WHERE ARE ALL THE GREAT CHRISTIAN FILMS?

Joseph Holmes on What Christian Movies Can Be

If you're a Christian and you love movies, it's a question you've probably asked at some point. Maybe as a kid you cringed when watching *God's Not Dead*, or maybe as an adult you groaned as you flipped through the faith-based options on Netflix. You love your faith and you love movies and you hunger to see your faith in the movies you love. Yet there are so few truly great examples of faith in film. Even if you like Christian films, you would probably agree that there are scarcely any that reach the level of quality you get from the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, Madeleine L'Engle, or Dorothy Sayers. You know that Christianity is capable and worthy of that kind of beauty, creativity, richness, and transcendence. So why don't the movies reflect that?

Where are the truly great Christian films?

Most people who try to answer this question come up with mostly wrong answers. They do this because they are defining Christian films too narrowly. They watch *Fireproof, God's Not Dead 2,* and *I Can Only Imagine* and think that they've watched "Christian Films," but those are only a third of what can be categorized as Christian Film. Once we open up our analysis to all the different kinds of Christian cinema, we begin to see the real flaws that hinder Christian filmmaking in general.

There are really three types of Christian films: Christian Industry Films, Hollywood Christian Films, and Arthouse Christian Films. The following essay will break down each of these different types of films and show their particular strengths and flaws. From there, we can map out how these particular flaws are actually symptoms of broader problem shared by all of them. Finally, we will see how these flaws are really a lack of three traditional Christian virtues: humility, hospitality, and courage. Reclaiming those virtues is the secret to making great Christian films.

Christian Industry Films

Christian Industry Films are films made by Christians for Christians with explicitly Christian content that preach an explicitly Christian message.

These are the kind of films people typically think about when they think about Christian films. They are *Facing the Giants, Fireproof, War Room, Left Behind, God's Not Dead, Unplanned,* and *I Can Only Imagine*. The films usually deal with modern day Christians who struggle with their faith or non-Christians who ultimately find strength, healing, and redemption by choosing to trust in God. Some films are set in Biblical times (*Paul: Apostle of Christ*), and some have more topical conflicts such as abortion (*October Baby* and *Unplanned*) or racism (*The Grace Card* and *Woodlawn*).

Christian Industry Films are hands-down the most successful type of Christian films today. After *The Passion of the Christ* first proved there really is a modern market for faith-based films in 2004, *Fireproof* shocked Hollywood by becoming the highest grossing independent film of 2008 and 84th highest overall.[1] [2] *God's Not Dead* broke more barriers by making $60,755,732 at the box office and becoming the 54th highest grossing film of the

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[1] Alissa Wilkinson, "Mel Gibson's sequel to The Passion of the Christ will face challenges its predecessor didn't" *Vox*, last modified January 31, 2018.

https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/1/31/16955448/passion-of-christ-sequel-mel-gibson-jim-caviezel-hell

[2] Dale Buss, "What Christians Watch," *Wall Street Journal*, last modified January 21, 2009.
https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123249904737100583

year.[3] In 2018 *I Can Only Imagine* shocked everyone by becoming the highest grossing independent film of 2018 and the 37th highest-grossing film of the year.[4] (For comparison, *BlackkKlansman*, Spike Lee's Oscar-winning historical action-comedy was the next-highest grossing independent film that year and came in at 58th overall.) These are the movies that the "Christian Film Industry" has built itself around, with Christian film festivals like the Christian Worldview Film Festival and the International Christian Film and Music Festival showcasing many of these Christian Industry style films each year.

What makes these films so popular is that they represent Christians, their life experiences, their way of life, and their values from the perspective of Christians themselves rather than Hollywood. This shouldn't be of any surprise. Christian films are made by Christians to respond to the perceived lack of Christian values and reverence to God — and sometimes outright hostility — in mainstream entertainment.[5] In this sense, Christian Industry

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[3] "2014 Domestic Grosses," *Box Office Mojo,* https://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2014

[4] "2018 Domestic Grosses." *Box Office Mojo*. https://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2018

[5] Russ, "What Christians Watch."

Films are an attempt by Christians to represent the experiences of a population that Hollywood and independent cinema usually ignore — much as filmmakers like Jordan Peele (*Get Out*), Greg Berlanti (*Love Simon*), and Greta Gerwig (*Lady Bird*) try to do for black, LGBTQ, and female representation. Christians like seeing people onscreen who turn to God for help or yell at him in anger, who pray before dinner, and who see God working in their lives — just like they do.

The main problem with these movies is that most people think the they're terrible.

It's no secret that Christian films have a reputation for being really, really bad — even among Christians. Criticizing Christian films is practically a cottage industry these days. Dozens of articles and YouTube videos exist explaining what they think is wrong with Christian films.[6] There is even a regular podcast by atheists titled "God Awful Movies" which

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[6] Alissa Wilkinson, "I'm a Christian and I Hate Christian Movies," *Thrillist*, last updated March 30, 2016, https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/christian-movies-why-gods-not-dead-and-faith-based-films-hurt-religion.

picks a different Christian film each episode and mocks it. [7] [8] [9]

The main complaint people give about Christian films is that they're bad art. They're badly acted and they're badly written, with heavy-handed and long-winded dialogue, blunt messaging, and uninteresting camera movement and editing. They are made with a love for the message they're trying to send but don't seem to love the medium of filmmaking.

But the more fundamental accusation made against Christian films is that they are *dishonest.* Art is supposed to honestly explore and portray the world that we all live in so we can make better sense of it, yet Christian films have a habit of coming off as sanitized and manipulative presentations of reality rather than honest portrayals of it. Christian films almost always seem to have the characters' lives go great once they start trusting God — something every Christian knows often doesn't happen.

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[7] Andrew Barber, "The Problem with Christian Films," *The Gospel Coalition*, last modified August 18, 2014. https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-problem-with-christian-films/

[8] Josh Keefe, "Why Christian Movies are BAD | The Problem with Christian Media - Part 2," *YouTube*, last modified August 4, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50_3J6Go5Ng.

[9] "God Awful Movies," *Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/GodAwfulMovies/

Protagonists of Christian films trust God and then start winning football games (*Facing the Giants*), getting totally repaired marriages (*Fireproof* and *War Room*), finding the love of their life (*Christian Mingle*), and repairing race relations (*Grace Card* and *Woodlawn*). These films make faith look like a neat formula instead of the complex and difficult relationship that it really is. Atheists and skeptics are typically caricatured and straw-manned and then trounced on by the morally superior Christian leads (*God's Not Dead, God's Not Dead 2, Unplanned*) Further, the films are so sanitized in order to keep the films family friendly that none of the stories can honestly deal with how bad the world can get (*Timechanger* and *I Can Only Imagine*).

Jon Erwin of the Erwin Brothers acknowledged some of these flaws during the launch of their new film studio, Kingdom Studios.[10] But he also argued that Christian films have listened to those criticisms and are very quickly improving. He's not wrong. Just compare the quality and critical reception of early famous Christian films like *Left Behind* and *Fireproof* to recent high-profile ones like *The Case for Christ* and *I Can Only Imagine*.

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[10] "Kingdom Studios," *Kingdom is Coming*, https://www.kingdomiscoming.com

Christian Hollywood Films

The next type of Christian film is Christian Hollywood Films. These are the films that Hollywood puts out because they know that there is a market for stories that affirm and reflect the beliefs of a Christian audience. These are movies like *Noah, Exodus: Gods and Kings, Risen, Ben-Hur, The Ten Commandments, The Prince of Egypt, The Shack, King of Kings, The Robe, The Greatest Story Ever Told, The Last Temptation of Christ, Bruce Almighty,* and *Chariots of Fire.* Most of the films tend to be retellings of Bible stories — which makes sense, as they're big properties that exist in public domain so studios don't have to own the rights to them like superhero movies. But some are present-ish day stories like *Bruce Almighty* and *Chariots of Fire*.

Christian Hollywood Films have a long history in filmmaking and used to be quite successful. *The Ten Commandments, The Robe, and The Greatest Story Ever Told* were all very well-received in their time and are still considered classics today by both Christian and secular audiences. (The original *Ben-Hur* is still on the American Film Institute's 100 greatest films of all-time list.)[11] Hollywood had the

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[11] "AFI's 100 Greatest Films of All Time," American Film Institute, https://www.afi.com/100Years/movies10.aspx.

budget and the filmmaking expertise to take stories that were central to people's faith and put them on-screen in technicolor glory.

But by the 80s things had changed. Hollywood culture and Christian culture had parted ways. *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) was lauded by critics but angrily rejected by the Christian Right.[12] After that, Hollywood simply stopped making faith-based films or Biblical epics for a long time. *Chariots of Fire* (1981) was the last faith-based film to also be a successful mainstream film and win Best Picture. For close to a decade there were almost no Hollywood faith-based films and Biblical epics. *Bruce Almighty* tried to tell a faith-based parable about God teaching a self-centered man a lesson by giving the man his powers, but it was panned by critics for being too sentimental and rejected by Christians for its inappropriate sexual content. [13] [14] *The Prince of Egypt* was probably the only such film to get a positive response by both Christian and

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[12] "Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ," *PBS*, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/theater/lasttemptation.html

[13] "Bruce Almighty," *Rotten Tomatoes*, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/bruce_almighty

[14] "Bruce Almighty." *Plugged In*. https://www.pluggedin.com/movie-reviews/brucealmighty/

secular audiences, but it didn't really lead to any resurgence of faith-based filmmaking.

That all changed once *The Passion of the Christ* lit up the box office in 2004. Studios took notice and started developing films to capitalize on the Christian market.[15] They promoted *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* to Christian audiences with huge success and started developing biblical epics like *Noah* and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* to revive the Biblical epic genre.[16] But one after the other the Christian market rejected their offerings. *Noah* was panned by Christian audience for turning Noah into a crazy (attempted) baby killer, and *Exodus* was panned by Christian audiences for making Moses a schizophrenic terrorist.[17][18] After that, most Hollywood studios

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[15] Gale Schiller, "How effective is marketing to faith-based audiences?" *Hollywood Reporter*, last modified May 15, 2008, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/how-effective-is-marketing-faith-111852

[16] JNS World News, "Hollywood's Revisiting of Exodus Story a Part of Throwback 'Year of the Bible'," *Christian Post*, last modified February 28, 2014, https://www.christianpost.com/news/hollywoods-revisiting-of-exodus-story-a-part-of-throwback-year-of-the-bible.html

[17] Matt Walsh, "I'm a Christian and I think 'Noah' deserves a four star review," *The Matt Walsh Blog*, https://themattwalshblog.com/im-a-christian-and-i-think-noah-deserves-a-four-star-review/

[18] Erica Ritz, "Beck: New 'Exodus' Movie Makes Moses 'Arrogant' Before Turning Him Into a 'Terrorist'," *The Blaze*, last modified December 15, 2019.

stopped making faith-based offerings. The ones that did, such as Fox, kept the budget small, with Bible films like *Risen* and *Ben-Hur* and Christian best-selling book adaptations like *Heaven is for Real* and *The Shack.*

The problem with Christian Hollywood Films is that they don't understand faith. Or at least they don't understand the faith of their audience — in the same way that Christian Industry Films understand faith but not filmmaking. *Noah* and *Exodus* both told stories about faith from the perspective of an unbeliever; when Noah and Moses talk to God they appear insane and dangerous to both the other characters and the audience. *Bruce Almighty* literally had the lead character give his live-in girlfriend an orgasm from a distance with God-magic. These filmmakers are good filmmakers, but they are so far removed from the culture of the audience they were trying to reach that they didn't realize they were doing things that didn't appeal to them — or in some cases, deeply offended them. It's no different than fans of Star Trek who don't like the new J.J. Abrams movies because they aren't philosophical like the old TV show, Dr. Seuss fans who don't like the film adaptations of *The Cat in the Hat,* or Deadpool fans rebelling against his portrayal in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (before we got a faithful version in the

Deadpool movie).[19] [20] [21] People who are fans of the original source material — whatever it is — reject an adaptation if it loses the elements that made them fans in the first place.

Christian Arthouse Films

The final kind of Christian film is what I call Christian Arthouse Films. These are films made by independent filmmakers unaffiliated with the Christian Film Industry that tackle faith-based narratives, experiences, and questions. These films include *Winter Light, Silence, First Reformed, Calvary, Blue, The Innocents, Last Days in the Desert, Selma, Tree of Life,* and *Something, Anything.* These films are typically made by passionate and skillful auteur filmmakers who may or may not be religious but are interested in tackling religious subject matter with sensitivity. The films typically show a great deal of knowledge and excellence in the craft of

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19 Charlie Jane Anders, "10 Hit Movies That The Fans Hated," *GizModo*, last modified March 12, 2014, https://io9.gizmodo.com/10-hit-movies-that-the-fans-hated-1542301563

20 Channel Awesome, "Cat in the Hat - Nostalgia Critic," *YouTube*, last modified August 7, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0_W6gomFA8&t=1423s

21 Arye Dworken, "Revisiting the Strange Cinematic Debut of Deadpool," *Vulture*, last modified May 18, 2018, https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/revisiting-the-strange-cinematic-debut-of-deadpool.html

filmmaking. Like Christian Industry Films, these films typically deal with a modern-day (or sometimes historical) person struggling deeply with questions of faith and doubt. Unlike Christian Industry Films, Christian Arthouse Films do not attempt to fully answer the questions they raise or validate faith by the end of the movie.

The first notable thing about these films is that Christian film critics adore them. High profile Christian critics consistently shower them with praise, calling *Calvary* "a rapt combination of external suspense and internal scrutiny," *First Reformed* "bruising, vital, and one of the year's best films," *Something, Anything* "quiet, observant, provocative, and quite contrary to the popular narrative of American love stories," and *Silence* "beautiful, unsettling, and one of the finest religious

movies ever made." [22] [23] [24] [25] And for good reason. To Christian critics, these films offer everything Christian films should offer but don't: artistic excellence, nuanced characters and situations, honest struggles, lack of easy answers, and a Christian faith not obsessed with pushing a cultural or political agenda. These films do what art is supposed to do: express the aesthetic vision of the artist and prompt questions for the audience. That is why critics and bloggers understandably and consistently offer these films as alternatives to

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[22] Kyle Smith, "Why 'Calvary' is one of the year's most powerful films," *New York Post*, last modified July 30, 2014, https://nypost.com/2014/07/30/why-calvary-is-one-of-the-years-most-powerful-films/

[23] Alissa Wilkinson, "First Reformed, starring Ethan Hawke, is bruising, vital, and one of the year's best films," *Vox*, last modified May 25, 2018, https://www.vox.com/summer-movies/2018/5/25/17384654/first-reformed-review-paul-schrader-ethan-hawke-christian-movie

[24] Jeffrey Overstreet, "Something, Anything," *Patheos*, last modified February 21, 2015, https://www.patheos.com/blogs/lookingcloser/2015/02/the-looking-closer-beauty-pageant-contestant-4-margaret/

[25] Alissa Wilkinson, "Silence is beautiful, unsettling, and one of the finest religious movies ever made," *Vox*, last modified January 14, 2017, https://www.vox.com/culture/2016/12/21/14005760/silence-review-spoilers-martin-scorsese-andrew-garfield-adam-driver

Christian Industry Films and as a model for Christian filmmaking overall.[26] [27]

The problem? Christian audiences don't watch them. *Calvary* made $3,600,006 in 2014, which put it 103 spots behind *God's Not Dead* in the 2014 box office rankings.[28] *Silence* made $7,100,177 in *2016*, placing it 40 spots behind *God's Not Dead 2*.[29] Last year, *First Reformed* made a respectable $3,448,256 at the box office, which made it the 177th highest grossing film of last year and put it behind not only *I Can Only Imagine* but also Christian films *Paul: Apostle of Christ, God's Not Dead: A Light in the Darkness, Sampson, Unbroken: Path to Redemption,* and *Indivisible.*[30] Christian film critics may praise Christian Arthouse Films as the best kind of Christian film, but Christian audiences appear to disagree by voting with their wallet.

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[26] Joel Mayward, "The 'Faith' of Faith-Based Films: On Moralistic Therapeutic Deism in Christian Movies," *Joel Mayward*, last modified September 7, 2015, http://www.joelmayward.com/2015/09/the-faith-of-faith-based-films-on.html

[27] Wilkinson, "I'm a Christian."

[28] "2014 Domestic Grosses," Box Office Mojo, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2014

[29] "2016 Domestic Grosses," Box Office Mojo, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2016

[30] "2018 Domestic Grosses," Box Office Mojo, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2018

Many people see this as proof of the poor taste of Christian moviegoers. Tyler Huckabee, senior editor at *Relevant* magazine, put it this way when discussing the box office failure of *Silence*:

> Whatever other lesson might be learned, one will certainly sink in: there is no market for thoughtful, creative religious filmmaking, whatever those who rail against Meryl Streep might say. Conservative viewers of the Golden Globes might say they want Hollywood to reflect their values, but until they start buying tickets, it will be hard to take such language seriously. After all, if Martin Scorsese, Liam Neeson, Andrew Garfield and Adam Driver can't make a profitable faith movie, who can?[31]

I don't think this characterization of Christian audiences is quite fair. First, the fact of the matter is *no one* sees independent films very much. As I wrote on my blog *Overthinking Films,* independent films are risky to the average moviegoer.[32] Since

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[31] Tyler Huckabee, "Christians say Hollywood ignores them, But they ignore great films about faith," *Washington Post*, last modified January 17, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/01/19/christians-say-hollywood-ignores-them-but-they-ignore-great-films-about-faith/?utm_term=.b545eca336d8

[32] Joseph Holmes, "Why Don't People Watch More Independent Films? (Part 1)," *Overthinking Films*, last modified November 5, 2018, https://www.overthinkingfilms.com/home/why-don-t-people-watch-more-independent-films-part-1

moviegoers don't usually know the person making it (unlike the latest Marvel or Pixar movie), they can't rely upon the film to have a satisfying story (unlike a predictable romantic comedy), and they probably don't see the film's marketing. When you only see one movie a month those are big risks indeed. Honestly, as Huckabee alludes to himself, we have no idea how many Christians would watch these movies if they simply showed in places where more self-identified Christians lived. (Independent films tend to show mostly in NYC and LA.) Moreover, independent films tend to be made for filmmakers and people who went to film school and can pick up on the subtle technical accomplishments of sound and camera (*Blue, Wings of Desire* and *Silence*) or follow unconventional narrative structure (*Tree of Life*). In fact, in my experience, many indie filmmakers have a deep belief that film is not for the audience at all, but for the filmmaker. Film is made to fulfill the need for self-expression in the filmmaker, and whether there's an audience matters little. Since they care so little about having an audience, it's little surprise that their audience is so little too.

But I also think Christians are justified in passing on these films as *Christians*, not just as moviegoers. Because there are plenty of things in these films that

wildly miss the mark when it comes to representing faith on screen, many of them have flaws pretty identical to those in Christian Industry Films.

First, Christian Arthouse Films often seem to love doubt too much and love faith too little. Nearly every protagonist spends the entirety of the movie agonizing over doubts or questions about their faith that are never resolved (*Winter Light, Calvary, First Reformed* and *Last Days in the Desert*). Characters who do work through their doubts to a place of faith end up with a very vague and ambiguous faith (*Silence* and *Something, Anything*). The only characters who maintain the strength of their beliefs are non-Christians (*Winter Light, Innocents* and *Silence*). While Christian Industry Films portray doubt as an obstacle for the protagonist to struggle through to greater faith and certainty, Christian Arthouse Films portray doubt and ambiguity as the resolution to the story's conflict. The priest in *Winter Light* resolves his inner turmoil by deciding that Jesus also felt abandoned by God. *Silence* has its missionary protagonists all buckle under the challenges to their faith and replaces it with a more ambiguous, private faith. *First Reformed* takes its priestly protagonist to greater and greater doubt and cynicism about the church until a climax so

ambiguous that even the director isn't sure what happened.[33]

To fans of these films, this affirmation of doubt is exactly what they love about them. They like seeing doubt validated and honestly wrestled with without the pressure to wrap things up in a nice bow at the end. And, in a sense, they're right. Doubt is a part of the life of any believer and you should have the freedom to explore that in film.

The problem is, just as Christian Industry Films can portray a one-sided view of faith by too neatly resolving doubt, these films too ignore half of the Christian experience by failing to celebrate faith and certainty. Moreover, they're ignoring the part most believers actually like. Much of the Christian life for people who are committed believers is about pursuing joyous celebration of the truths about God and the world he made. The truth is that God is real; He saves; He brings joy, answers prayer, reconciles relationships, and conquers evil. Part of the reason Christians want to go to faith films in the first place is they want to see their experience of joy

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[33] Erica Cortellessa, "Paul Schrader on First Reformed's Provocative Ending and Its Many Influences," *Slate*, last modified June 13, 2018, https://slate.com/culture/2018/06/first-reformeds-ending-paul-schrader-explains-why-its-designed-to-be-ambiguous.html

represented on screen, too. They have little interest in seeing their joy in those realities torn apart.

Further, it's arguably a spiritual problem to love questions for their own sake and to not want any answers. In C.S. Lewis's book *The Great Divorce*, he portrays a character reluctant to go to heaven because someone from heaven tells him that he will get final answers to his questions there.

> "Well, really, you know, I am not aware of a thirst for some ready-made truth which puts an end to intellectual activity in the way you seem to be describing. Will it leave me the free play of Mind, Dick? I must insist on that, you know."
>
> "Free, as a man is free to drink while he is drinking. He is not free still to be dry."
>
> The Ghost seemed to think for a moment. "I can make nothing of that idea," it said.
>
> "Listen!" said the White Spirit. "Once you were a child. Once you knew what inquiry was for. There was a time when you asked questions because you wanted answers, and were glad when you had found them. Become that child again: even now."
>
> "Ah, but when I became a man I put away childish things."

> *"You have gone far wrong. Thirst was made for water; inquiry for truth."*[34]

Second, Christian Arthouse Films often traffic in simplistic and cliche narratives and caricatures. This might surprise people, since these movies sell themselves on being nuanced and complex, but these movies traffic in simplicity and cliche as much as Christian Industry Films; the difference is, the simplistic narratives are ones that validate the beliefs of arthouse film audiences rather than faith-based audiences. Christian Arthouse Films regularly utilize the tropes of oppressive and hypocritical religious people (*Winter Light, Innocents, Babett's Feast, Calvary,* and *First Reformed*), oppressive husbands or fathers holding the protagonist back from achieving their dreams (*Last Days in the Desert* and *Something, Anything*), the evil southern racists (*Selma*), and the greedy and corrupt businessmen polluting the environment and controlling everyone with their money (*First Reformed*). The most obvious example is *Something, Anything*; the entire plot recycles the cliche of the unhappy middle class white person who leaves their oppressive life to go on a vaguely spiritual quest for self-fulfillment that

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[34] C.S. Lewis, The Great Divorce (New York: HarperOne, 2000), 40. Digital Edition.

somehow leads them to hook up with a hottie at the end (e.g., *American Beauty, Fight Club, The Matrix,* and *Eat, Pray, Love*). This protagonist's story comes complete with a two-dimensional hatable ex-husband and unenlightened housewife friends who give her an excuse to go on a very unoriginal rant against children.

For many Christians, these cliches and caricatures are targeting them and their values. Christians generally value religion, marriage and family, and keeping the faith, but these movies portray these values as the problem which must be overcome. *Silence* is a good example of this. In an era where Christians are put under increasing pressure to surrender their beliefs in order to be compassionate to their neighbors, Martin Scorsese makes a movie that celebrates Christians who deny Christ out of compassion for their neighbors. To many people, these movies don't feel like simply "asking honest questions"; they're taking a side in the culture wars and they're taking the side against Christians.

This brings us to one unspoken reason people like the kind of Christian films they do: demographics. Christian Arthouse Films tend to validate the biases and values of people who live in coastal cities, and Christian Industry Films tend to

validate the biases and values of the midwest and the south. People who live in coastal cities who have a college degree tend to value self-expression, individual self-fulfillment, are single, are less religious and more vaguely spiritual, vote democrat, and are most concerned with issues like climate change and racism. These people deeply resonate with *Selma, First Reformed,* and *Something, Anything.* People who live in the midwest tend to value family more, value tradition, have less formal education, are more patriarchal, are more conservative politically, and are more concerned with the breakdown of traditional social institutions like the church, family, fatherhood, etc. These people deeply resonate with *God's Not Dead, Courageous,* and *Unplanned.* The contempt and indifference that Christians show for each other's movies is partly a sad reflection of the contempt we show for each other's values more broadly.

What's Next?

So we've broken down where these films go wrong. Where do we go from here? What can be done to make them better?

The problems with Christian films come down to not living out traditional Christian virtues in our filmmaking lives. As Christians we believe in the

virtues of humility, hospitality, and courage, but as filmmakers we are failing due to the lack of these virtues in our work.

First, we lack humility. We lack humility when we assume our films are portraying Christianity but they are really just portraying our particular tribe of Christianity; we portray people with coastal values as unchristian rather than simply coastal, or people with midwestern and southern values as unchristian rather than simply midwestern or southern. We lack humility when we think our film is capable of convincing people to change their hearts and minds if we just make the message explicit enough. We lack humility when we assume that we can make a religious film even though we are not religious. We lack humility when we assume that our own thoughts and feelings are so important that simply expressing them is the most worthy goal a film can have. To become better filmmakers, we need to be humble enough to change these attitudes which get in the way of the stories we desperately want to tell.

Second, we lack hospitality. We lack hospitality when we make films that ignore or treat with contempt people who are outside of our tribe. We lack hospitality when our films treat atheists as evil or stupid, religious people as crazy or oppressive, or

generally treat people with different values or demographics as one-dimensional caricatures. This tells anyone in those groups that they are not welcome here, and we should not be surprised when they believe us. We lack hospitality when we don't invite religious people to tell their own stories. We lack hospitality when we make movies that nobody can appreciate unless they've had four years of film school. We lack hospitality when we make movies for ourselves rather than for the people who watch them. We need to learn to love the people outside our in-group with our movies as much as we love people who are like us, and our audience as much as we love ourselves. Christianity is outward facing; it takes care of its own and then spreads that love outwards. For a Christian filmmaker, this includes the audience.

Finally, we lack courage. We lack courage when we don't do any of these things because we're afraid. We lack courage when we hit our audience over the head with our message because we're afraid of them missing the point. We lack courage when we don't ask our audience hard questions in our films because we're afraid of weakening their faith. We lack courage when we strawman our ideological opponents because we're afraid of audiences finding their view persuasive. We lack courage when we

don't invite Christians to tell their own stories with a Hollywood budget, or when we stop trying to tell those stories after one or two box office failures. We lack courage when we don't portray the beauty of religious certainty for fear of appearing corny or for fear of committing. We need the courage to act out of love and trust that God will take care of the rest.

I believe it is possible for Christian films to be challenging and affirming, to serve the faithful and the seeking, to serve the artist and the audience, to resonate with Christians on the coasts and in between, and to portray both doubt and certainty. I have seen enough glimmers of films that have done this. This year's *Breakthrough* showed how a movie can be comfortable with both faith and doubt by telling the story of how God miraculously healed a young man, while having the characters ask why God heals some people and not others. *Hacksaw Ridge* showed how to unite Christian and secular audiences by telling a story of a young man in the army standing up for his Christian beliefs that drew in acclaim and box office from Christian audiences *and* garnering six Academy Award nominations and two wins. *Believe Me* showed Christian films can do nail-biting satire by telling a story that pokes fun at Christian subculture while affirming central

Christian beliefs. I believe it is possible for these to be the rule, not the exception.

In fact, I know it is possible.
Because people have already done it.
With superhero movies.

I remember what it was like being a superhero fan before the explosion of superhero movies. It had been years since the last good superhero movie, and the culture's idea of a superhero was George Clooney in *Batman and Robin.* People thought superheroes were corny stories for children, but fans of comic books knew how great they could be. Finally comic book fans like Sam Rami and Kevin Feige brought to life movies like *Spider-Man, X-Men, Iron-Man* and *The Dark Knight*, which asked hard questions about responsibility, bigotry, and American foreign policy, while embracing the values and glee of its superhero comic book roots.

The Dark Knight in particular did everything that we just described we need in Christian films. No one would doubt that The Dark Knight is a superhero film. It has the costumes, the hero, the villain, the fights, the love interest, the climactic third act battle where the hero wins. But it also has some of the greatest challenges to the very idea of a superhero. It

challenges the idea of whether humanity is worth saving, whether it is possible to save, and whether it is possible to be a hero without being corrupted. It makes the best case possible that heroes aren't worth believing in, and then, in the end, it shows how it is possible to be a hero, how humanity can be saved, and why they are worth saving. It is both deeply honest and challenging but also completely affirming of the belief system at the heart of the superhero genre. It is a movie that film critics adored for its deep philosophical ideas and its skillful filmmaking and that audiences adored for its great action, characters, and celebration of heroic values. It is the one superhero movie of which I hear said constantly: "I don't really like superhero movies… but I love *The Dark Knight*."

That's what we need for Christian films.

I grew up being a Christian and loving movies, and I have been asking my whole life for Christian movies that can be both deeply honest and deeply affirming of that faith I hold so dear. It might be a surprise that the best model for doing that comes from superhero movies. But God has spoken is truth through stranger vessels than that. The question, as always, is whether we will listen.

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