

Hollywood's Church

Underground

Christians behind the scenes of today's movies say God is working to redeem the film industry.

You've been working hard all day, and you want some light entertainment. You remember this was the hour Little House on the Prairie used to air, so you figure you're in for something wholesome. Instead, a program about several unmarried young adults, each involved in a sexual relationship, comes on.

You take your 13-year-old daughter to see Queen Latifah's movie Beauty Shop, thinking it can't be too bad. Instead, you're embarrassed by the frequent raunchy references to sex acts and body parts.

If you think entertainment wasn't always this debased, you're right. And if you're wondering whether Christians can do anything about the current situation, the answer is yes.

This isn't the first time the cultural climate has been favorable to offensive media, however. Many films made during the Roaring '20s featured explicit sex, violence, profanity and blasphemy. Christianity and clergy were often ridiculed on the screen.

During that decade, attempts at censorship on the local and state level met with mixed success. God's people had to rise up and act in concert to bring change.

In 1934, the Roman Catholic Church formed the Legion of Decency to help reverse the trend toward immoral films. Parishioners were urged from the pulpit to boycott movie

theaters until Hollywood changed its ways.

The legion helped to enforce the Motion Picture Production Code, a set of guidelines developed in 1930 to govern the content of films. For more than 30 years, Christians of various denominations read every script from every major studio in the light of this code.

If a picture conformed to the code, it received the Code Seal. If not, many theaters would not show it. The church exercised godly stewardship over the moral climate of the country.

Protestants worked with the Roman Catholics during the 1930s until a growing distrust of Catholics caused Protestant representation to wither. Not until 1948, with the creation of the Protestant Film Commission (PFC), was there an organized presence of Protestantism in Hollywood.

In the late 1950s, censorship efforts weakened. The Legion of Decency stopped warning people to stay away from bad movies and began only commending good movies. By 1975, the organization had virtually ceased to exist.

The PFC initially was under the umbrella of the liberal National Council of Churches. In the 1960s, the council dismantled the PFC on the grounds that mainline Protestants no longer “[are] concerned with condemning sex and violence or immorality and futility, but are interested in films which are honest in their portrayal of the human situation.”

Not long after, what we now call R-rated movies started being produced. It wasn't that Hollywood threw out the church and

its restraining force. Rather, the church abandoned its call to be salt and light. When it did, the era of Christian-led decency in Hollywood came to an end.

Cleaning Up the Big Screen

As the moral quality of movies degenerated, many individuals heard God's call to action. Currently, several dozen Christian ministries are active in Hollywood ministering in various ways to people in the film and television industry. You might say they are Hollywood's underground church.

Many ministry leaders, while acknowledging there's considerable room for improvement, cite trends that give cause for rejoicing. Two men making a difference are Larry Poland, Ph.D., and Ted Baehr.

Poland, founder and CEO of Mastermedia International, builds relationships with Hollywood decision-makers, presents the gospel to them and then discipless those who come to Christ.

"God is at work in the industry," he says. "There's a hunger and an openness to the gospel on the part of Hollywood persons of influence. And there are growing numbers of believers in prominent places in the business."

Poland says he once led a network vice president to Christ. Afterward, the man instinctively started red-penciling bad words out of scripts that landed on his desk.

Poland's ministry publishes a quarterly prayer calendar naming Hollywood media personalities and decision-makers. He says

that many media people-believers and nonbelievers-express appreciation for Christians' prayers.

If Poland is an evangelist, Baehr is a researcher and lobbyist. He is founder and chairman of The Christian Film & Television Commission and publisher of Movieguide magazine.

Baehr's research demonstrates that wholesome movies do much better at the box office, and he shares his findings with heads of studios. His research shows that although in 1985 there were only six movies aimed at families, in 2003 the number made represented more than 40 percent of the total.

"The chairman of a major studio recently told me that he attributed these shifts directly to our influence and our economic benchmarking of the entertainment industry," he says.

Movieguide () helps Christians make wise entertainment choices by publishing reviews of movies currently playing. In addition to putting out this publication, Baehr also hosts the increasingly popular Movieguide Annual Faith & Values Awards Gala and Report to Hollywood in Beverly Hills, California, at which awards are given for television programs and movies, and to actors based on wholesomeness of values presented.

This awards show is attracting increasing attention from Hollywood decision-makers, some of whom have come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior at the event. Even the media is taking note; the 2005 gala garnered a segment on NBC Nightly News.

In spite of the efforts that have been made to clean up the big screen, however, there is still much to be done.

Christians must continue to work to reform the entertainment industry. Here's why:

First, though we rejoice that movies and television programs with wholesome, redemptive-even specifically Christian-themes do get produced, they are not the majority of visual media made, and their effect doesn't last long. Dave Johnson, a Christian and the creator-producer of TV series *Doc and Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye*, comments, "The effect of one good movie like *The Passion of the Christ* quickly wears off. We must keep the effort going."

Second, media influence attitudes and behaviors. A recent article in *Newsweek* gives a significant example. The article states that Emory University researchers Ralph DiClemente and Gina Wingood tracked the disrespectful lyrics of rap songs and found a greater incidence of lowered self-esteem and associated risky behaviors in girls who frequently viewed rap videos.

Third, our national security is at risk. Though we do not condone the actions of terrorists, we can understand why many in the Muslim world view America as a moral cesspool, out to corrupt the nation's children.

Christian businessman David McQuade says, "Perception is reality a half a world away, and with each morally irresponsible motion picture or television show we export, we add to an already deadly cocktail of misperception-it has literally become a matter of national security."

What Can We Do?

Many conservative Christians are no longer willing to live self-protectively, letting the world become an ever-worsening cesspool. They now acknowledge Christians have a divine custodial mandate to change society. However, not all responses are wise or helpful; in fact, some are actually counterproductive. For example:

1. **Forbidding people from watching movies and television.** Many people thus “forbidden” respond by viewing on the sly, gravitating to programs worse than those they might normally have watched. A July 2004 study by evangelical Christian George Barna revealed that evangelical Christians were among the most frequent moviegoers. Simplistic commands to stay away from the media are no substitute for godly guidance.
2. **Viewing only those Christian-produced movies often shown at church on Sunday nights.** Many of them are amateurish and turn off the brightest of our youngsters. Most who view “Christian movies” still go to the theater or buy or rent DVDs to see something done well.

Further, few such Christian movies impact our culture. They do not improve the quality of the movies most people see.

3. **Engaging in angry denunciations and personal insults.** Many non-Christians in Hollywood are sincere, family-oriented people. They do not set out to corrupt the morals of young people.

They are people who want to tell a story, although-since they are not Christians-their understanding of what is good and wholesome sometimes differs from ours. Graciously and humbly show them the negative results in the lives of those who view their movies and programs.

Our approach must be the same even with those who do have an anti-Christian agenda. We won't get secular media moguls to produce more wholesome entertainment by insulting them. Jesus never railed against the Roman guards even when they were beating Him.

4. **Using a lack of wisdom in protesting.** Picketing a movie because it portrays New Age spirituality or has foul language or excessive sex or violence does not deter people from seeing it and often calls attention to a movie people might otherwise have ignored. Research indicates, however, that boycotting a movie portraying Jesus in a blasphemous way does deter many people from attending.

So what can you do? A lot!

5. **Pray.** Pray for Christians ministering to the entertainment industry. Pray for actors, writers, directors, behind-the-scenes people, producers, and cultural movers and shakers. Use Mastermedia International's Media Leader Prayer Calendar (see article on page 46) to help focus your prayers.
6. **Be media-wise.** People who enjoy movies and television like to know how a story is constructed and how music, lighting and camera angles make a difference. Use their interest as a springboard to teach how to discern hidden agendas and non-Christian worldviews.

Also, train people to ask questions about what they watch. Is what is portrayed true to life? If you or your friends spoke or acted this way, would the results you see depicted on the screen reflect what would really happen to you? Teach people how the scriptwriter, producer and director of a television program or movie can subtly influence viewers' beliefs through how they unfold a story.

7. **Apply pressure.** Write to the heads of television and movie studios. TV Guide lists names and addresses of the networks in each issue. Movieguide lists the same for heads of movie studios.

Make sure your letter is brief, neat and not mass-produced. Tell them you are offended by certain language or actions and you and your family will not in the future patronize the studios that produce such entertainment. Similarly, write to the sponsors.

8. **Be polite!** “The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (James 1:20, NKJV). Polite protests work; shrill denunciations do not. Creative people often come from a different subculture. It’s not that they despise the rest of Americans; they are not aware of us, or when they are they have a negative impression, often fostered by our less than Christ-like actions.
9. **Support ministries that are making a difference.** Financially support one or more of the Hollywood-based ministries (see article on page 46). Get others in your church to join you.
10. **Attend movies that reflect your worldview-preferably during the first week the movies are in the theaters.** It’s during the initial release period that a buzz is created and financial success is determined.

Most churchgoers didn’t support Luther. As a result the movie did poorly at the box office and its financiers are not likely to do other films.

Christians did support Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ, talking it up among friends. As a result, the movie became a major news story and thousands of people who otherwise

wouldn't have gone to it, saw the film.

Mark Joseph, producer of The Passion of the Christ CD, says, "Attending is like voting. Your attendance or nonattendance determines what kind of movies get made." So don't go to movies that portray a lifestyle you, as a Christian, cannot support. Your attendance at such movies only assures more like it will be made.

Baehr's research indicates that in 2004, movies with no sex made on average \$39.9 million; movies with some depicted sex averaged \$25.9 million; and movies with excessive, extensive or graphic sex averaged less than \$6.3 million. As we support what is wholesome, we encourage business people to do the right thing, even if for merely financial reasons.

11. **Work in the entertainment industry.** During the last decade the number of people hearing a "Macedonian call" to work in the industry has gone from a trickle to a flood.

Thom Parham, Ph.D., associate professor of cinema and broadcast arts at Azusa Pacific University, encourages people to respond to God's call to the arts: "The best place to start is by tapping into a community of artists in your own area. Find people who are good mentors who will critique as well as commend."

Johnson offers a series of steps for answering the call: "First, pray. Second, discern what part of the business you're gifted in. Not everyone is called to be an actor or a writer. Some are called to be makeup artists, set designers or lighting technicians.

“Third, be the very best you can at what you’re gifted in. Fourth, start at the bottom and work hard. Fifth, stay close to God and let Him guide your career.”

Baehr’s just-published *So You Want to Be in Pictures* is an excellent primer on the basics of how to prepare for a career in entertainment. Also, Christian colleges and universities offer degrees in various aspects of theater, film and television. ActOne: Writing for Hollywood offers briefer courses in screenwriting at locations around the United States.

Doug Folsom, a clergyman and actor, suggests that a person interested in pursuing a career in Hollywood should contact a Hollywood-based ministry and “go check out the scene.” Hollywood Connect Orientation Sessions () are designed for Christians trying to enter the entertainment industry.

Folsom notes that there is a tremendous hunger among Hollywood professionals for connectedness, belonging and caring. You may be called to help bring Him to someone in Hollywood.

12. **Invest financially.** Hollywood runs on money. Things are afoot there to enable Christians to invest in producing wholesome, God-honoring movies.

Whenever you get discouraged about what’s being offered on the big screen, remember: God has always responded to the pleas of His people. Revivals have occurred, and society has been transformed. A major change occurred in Hollywood in the 1930s-and with our help, such a turnaround could happen again.

Mark A. Pearson is the author of *Christian Healing: A*

Practical and Comprehensive Guide. He conducts evangelistic, teaching and healing crusades in churches around North America. Contact him at i4cr@.

Quiet on the Set

These four Christian organizations are making a subtle impact in Hollywood.

The Christian Film & Television Commission

Led by Ted Baehr, this organization is dedicated to revising the values of the entertainment media according to biblical principles by influencing industry executives and informing and equipping the public to be active, media-wise consumers. It produces Movieguide, which helps readers discern which movies to watch, and hosts the Movieguide Annual Faith & Values Awards Gala and Report to Hollywood, which bestows awards on television programs, movies, actors and actresses. For more information: 1151 Avenida Acaso, Camarillo, CA 93010; movieguide@; 805-383-2000; .

Mastermedia International

Led by Larry Poland, Ph.D., Mastermedia provides professional consulting and personal counseling to media professionals. The organization publishes The Media Leader Prayer Calendar to encourage Christians to pray for media leaders and cultural influencers, and The Mediator, a newsletter intended to create awareness of the impact of media on individuals, the family, the church and society. It also hosts the annual National Media Prayer Breakfast (). For more information: 330 North Sixth Street, Suite 110, Redlands, CA 92374; info@; 909-335-7353; . In New York: 132 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10016; 212-696-9351.

Hollywood Prayer Network

Led by director Karen Covell, HPN has launched a growing movement of prayer for the world's most influential mission field: the entertainment industry. They line up prayer partnerships called I to I so that every missionary in Hollywood can be prayed for. They invite churches, parachurch organizations and individuals to commit to pray for all aspects of the entertainment industry and supply monthly prayer requests, praise reports and news to partners. For more information: 1763 N. Gower St., Hollywood, CA 90028; hollywoodprayernet@; 323-462-8460, ; .

Act One

Led by founder-director Barbara Nicolosi, this interdenominational group trains Christians for careers in mainstream film and television. Act One offers summer programs for aspiring writers and executives, a series of weekend screenwriting seminars held around the country, and many other programs and services. Nicolosi is co-editor of the recently released book *Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film and Culture* (Baker Books). For more information: 2690 Beachwood Drive, Lower Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90068; info@; 323-464-0815; .