, "'Noah' Film Inspires Flood of Religious Freak-Outs," *Mother Jones* (March 27, 2014)), accessed online, May 4, 2015 <http://www.motherjones.com/mixed-media/2014/03/noah-film-darren-aronofsky-russell-crowe-controversies-bans-fox-news>.
For samples of Christian condemnation of *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, see: "Exodus: Gods And Kings – Hollywood Heresy Strikes Again," Beginning and End (November 20, 2014), accessed online, May 5, 2015 <http://beginningandend.com/exodus-gods-and-kings-hollywood-heresy-strikes-again>; and "Is New 'Exodus' Movie Actually Blasphemous?" *WND* (December 1, 2014), accessed online, May 5, 2015 <http://www.wnd.com/2014/12/exodus-gives-3-major-faiths-false-portrayal-of-god>; and John Nolte, "Christian Weren't Fooled," *Breitbart New Network* (January 5, 2015), accessed online, May 5, 2015 <http://www.breitbart.com/big-hollywood/2015/01/05/worldwide-box-office-wont-save-exodus>.

Grace Hill's campaigns could not convince Christian audiences that were not actually offended, and the marketing firm once again handled the uncomfortable task of promoting films that their core demographic seemed to reject. Although Fox and Paramount had ventured into these faith-based films with high hopes, their actual handling of the material and the target audience makes Jonathan Bock's dire diagnosis of Hollywood's ignorance towards faith-based moviegoers seem eerily accurate.

TYLER PERRY

There is an unspoken but underlying implication to this project, and indeed it haunts the margins of every case study and marketing campaign discussed thus far: Christian film culture, both in terms of production and reception, is thus far predominantly white. Almost all "Holywood" films are generally white in their casts and crews and made for consumption by generally white Evangelical audiences. Indeed, it seems that minority filmmakers and audiences are not just underserved by mainstream Hollywood, but by Christian film culture as well. However, there is one major exception to this rule, and the term "major" seems exceptionally understated. Since his first low budget film, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), granted a greenlight in the mad studio scramble caused by *The Passion*, Tyler Perry has created a media empire that includes films, television, books, and plays, as well as Perry's own studio in Atlanta, GA, and all specifically catering to African American audiences. Although Perry came from an abusive and impoverished background, he developed his stories as a performer on the "Gospel Theater Circuit," which consists mainly of African American churches in the Midwest and Southern states that give black performers a chance to showcase their talents. Perry's film narratives spring from both his personal background and his time as a stage performer. The films are generally social melodramas focusing on female protagonists and dealing with issues of abuse,

victimization, and rape. These issues are always ultimately resolved through the Christian themes of redemption, forgiveness, and self-love, which Perry connects to divine grace and favor. To complicate matters, Perry often stars in his films in drag as the character Madea, a domineering and elderly black woman who carries a handgun and thrusts herself into people's problems. Beyond merely targeting black audiences, these film narratives actually aim for an even more specific audience: African American female churchgoers—sometimes referred to as the "non-hip-hop" black audience, and a demographic that has been traditionally underserved by film and media more than any other black demographic. As such, Perry has built a fiercely loyal and devoted fan base, although his work has also faced some of the harshest criticisms of any "Holywood" product, particularly from black feminist/womanist groups. Thus, Perry and his films offer an important counterpoint to the "Holywood" film culture discussed thus far. Indeed, although Perry certainly conforms to some aspects of dominant "Holywood" filmmaking, he also defies and complicates others aspects in fascinating ways.[421]

In terms of adherence to dominant "Holywood" tropes, Perry mirrors other faith-based filmmakers on several levels. First, he stridently cultivates Christian branding amongst his core audience. Besides his own personal narrative within the church—with Perry repeatedly emphasizing his Christian background as both a believer and a performer—Perry's most significant marker of spiritual credibility has been his longtime association with Bishop T.D. Jakes, a megachurch pastor of 30,000 congregants and arguably the most powerful Christian celebrity within the African American community. Jakes helped support Perry's plays when the performer was traveling the Gospel Theater Circuit and the two have remained personally and

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[421] Andrea C. White, "Screening God," in *Womanist and Black Feminist Responses to Tyler Perry's Productions*, LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, Tamura A. Lomax, and Carol B. Duncan, Eds. (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2014), 73-74.

professionally close ever since.[422] Indeed, Perry's interactions with Jakes have been some of his most outwardly spiritual, as exampled in the most famous and most reported interaction between the two, when Perry attended Jakes' Megafest Conference, took the stage, publically pledged over $1 million to Jakes' causes, and then prayed in tongues over Jakes while "laying hands" on the pastor—a gesture of great spiritual significance within the Christian apostolic community that communicates the passing of divine blessing and holy anointing from one person to another. The act connotes a specific power dynamic with spiritual authority being granted from one person to another, and since Jakes fell to the ground when Perry prayed over him, in a pose of being "slain in the spirit," Perry's spiritual credibility of divine apostolic power was evidently on display for the audience and home viewers. The clip was much watched and praised within the African American community, although some apostolic leaders (particularly white pastors) criticized the display as calculated and self-promoting.[423] Either way, as just one of many public acts, and in conjunction to an oft-repeated personal narrative, the event demonstrates Perry's savvy in displaying his religious credibility to his core audience in a manner of deep insider significance.

Another example of spiritual credibility, and one that reflects standard "Holywood" branding, is Perry's ability to utilize "culture war" language in his discussions regarding Hollywood. Perry often uses such language to connect his work to larger racial and spiritual movements that the film industry cannot comprehend. His most repeated story revolves around his original proposal for his television show, *House of Payne*: "I went to L.A. and pitched to a room full of studio execs. They told me I couldn't say 'Jesus' on television and nobody would

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[422] Felicia Lee, "Talking the Dream, Growing the Brand: Tyler Perry Spreads His Message of Hope," *The New York Times* (Jun 6, 2007), E1.
[423] Candice Benbow, "Dissecting the Spirit: Jakes, Perry and Prosperity Gospel," *Urban Cusp* (September 3, 2013), accessed online, July 9, 2014 <http://www.urbancusp.com/2013/09/dissecting-spirit-jakes-perry-prosperity-gospel-2/#sthash.yit5cnWE.dpuf>.

watch it."[424] In this narrative, Perry then storms out of Hollywood and funds the show himself, later making the studios bid on the completed show when it is obvious his Christian vision will be a massive hit. As with other "Holywood" filmmakers, such stories cast Perry in the light of true Christian, and even defender of the faith, while utilizing feelings of hostility amongst Christians towards Hollywood to establish his own credibility.

At the same time, Perry offers several stark contrasts with other "Holywood" filmmakers. The most obvious difference with Perry revolves around his choice of narrative subject matter and the particular spiritual messages of his films. As the case studies in this project demonstrate, the vast majority of "Holywood" cinema features plots about white men in crisis and convey spiritual messages centered on the need for salvation and prayer. For example, all of the Kendrick Brothers' films (with the exception of *The War Room*) deal with white men facing personal dilemmas and turning to Jesus for deliverance from their circumstances. Even when the narrative deals with more specific needs—such as the marriage dilemma in *Fireproof*—the very act of turning to God and/or praying usually solves the problem. These same plot and message elements hold true for most prominent "Holywood" works, such as *God's Not Dead*, *Letters to God*, both versions of *Left Behind, The Omega Code*, and *Woodlawn* (2015). In each case, the grace of God to deliver (white) protagonists is the always the key message of the films; God saves, and man's only responsibility is to be empowered by God's grace through asking for salvation and/or prayer. Simply committing to God somehow empowers the protagonists to change their wicked behavior and live virtuous lives of highly moral conduct. However, Perry's films feature dominantly African American female protagonists, and the messages are often much more complicated than "God saves." The plots are often highly convoluted—most could not be easily or briefly explained—and, as Andrea C. White points out in her essay on theology

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[424] Lee, "Talking the Dream, Growing the Brand."

in Perry films, his characters generally act with worldly behavior throughout the films. Perry's protagonists often drink heavily, curse, engage in non-marital sex, and even display bursts of violent behavior, especially the character Madea—all acts that would be completely out of place in most "Holywood" cinema. While God definitely has a place in Perry's plot, that place is typically through divine intervention, which usually arrives in climatic moments and as a result of characters first learning a personal life lesson—such as forgiveness or self-love.[425]

While a full explanation of these differences in Perry's faith-based films would require much more investigation and scrutiny, a few general analyses can be ventured. For one, the message of personal salvation, and its miraculously redeeming impact of personal morality, is historically more central to white Evangelical churches than African American churches, which tend to be more apostolic. A chief reason for this is the fact that the vast majority of African Americans, 87%, already identify as Christian, and 79% of those describe their religion as very important to their lives (compared with just 56% of white U.S. adults).[426] As such, African Americans Christians feel much less need to evangelize within their communities, since most of the community is already Christian. Additionally, as is commonly known, most African American communities face rampant socioeconomic disparity—far more than any other U.S. racial demographic—and thus these communities also face the social ills that accompany such disparity. Perry's films reflect these issues by focusing on the actual process of surviving personal traumas, and through gaining personal growth on the other side of this process. In these situations, God is seen less as a miracle cure obtained through salvation than as a divine giver of rewards to those who have sowed sorrow and reaped enlightenment. This principle of sowing

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[425] White, "Screening God."
[426] "A Religious Portrait of African Americans," *Pew Research Center* (January 30, 2009), accessed online, April 20, 2014 <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-african-americans>.

and reaping is also much more in line with the theology of T.D. Jakes and many black churches in the U.S.

Finally, Perry also differs from other "Holywood" contemporaries by not emphasizing ministry in his film marketing. As this project has thoroughly discussed, most "Holywood" filmmakers since *The Passion of the Christ* sell their films as inner-church ministries (sermon notes, study guides, ministry-in-a-box programs, marketing pushes for extra-textual books, etc) and outer-church evangelism (block ticket sales). Although Perry has traditionally promoted his films on a grassroots level to African American churches and media outlets, and indeed sold his films as offering spiritual lessons, he has been less concerned with associating his films with specific spiritual ministries. One reason for this might be the vastly underserved nature of his core audience (predominantly black, female, and churchgoing). As this niche market is often completely neglected by both mainstream Hollywood, mainstream black entertainment, and dominant "Holywood" cinema, the demographic has proven itself incredibly loyal to Perry's work. Such a devoted following might require much less prompting and convincing to lend support at the box office than other "Holywood" films, which must resort to complicated ministry associations and divine endorsements.

However, in the end, all of these conclusions remain tentative, and Perry as a "Holywood" filmmaker requires substantially more analysis. Just as Hollywood's modern relationship to Christianity has never been explored at the industrial level before this project, so too has Perry never been considered in the context of industrial practice interacting with Christian faith, and all these elements simultaneously relating to the dominance of Hollywood film culture in the United States. Perry stands as a reminder that racial divides in this nation also extend to religious identity, that black church culture and white church culture are often utterly

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separate worlds, and that the filmic product of these differing worlds will reflect these racial contexts as well. Although Perry serves as a fascinating complication to the dominant "Holywood" practices investigated in this study, his work more than deserves its own full investigation—hopefully the central focus of my next project.

Indeed, Perry's work points to the myriad of issues unexplored within the field Christian filmmaking and Christian film marketing, as well as the ever-more concentrated, yet-still-fragile relationship between "Holywood" and Hollywood. As this project demonstrates, the two cultural institutions of Hollywood and Christianity within the United States do indeed make for strange bedfellows. And yet, profit margins will always encourage cooperation between even the most opposing parties, and thus the relationship seems to work under the right circumstances and within certain boundaries. As a result of specific cultural and technological conditions in the contemporary era, Christian audiences have now proven to be a viable demographic. Where once Christian film topics were verboten, now Christianity-on-screen possesses the potential for huge box office returns. Where once overt calls for ministry and evangelism would have seemed ludicrous in the arena of film marketing, now such calls can be leveraged to establish endless streams of film revenue. Where once branding remained in the realm of film franchises and a few special film companies, now branding can extend to filmmakers with viable Christian credibility. Where once early Christian filmmakers would have seen the exploitation of Christian audiences at the box office to be a violation of credibility, now the social, economic, and theological conditions of Evangelical culture seem to have evolved. Indeed, amongst the myriad of filmmakers and marketers interviewed for this project—each claiming Christian credibility— only one person raised old-school concerns over the mixing of Christianity and the pursuit of profits. As Stephan Blinn, of the now defunct Gener8ion Entertainment, put it:

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There's a fine line between making people aware of [your message] and turning church itself into money changers at the temple as it were and turning church into some kind of marketing vehicle. That's something that we think about and deal with all the time too. I don't know how many people care or are cognoscente of it, but for me personally, that's something I am very cognoscente and concerned about.[427]

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[427] Interview with Blinn.

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