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HOLY HOLLYWOOD

HOW CHRISTIANS IN ENTERTAINMENT
INFLUENCE WHAT WE SEE

MARCH 2004

MEL GIBSON'S *PASSION* :: WHEN SOLDIERS RETURN HOME :: GOD'S PLAN FOR YOUR FAMILY

A photograph of a person sitting in a theater, reading a book. The scene is dimly lit with a warm, reddish-orange glow. The person's hands are visible, holding an open book. The background shows rows of theater seats.

Finding **GOD** in Hollywood

BY PHIL COOKE

Photo by Alan Pappa/Getty Images/Collage by Robert Echeverria

Some Christians think Tinseltown is the last place anything good can come out of, and have either written it off or equated it with the devil. But is there a better response? Here's a look at how believers in the industry are making a positive difference in Hollywood, and how you can, too.

Hollywood. Tinseltown. The movie business. For most people, those words invoke images of romance, thrills, heroism, suspense and celebrity. For many Christians, on the other hand, they generate images of illicit sex, unchecked violence and moral depravity. I understand this more than most because I'm a preacher's kid with a Ph.D. in theology who has grown up in the church. But I'm also a working producer and director in Hollywood, so I have a ringside seat from both perspectives.

The movie industry is a remarkable business, and has had a profound impact on the world since its birth at the turn of the century. In the 1934 film *It Happened One Night*, popular star Clark Gable performed without an undershirt to better display his physique and, thereafter, undershirt sales dropped dramatically. In 1942, when *Bambi* premiered, deer hunting in the United States dropped from a \$5.7 million business to barely \$1 million. In recent years, the influence of entertainment has been even greater. Last summer, 20th Century Fox Studios made an unprecedented deal with Dr. Pepper to advertise the blockbuster movie *X2: X-Men United* on one billion soft drink cans.

That influence doesn't stop in the United States. International news services reported that after Afghanistan was invaded by Coalition forces in the search for Osama bin Laden, the first public buildings in that country to reopen weren't hospitals, schools or government agencies—they were movie theaters, showing American movies.

The power of movies is significant and pervasive in this society but, as a Christian community, we have done remarkably little to harness that power for the work of the gospel. In fact, that inability has created a strained relationship between Hollywood and the Christian community.

As a result, the church has spent far more time criticizing the movie industry than developing a positive relationship with it. Boycotts and public condemnation have been the typical

Christian responses, but those approaches have had little impact. During the last national Baptist boycott of the Walt Disney Studios, for example, Disney's sales actually increased.

That negative approach has led the church to the creation of an entire subculture of Christian movies, most of which feature poor production values, bad acting, and sacrifice compelling storytelling for an explicit gospel presentation. While many Christians have supported films such as *The Omega Code* and *Left Behind*, most would agree these films fell far short of their potential and will never be considered examples of excellent filmmaking.

But if boycotts, shame and even creating a Christian movie industry don't make better movies, what will?

For a number of years, thousands of Christians have been working quietly (and not so quietly) in the mainstream entertainment industry, trying to make a difference in the quality, moral values and direction of movies and television. Sometimes, their work is obvious. Such is the case with Martha Williamson, the executive producer of the *Touched by an Angel* TV series and a longtime member of The Church on the Way in Van Nuys, Calif.

Some Christians have criticized Williamson for not being more explicit in her episodes—especially not mentioning the name of Jesus. But week after week, she walked a tightrope to balance the network's demands with her Christian faith in order to reach the widest possible audience. After all, a prime-time TV program that tells millions of people every week that God loves them and has a wonderful plan for their lives is not such a terrible thing.

The work of other believers in the entertainment world may be less spiritually explicit, but is no less positive. Examples of this are the hit PAX TV shows *Doc* and *Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye*. Created by Dave Alan Johnson and Gary R. Johnson, both believers, the programs have hit a chord with viewers and been very successful, despite a



Lights! Camera! Take Some Action!

Six ways you can be involved in what's piped over the airwaves

BY BOB BRINER

Every Christian can influence TV programming in positive, productive ways that have a real impact. Here are a few ideas.

1. Watch good programs. Don't watch bad ones. If all the Christians in the United States would do these two things, television in America would change dramatically for the better. Television responds to one thing: number of viewers. If the church would coalesce around quality programs and eschew the bad ones, television would change for the better.

2. Train your children. Begin immediately to help your children with their TV choices. We need to train a generation of discriminating viewers.

3. Express your opinion. As an individual, express your opinion forcefully, rationally and with grace about what you like and don't like. Your individual voice will carry more weight than when it is lumped into some organization's petition. Your opinion about particular programming should go to the local station or cable system, the national network delivering it, the program sponsors, the production company, the TV critic of your local newspaper, and the editor of *TV Guide*.

4. See television as a ministry. We should see television as a mission field demanding a Christian strategy. How can your church impart this message to young people looking for an area in which to serve? How can our Christian schools train writers for television? How can advertising dollars be made available to support TV programming with Christian content? How can we impact mainstream television for good?

5. Focus on a positive strategy. Don't waste your money and efforts supporting blasters and boycotters.

6. Pray. Place on your prayer list Christians you know who are on the front lines trying, against very formidable odds, to bring a godly influence to the medium.

Adapted from *Roaring Lambs: A Gentle Plan to Radically Change Your World* by Bob Briner, copyright 1993. Published by Zondervan. Used by permission.



Getty Images

lack of high exposure in the secular press.

One of the most influential and respected Christians in the movie business today is Ralph Winter, producer of films such as *X-Men*, Tim Burton's recent remake of *Planet of the Apes*, *X2*, and some of the most successful Star Trek movies. He has an exclusive deal to produce major blockbuster "event" movies for 20th Century Fox Studios, and most of his films are budgeted in the staggering \$100 million range. But at the same time, Winter has been active in fostering, encouraging and helping Christians create smaller films that reflect biblical values. The difference between him and many other Christians who have attempted movies is that he absolutely will not compromise production values or storytelling.

"People come to a movie to be entertained first," Winter said in a recent interview. "We have to master the art of filmmaking and create a powerful story before we think about how we're going to put some kind of Christian message in the film. Most Christians fail in the film business today because even though their intentions are admirable, they haven't learned the art and skill of making a great movie. We have to earn the respect of the viewer if we're going to succeed."

Winter's extraordinary credentials in the industry have earned him the right to be heard. His box office results have garnered billions of dollars, and many Christians in Hollywood consider him a mentor and friend.

Scott Derrickson is a writer and director who is rapidly becoming one of the most sought-after screenwriters in the industry. He just finished a screenplay for Jerry Bruckheimer, who is generally considered to be the single most powerful producer in Hollywood. Just as many other Christians in the entertainment industry, Derrickson wants to be known both as a writer and a Christian, but not as a "Christian writer."

Derrickson explains: "Jesus didn't tell explicitly 'Christian' stories. Many of His parables were about everyday life, and they impacted people in a powerful way. I want the movies I work on to do the same thing. When you tell a great story, people drop their defenses and give you the opportunity to share profound truth. But if they feel like you're preaching to them, they'll quickly resist, and the opportunity is lost."

Besides Martha Williamson, the Foursquare family has its share of members who are making a difference in Hollywood, from legendary actor Dean Jones to Amick Byram—a noted vocalist and musical theater producer who was the singing voice of Moses in Disney's animated feature film *The Prince of Egypt*—to Gavin MacLeod of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *The Love Boat* fame. MacLeod's bold faith and determination to be a light in dark places have made him a source of inspiration to many younger Christians in the industry.

Foursquare people are even in TV commercials.

In his more than 25-year career, Mark Thomas has won virtually every major award in advertising and has just recently opened a new production company called Thomas/Winter/Cooke (TWC). In just a short time, TWC has produced national commercials for companies such as Home Depot and Verizon. Commercials exert a powerful influence on our culture and trigger major trends in fashion, style and behavior. There are plenty of other stories of Christian professionals in the industry: Todd Komanicki, producer of the Christmas film *Elf* starring Will Ferrell; *Extreme Days* screenwriter Craig Detweiler; Janet and Lee Batchler, writers of *Batman Forever*; actress Nancy Stafford, and more.

But the filmmaker currently in the news is Mel Gibson and his new film, *The Passion of the Christ*, which released February 25. A Catholic believer, Gibson has been one of Hollywood's highest paid actors, and his films have experienced extraordinary box office success. In recent years, however, he has moved from an action movie actor to a serious filmmaker pursuing mature themes of faith.

The Academy Award-winning film *Braveheart* established Gibson as a serious actor and director. But his most recent project, *The Passion of the Christ*, is the culmination of years of painstaking research on the last 12 hours of the life of Jesus. Gibson paid more than \$25 million of his own money to make the movie. Despite his status as a top box office draw and Oscar winner, however,

HOPE IN HOLLYWOOD

These organizations offer support to Christians in entertainment as well as information and opportunities for the rest of us to give spiritual support to those who make their living in the industry.

Hollywood Prayer Network
www.hollywoodprayernetwork.org

Hollywood Transformation Coalition
www.hollywoodtransformation.com

Master Media
www.mastermediaintl.org

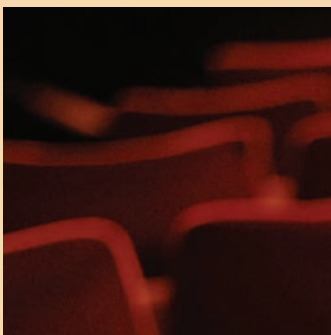
Act One
www.actoneprogram.com

Actors Co-Op
www.actorsco-op.org

Inter-Mission
www.inter-mission.net

Media Fellowship International
www.mediafellowship.org

Christians and Media
www.christiansandmedia.org



“If God chose to speak through a donkey, and if stones are capable of crying out in praise, then He certainly can work through the movie and TV industry.”

Hollywood's major studios shied away from distributing the film early on due to the controversy surrounding it.

Although the film was initially beset by charges of anti-Semitism and attacked by some Jewish leaders in the press, more recently many influential leaders of both Christian and Jewish backgrounds have defended it as possibly the single greatest film on the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ ever created. Even Pope John Paul II said, “It is as it was,” meaning he considered it an authentic portrayal of gospel accounts of the last hours of Christ's life. The film is based on gospel narratives and contains dialogue only in Latin, Hebrew and Aramaic, the vernacular of ancient Palestine. Christian leaders across virtually all denominational groups have recommended the film as a “must see” experience.

But these questions remain: Are these and other Christians making a difference in Hollywood and, if so, how can we support their efforts?

While the major stories of boycotts, controversy and condemnation sometimes make the headlines, few stories of hope ever do. And yet everyday in Hollywood, Christians experience situations that are a great encouragement to the body of Christ.

A director on a network series said, “I don't make a big deal to my fellow workers about being a Christian, but it's amazing how people who are experiencing a divorce or having family or drug problems always seem to seek me out.”

One film-crew member took the bold step of asking if she could pray with everyone before a big day at the studio. To her surprise, the series star stepped up and said, “I've always hoped someone would say that,” and the entire crew held hands and prayed.

Because of his Christian values, a writer refused a producer's request to include a violent rape scene in a script. He resigned from the show, thinking his career was over. But when he got back to his office, his desk was covered in phone messages from other producers “wanting to hire someone who had the guts to stand up for what they believed in.”

Yes, believers are making a difference in Hollywood.

If God chose to speak through a donkey, and if stones are capable of crying out in praise,

then He certainly can work through the movie and TV industry. But we need your help. Here's what you can do to make a difference in Hollywood:

- **Consider Hollywood a mission field.** We don't boycott or humiliate a tribe in Africa because they don't understand Christian values, so why do we do it to Hollywood? Let's begin approaching Hollywood as a mission field—people who are made in the image of God, but who need to know about His loving plan for their lives.

- **Support films with Christian values such as *The Passion of the Christ*.** It's absolutely critical that Hollywood studios realize there is an audience for films with a Christian worldview. I would especially urge you to see these movies on their opening weekends, since that's when studios make the decision about how long the films stay in the theaters.

- **Pray for Christians in the industry.** Every day, Christians are working in an often hostile environment in a heroic effort to write, act, direct and produce stories that celebrate faith in God. But we can't do it alone. We need the help of every Christian to provide the kind of prayer support that will open doors, soften hearts and, sometimes, make a way where there is no way.

- **Understand how the media can be used as a tool for evangelism.** Encourage Christian young people to pursue careers in the media, businessmen and women to fund Christian media projects, and churches to use the media in their outreaches. Movies, television and the Internet are the communication tools of this culture—if the church doesn't take them seriously, we'll lose a generation.

It doesn't take much looking around to see that, more and more, entertainment professionals are exploring themes of spirituality, redemption and faith. The question is, Is the church ready to point the way to the answers?

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