

Faith on Film

The upcoming release of C.S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters is just one sign of the growing influence Christians are having on Hollywood.

During his six-year journey to make the movie *Amazing Grace*, producer Ken Wales visited St. Mary Woolnoth, the London church where the pastor and former slave trader John Newton wrote the beloved song for which the film was named.

Standing in the pulpit, Wales closed his eyes, imagining Newton reading the words of the poignant hymn that told about his life, how ashamed he was of it and how God had worked through him to help end slavery. He had been lost, but was found; was blind, but now could see.

“[‘Amazing Grace’ is] a retelling in a very poetic way of Newton’s life as a slave trader and how he was blind to what he was doing,” Wales says. “But the point of it is, no matter how far we pull away from God, He’s still able to reach out and offer us salvation and is able to save a wretch like us.”

Wales, a veteran filmmaker whose production credits include 1978’s *Revenge of the Pink Panther* and the television program *Christy*, sees that grace at work in Hollywood, where he says Christians are working to reform the world’s most influential art form. Thanks in part to the success of *The Passion of the Christ*, their efforts are gaining new momentum as studios show an unprecedented openness to faith-based films.

In recent years, seven major studios have opened divisions that target faith-based audiences. Through its FoxFaith subsidiary, Twentieth Century Fox is expected to release 12

faith-based films annually. Last fall, the Walt Disney Company announced plans to refocus on family-oriented content.

Bristol Bay Productions, the company that produced *Amazing Grace*, *Ray* and *Sahara*, is developing a film adaptation of C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*. Wales is working on *With Wings as Eagles*, a sequel to *Chariots of Fire*. And John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is in production.

"I think *The Passion of the Christ* really awakened a lot of people that there is a mass audience across middle America who is longing for movies that instead of trampling their faith, instead of trampling their values, that will honor those things," says Stephen Kendrick, executive producer of *Facing the Giants* and an associate pastor at Sherwood Baptist Church, an Albany, Georgia, congregation that financed the \$100,000 film.

Since its September 2006 release, *Facing the Giants* has grossed more than \$10 million, surprising most industry insiders. Similarly, filmmaker Tyler Perry's faith-based movies exceeded expectations. *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* grossed more than \$50 million after its 2005 release, and Perry's follow-up *Madea's Family Reunion* opened at No. 1 in February 2006, eventually grossing \$65 million.

The success of Perry's films has led to more offerings targeting African-American churchgoers. In addition to Perry's *Why Did I Get Married*, which hits theaters in November, films such as *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, whose cast includes Golden Brooks (*Girlfriends*) and Bishop Noel Jones of City of Refuge Church in Los Angeles, and *Mama I Want to Sing*, starring singers Ciara and Patti LaBelle, are being marketed to faith-based audiences.

Movies with redemptive themes have consistently earned more revenue than any other type of film, averaging \$39 million in 2006, up from \$5 million in 1993, according to Movieguide's recent annual report to the entertainment industry. The report found nearly 50 films were released in 2006 with positive Judeo-Christian content. That's up from only one movie in 1985 when Movieguide first began reviewing films.

"I'm always hesitant to be a prognosticator of the future, but Hollywood looks like it's much more in the midst of a revival than the rest of the country," says Ted Baehr, publisher of Movieguide and chairman of the Christian Film and Television Commission.

And although greed may be motivating studios to scramble for a share of the faith-based market—(The Passion of the Christ grossed more than \$1 billion worldwide)—the interest has brought Christians genuine influence in Hollywood, observers say.

"More and more Christians are entering very influential places in the media industry," says Phil Cooke, president and creative director of Cooke Pictures. "In the last several years, we've seen a real growth in the momentum of Christians in Hollywood—people making a difference. We are starting to see a real impact."

Inside Hollywood

Not long ago, those in the industry who revealed their faith risked losing their careers. "Many of them still live like Superman with secret identities," Baehr says.

But today, more Hollywood insiders are open about their faith, including X-Men and Fantastic Four producer Ralph Winter and actor Stephen Baldwin, who accepted Christ after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Famous for his roles in The Usual Suspects and 8 Seconds, Baldwin stars in the Christian drama Midnight Clear, which releases in theaters in December, and the end-times thriller Six: The Mark Unleashed.

He believes the entertainment industry is in need of a revolution. "If you look at most of the films that come out of Hollywood, some awful, horrible, sad and depressive thing needs to transpire," he says. "It's unfortunate that an industry that has so much influence can't really create more content with more positivism."

George Barna, chairman of The Barna Group and Good News Holdings, a film production company co-founded by Paramount Pictures veteran David Kirkpatrick, said five of the top seven influences on the public include media: movies, television, music, the Internet and books.

"When we look at people with automatic entry into people's hearts and minds, it's the people who have effectively used the media to tell stories or to communicate a particular message," Barna says.

The California-based researcher says his firm has found that Hollywood is changing society's understanding of right and wrong. "That is the heart of the culture war taking place in America now—who determines what is right or wrong. Is it the individual, or is it God?" Barna says.

But even as Christians are making inroads into the global seat

of influence, Hollywood insiders worry that too many movies with low budgets, poor quality and amateurish-acting could burn out the studios and the audience.

“There are people who have released films with Christian content who felt the market was soft and won’t do it again,” Baehr says. “Hollywood is a little fickle. When you throw out cheesy Christian movies that bomb at the box office, Hollywood blames the genre, instead of blaming the quality of the movie.”

One film that didn’t do as well as expected at the box office was *The Nativity Story*. Observers say a variety of factors could be at play, including a script that sanded down a lot of the rough edges. “A lot of Christian films are famous for that,” Cooke says. “For instance, the scene where Herod killed all the baby boys under 2 years old was pretty much glossed over, and that was a pretty horrific event. The film overall is a terrific story, but they tried to make the story too nice.”

Also, New Line Cinema marketed *The Nativity Story* with what is known as event marketing, which hypes a film just before its release as a “big event that breaks like a tidal wave on the beaches of Malibu,” Baehr says. “But church marketing is 180 degrees opposed to event marketing. The church didn’t know about this movie.”

Although *The Nativity Story* wasn’t as profitable as *The Passion of the Christ*, Cooke says he doubts New Line Cinema will abandon the genre. “I think ultimately New Line Cinema probably got burned a little bit, but they probably realize that’s because of their project and not the market,” he says. “There is a lot of buzz going on in town about the faith-based

market.”

On the other hand, the film *Amazing Grace*—about British politician William Wilberforce’s 20-year fight to abolish the slave trade—received standing ovations. Producer Wales believes the reaction is due to the fact that audiences are inspired by both the famous hymn and the story of a historically overlooked hero who—because of his faith in God—sought to enter politics and help correct an injustice.

“I think part of the difficulty with much of the Christian productions is trying to overload it with such strong Christian content that viewers who may not be Christians are either disappointed, put off or don’t feel a part of the story,” Wales says. “Most people said *Amazing Grace* was right on target, and it’s Christianity in action.”

The Rev. Edward McNulty, a retired Presbyterian minister who is now editor of the film review Web site *VisualParables .net*, says filmmakers should take their cues from Jesus, who often spoke in parables to convey important truths.

“Jesus challenges us with His stories, challenges some of our prejudices, and I think good films can do that as well,” McNulty says. “They can enlarge our understanding, deepen it and make us feel sympathy toward people. Most of Jesus’ stories are everyday stories, but He used them to point to a religious concern, mainly trying to get people to understand what the kingdom of God is like.”

Supernatural Thrills

Offerings for faith-based audiences are growing more diverse

and sophisticated. A script is being written for *The Screwtape Letters*, the famous 1942 C.S. Lewis book that tells the story in the form of a series of letters from a senior devil, Screwtape, to his nephew, a junior tempter, Wormwood, on ways to secure the damnation of an earthly man. Filming is expected to begin next year.

"We're going to try to be faithful to the book," producer Winter says. "It's a piece of literature that is well-written, interesting, and it looks at the spiritual realm in an odd way. ... It looks at it from the perspective of a senior demon teaching a junior demon how to keep humans away from God.

"We're also making some movies based off of books by Frank Peretti and Ted Dekker—*House*, *Three*, *Skin* and *The Visitation*. Those are all supernatural thrillers. There is an audience that is interested in that genre. We're exploring it. But *The Screwtape Letters* is at another level. It's much bigger."

Director Scott Derrickson, co-writer of the *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, is currently developing John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the biblical story of Lucifer's leading a rebellion against God and being cast down from heaven to Earth, where he tempts humanity.

The Legendary Pictures film, which has a \$100 million budget, is expected to use recent advances in computer animation to depict Milton's imagery of spiritual warfare, including scenes in heaven of angels in battle. "What used to be limited to our imagination ... can now be realized in this computer-savvy digital era," says Craig Detweiler, co-director of Reel Spirituality and head of the Fuller Theological Seminary Film Studies Department.

“So I think you are going to start seeing more fantastic stories, more mythical stories and more magical stories like The Screwtape Letters and Paradise Lost in the days and months to come. In the past, your imagination was limited by your budget. But now with new technology, it’s so affordable and so available that you can let the technology catch up with the creativity of God.”

But Cooke is concerned that Christians, having finally broken through the gates of Hollywood, could once again retreat into their own subculture of producing entertainment for themselves. “The big thing I’m worried about in the Christian media world is that we’ve created our own ghetto, our own bubble of Christian publishing, Christian radio, Christian TV, Christian movies and Christian music,” he says. “As a result, we’re producing media projects for each other, but not impacting the larger culture.”

The solution is better storytelling, better acting and higher quality productions, Cooke says. “Just like Michelangelo [believed], God doesn’t settle for second-rate,” says John Ware, founder and executive director of the 168-Hour Film Project, a speed filmmaking competition where producers have a week to make a short movie based on a Bible verse.

Numerous efforts are under way to improve the quality of Christian films. Cooke and Winter are co-chairs of the Biola University Studio Task Force, an organization of about 100 Christians in highly placed industry positions who support the university’s strong programs to train up a generation to work in Hollywood.

Behind the scenes, television producer Karen Covell,

challenging people to view Hollywood as the world's most influential "mission field," formed the Hollywood Prayer Network, which involves thousands of people around the globe praying for celebrities and industry executives.

"Hollywood will not change until the hearts of the people who are making the projects change," Covell says. "Christians outside of Hollywood are angry at Hollywood. They think it's Satan's pit here. If Christians could take that energy and pray for people here, instead of boycotting films, it will send a message of love and help Christians understand that God is the only one who can change Hollywood."

Another organization, Act One, has trained more than 300 Christian scriptwriters in the art of storytelling. Its faculty includes more than 50 Christian writers working in Hollywood. "This movement is much larger than people would expect," says Chris Riley, director of Act One's writing program.

Dean Batali, former executive producer of That '70s Show who is trying to get Hollywood to produce television scripts with Christian characters, says the possibilities for these types of shows are endless, but Hollywood has been reluctant to produce them.

Batali has encouraged television networks to produce a show called Youth Group, noting that half of American teenagers attend church youth groups. Batali has written a pilot television show called Seven Hills, which is similar to the Buffy the Vampire Slayer scripts Batali wrote, but features Christian teenagers.

"I'm not just talking about safe, pretty shows that are boring," Batali says. "I'm talking about teen shows with maybe some supernatural elements and quirky shows. This is a big and interesting debate. Most Christians I know love the X-Files because it has to do with bigger themes about life, truth and faith."

In an unexpected move, TBS ordered 100 episodes of Tyler Perry's House of Payne, a comedy about a multigenerational, working-class African-American family that debuted in June amid a church-based marketing campaign. The premiere episodes set a cable record for sitcom airings, with each drawing more than 5 million viewers.

As a new generation picks up the mantle to help redeem Hollywood, Wales says filmmakers should focus first on telling compelling, first-rate stories. "I'm a real big fan of telling the great story," says Wales, also a University of Southern California film professor. "The three most important parts of filmmaking are story, story and story, no matter how much technology improves."

And like the ones told by the greatest storyteller in history, Wales recommends filmmakers look for the metaphoric thread, or parable, that expresses the universal predicament of the human spirit—a predilection to stray off the right path, but a way to find the road back to redemption through God's incredible grace.

That's what most impressed Wales about Wilberforce and made him passionate about telling the reformer's tale. "For me, it was very much admiring what he did—his tenacity," Wales says. "I certainly know about that perseverance. It took me 19 years to do Christy. When you have a dream and an obsession to do

something worthwhile, you are tenacious and don't let go.

"Wilberforce was derided by his colleagues ... but he persevered until the abolishment of the slave trade became the law. He very much wanted to right a wrong. And I very much believe in that."

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