

No More Nice Christian Movies

David Cunningham has captured Hollywood's attention with his new movie, *To End All Wars*. But don't expect it to resemble the squeaky-clean Christian movies of the last decade.

After weeks of trying to land an interview with David Cunningham, director of the recently released World War II movie *To End All Wars*, I finally have him on the phone. But before I can even explain the angle of the story I am pursuing for *Charisma*, Cunningham apologizes for the phone calls he is going to take during the interview.

"We're in the middle of what we think is closing another deal on another movie," he says. "If the deal closes today I'll be catching a plane in about an hour and a half. This has all happened really, really fast."

Indeed. Before *To End All Wars*, which is produced by Gumshoe Productions and Argyll Film Partners, Cunningham was little known for the documentaries he made. But within the last year, thanks in part to *To End All Wars*, Cunningham has captured the attention of several studio bosses including Steven Spielberg, who recently asked him to direct a project.

On this day, Cunningham is in Kona, Hawaii, doing research for a movie. Though his schedule is hectic he has taken time to talk with me—with the added caveat of his taking other calls. After introductions the interview is only seconds under way when I hear the ring of a cell phone—his—over the line. "Hang on a second," he says. "Let me get rid of this other one here."

Such is the life of an up-and-coming director in Hollywood, a

reporter on one line and an agent on another.

Minutes later he returns to our conversation. As we talk I note that his easygoing attitude is complemented by a restrained intensity and passion for telling stories. "My life's mission is to challenge and shape culture through film," he tells me. "I want my films to connect with people and touch their hearts."

Though Cunningham, 31, is the son of missionaries Loren and Darlene Cunningham, founders of Youth With A Mission, he has no ambition to become a minister. Instead, he says, he pursues filmmaking, an art he fell in love with as a teenager.

Recalling the day when he first looked through a movie camera, when he was 19, he says: "I knew from that moment on, making movies is what I wanted to do. Since then I have focused on learning the craft and business and trying to find stories that are relevant and can make a difference."

So far he has done both well. Like his parents, he too is a missionary (though not by title or definition) in Hollywood, a place none too familiar or all that comfortable with his brand of spirituality. But like the actors Cunningham directs, he also is on stage—a stage he hopes to use as a platform to shape culture and society, and maybe even give audiences glimpses of his faith.

As evidenced in *To End All Wars*, which had a \$14 million budget and is based on a true story told by Ernest Gordon in his book *Miracle on the River Kwai*, Cunningham's attempt to merge a Christian worldview with top-notch entertainment actually works.

"This is the only movie I have heard about that deals with reconciliation between enemies within the context of war," he says. "I was gripped by this true story of POWs who were tortured and abused but through it all decided to forgive their enemies."

Though the film is laced with biblical truths and features the trials of at least one Christian POW, it is not a celluloid gospel tract. In fact, some say, it shouldn't even be considered a Christian film because of its use of extreme violence and cursing, both of which contributed to the film's R rating. Yet despite, or maybe because of, its unusual melding of spiritual matters and realities of war, Christian and secular critics have taken notice of this raw and sometimes disturbing film.

"This is a powerful and profound movie, one that deserves praise and attention and discussion and emulation," writes a Books & Culture critic of To End All Wars in the magazine's July-August edition. "The way I reckon, it is the Christian film to end all Christian films."

Not Showing in a Church Near You

The Delancey Street Viewing Room in San Francisco is near capacity. Hip 20-somethings chat as couples in their 50s and 60s sit quietly waiting for the private screening of To End All Wars.

"I hope this isn't another one of those Christian movies like The Omega Code," one young Abercrombie & Fitch disciple says to his date, loud enough for those of us within earshot to hear. "I don't think I could sit through something like that

on a Friday night.”

Within minutes we, the viewers, are thrust into a Japanese POW camp in Thailand during World War II. For the next two hours we are confronted with the hardships POWs suffered at the hands of Japanese captors who practiced Bushido, a ruthless system of cruelty toward one’s enemies and misguided dedication.

“[To End All Wars] was unrelenting and at times hard to take,” says a 34-year-old pastor who was at the screening, but asked to remain anonymous (because of the film’s R rating). “A few times I wanted to close my eyes. But even if it’s not a Christian movie, the spiritual principles still point people to the cross.”

Whether for marketing reasons or because of a true conviction that it is not a Christian film, Cunningham almost recoils at the notion that his film might be classified as a Christian film.

“This is not a Christian movie, and we don’t want it portrayed as one,” he says. “There are strong gospel truths in this movie, but they are not meant to be evangelistic tools, they are meant to sow seeds and challenge. This story is a very unreligious portrayal of the gospel.”

Such “unreligious portrayals of the gospel” are starting to catch on among filmmakers who are Christians. The reason being that mainstream audiences have shown time and again that they are not interested in slapping down \$8 to see sappy-sweet characters who always drop to their knees at the right moment to commit their lives to Christ in overtly religious

portrayals of the gospel. Instead, Cunningham and others have learned, or are learning, to embrace the formula mainstream audiences have come to expect, and what producers and critics demand. And that is simply to tell a good and truthful story—no matter what.

In the past, those who have attempted to make a film with an intentional Christian worldview have neglected the story they were trying to tell, say many people Charisma interviewed, favoring the message they were trying to convey.

“[Christian filmmakers] need to be committed to their story rather than the use of their story,” says Robert K. Johnston, 56, a professor of theology and culture at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California, and author of *Reel Spirituality*. “The obligation of the Christian artist is to be an artist who creates from out of his or her personal center of faith. The artist is not first of all an evangelist or teacher. Though those are noble, those are not the filmmaker’s profession. An artist’s responsibility is to create a story on screen that engages the viewer and invites the viewer into a new reality or perception of life.”

Craig Detweiler did just that with *Extreme Days*, a film he wrote and one many people consider to have broken new ground for the Christian film genre. “The people who made [Extreme Days] are people of faith, and hopefully it reflects our values, perceptions and our Savior,” says Detweiler, 37, who is currently writing a teen comedy for the makers of *American Pie*. “But I don’t know what a Christian film is. Usually, to me, that means something that is amateur, poorly acted, under budget, hokey and preachy. My goal was definitely not to make that.”

Yet Detweiler's faith does suffuse *Extreme Days*, which was released last year, had a \$1 million budget and is rated PG for its sometimes crude humor. The film's plot has four friends on a road trip seeking extreme sports thrills. Yet after meeting up with a young woman who has a strong faith and cogent morals, the friends learn much about life and God. But Detweiler says the film never becomes Christian propaganda.

"A film is an opportunity to explore something, not answer something," he says. "I can't capture all of God in two hours. All I can do is give the viewer a preview of what a life with God might look like.

"I was aiming to reach as broad an audience as possible with an intriguing message and believable characters," he says of *Extreme Days*. "We made *Extreme Days* as a conversation starter. It's a movie that asks questions rather than gives answers—that's what good art does; it deals with life in a truthful way."

Faith on Film

As of late, Hollywood is beginning to accept the notion that there is a market for movies that hint at or are even forthright in presenting a Christian worldview. This is a good thing, according to Ted Baehr, founder of the Christian Film and Television Commission, who says that last year there were nearly 100 films that had either a strong redemptive message or Christian worldview.

According to *Behind Enemy Lines: A Parent's Guide to Developing Media Wisdom*, a study Baehr co-authored, by the time a person turns 17 years old he or she will have spent at

least 40,000 hours consuming media, such as watching movies and listening to music. Of the 2,353 hours each year a child will spend doing this, only 165 hours of it will feature a solid, strong or very strong redemptive or Christian worldview.

That said, even if a Christian filmmaker's faith suffuses his film, should he, like Cunningham has done, tell an R-rated story in an R-rated way? Or for that matter, should he tell a PG-13 or PG story in a PG-13 or PG way?

"Stories need to be told authentically," Johnston says. "A Christian filmmaker can and should produce an R-rated movie if it is an R-rated story. To clean it up is to deny those dimensions of life."

He points to Schindler's List as a film that did not sanitize Hitler's treatment of Jews. By not doing so, the filmmakers were able to make important points.

"The depth of human possibilities and the challenge to take all humanity seriously and the possibility of the redemption of the human spirit are told within a context of horrific violence," Johnston says. "It's only in that context that makes the [movie's] hard-won redemption the miracle it is."

The same is true of To End All Wars, Cunningham contends. "We are dealing with a controversial issue; it involves suffering, and if we didn't show the suffering [the POWs] endured, it would cheapen the forgiveness at the end of the film," he says. "It's not unlike a biblical reference when Christ was crucified. The Bible went into great detail of His physical suffering in order for us to understand the price that was

paid.”

For too long, many say, Christian filmmakers have shied away from any cinematic elements that might offend others. According to experts, by ignoring the realities of life, twisting plots only to preach or abstaining from elements that might offend, filmmakers interested in bringing a Christian worldview to the big screen relegated their films and their message to those in the church.

“As soon as a Christian filmmaker steps over the line and tries to produce propaganda, it fails as an art form, and it will be sterile for the viewer,” Johnston claims.

Cunningham has a similar take. “I don’t try to cram something into the movie that isn’t there organically,” he says. “If you pick the right story it will come out naturally, and there is nothing anyone can say about it.”

Maybe, some have speculated, Christian filmmakers have tried to secure as many commitments to Christ as possible with their films because films are so expensive to make. It only stands to reason that Christian investors would want to see eternal dividends. But such thinking, some say, is what has kept Christian movies a step or two below their secular counterparts.

“Movies are explorations of the truth; they are not the truth themselves,” Detweiler says. “Movies don’t save people; God does.”

Last Take

When the last credits roll at the Delancey Street Reviewing Room audience members appear stunned, shocked and somehow pleased by what they have just seen. Jack Hafer, producer of *To End All Wars*, leads an impromptu 30-minute Q-and-A about the film. He slides easily in and out of roles as behind-the-scenes answer guy, grief counselor and cheerleader for Cunningham and the possibility of more films like *To End All Wars*.

“It’s a film that is important for Christians and non-Christians to see,” he says, choosing each of his words with care like a seasoned pitchman who knows how to protect his product while building brand loyalty. “Because it takes the truths of the gospels and shows that they are real and they work.”

He pauses then asks rhetorically, “What movie is doing that today?”

To End All Wars is for sure. And many are hoping other films will follow—and maybe in a theater near you.

Kirk Noonan is a frequent contributor to *Charisma*. He lives in Springfield, Missouri, with his wife and three children.

Hollywood Survivor

One insider says God is looking for strong believers to influence the world’s culture capital.

Victorya Michaels Rogers, 39, knows the games that are played in Hollywood. Once upon a time she used to be one of the players. As an agent in Hollywood she helped make no-name actors into stars. In doing so, she not only got to hobnob with the rich and famous, she also saw the underbelly of the film industry and learned firsthand what it takes for a Christian to survive the Hollywood experience.

“Washington, D.C., is the seat of power in this world,” she says, “but Hollywood is the seat of influence. In the entertainment industry there are so few Christians, the industry is a mission field.”

But the weak-willed need not bother going to Hollywood, according to Rogers, who says sin is easy to fall into because in Hollywood temptations abound. But for those who think they can handle it, Rogers recommends striving for excellence, networking with other believers and staying grounded in one’s faith. But, she warns, Christians need to avoid being overly aggressive in their attempts to share their faith.

“Professionals need to do their job first,” she says, noting that opportunities to share Christ’s message of love and hope follow the pursuit of excellence. “If there are not Christians in Hollywood there will be no positive change [in the media and society],” she says, adding that Christians are having an impact on the film industry on many levels.

Jesus at the Multiplex

Christian film critic Ted Baehr wants believers to use discernment at the box office.

If you are going to see a movie, Ted Baehr wants you to know what you're getting into. As publisher of Movieguide, a magazine and Web site that reviews and critiques films based on their production quality, as well as, and more importantly, their moral acceptability, Baehr is educating discerning viewers about movies and, in doing so, helping influence what makes it to the big screen.

"Our concern is that movies become more and more Christian," he told Charisma. "But we are not interested in throwing a burkha over the film industry."

Lest you be confused, Baehr reviews movies of all kinds and does not shy away from R-rated movies. "Movies can contain some tough material and still be very redemptive," he says, noting Saving Private Ryan's Captain Miller (played by Tom Hanks), who is willing to lay down his life for Private Ryan (Matt Damon) in the R-rated film. "Anybody who knows the Scriptures knows that is exactly what Jesus did for us."

If you decide what movie you will see based on a film's rating alone, Baehr would advise you to do a little research and find out what the movie is promoting. One of the easiest ways to do that is to visit Baehr's , where he puts movies through a 24-point check.

"Many Christians go to movies," he says. "But let's be discerning. Let's choose the ones that have strong Christian, redemptive themes and are going to be a blessing to us. If a Christian decides not to go [to movies], bravo. But there are a lot of good movies to watch, so why not watch the good and reject the bad."

The Case for 'Christian Films'

Peter Lalonde and Matt Crouch are unapologetic about their overtly Christian approach to filmmaking.

Peter Lalonde, CEO of Cloud Ten Pictures, doesn't mind being called a Christian filmmaker. In fact, he relishes the thought of mixing moviemaking and ministry. For him, there is simply no other way or reason to make films. And he says if his doomsday films are deemed evangelistic—so be it.

"We don't hide the greatest thing we have," Lalonde recently told Charisma, making reference to his faith. "We don't try to mask that our films are Christian films. There is a huge appetite out there [for Christian films], and we don't hide from what we are; we just get better at what we're doing."

See Cloud Ten Picture's Revelation (1998), Tribulation (1999), Left Behind (2000), Judgment (2001) and Left Behind II: Tribulation Force (October). All of these movies punch home an evangelistic message, and most have had some measure of box-office success. Left Behind, based on the popular series of apocalyptic novels, was rated the No. 1 independent release in its opening weekend and sold more than 3 million videos and DVDs.

Other unapologetically evangelistic films have garnered significant media attention and the eyes of Hollywood insiders as well. In 1999, The Omega Code stormed the box office and took in \$2.4 million on only 304 screens. Producer Matt Crouch followed the film with the \$25 million sequel, Meggido: The Omega Code 2.

"This is a ministry project," says Crouch, son of Trinity Broadcasting Network founders Paul and Jan Crouch. He told Charisma last year about Meggido: "I hand this project over to the body of Christ and say: 'Now it's yours. I built you a tract and put it in a neutral location. Invite someone.'"

For years Christian films have been panned because they are low-budget, poorly acted, too preachy and almost always based on end-of-the-world themes. But those characteristics are exactly what make Lalonde feel like a pioneer venturing into new territory.

"[Christian filmmakers] haven't had the budget or the experience," admits Lalonde, 43, who runs Cloud Ten Pictures with his younger brother Paul. "Our films are not up to a studio level. But we have climbed up with Left Behind and Revelation to the independent filmmaking level. However, we are not at the big studio, blockbuster level yet."

Reaching that level may take years. But Lalonde says Christian filmmakers are on the right track and making strides in the right direction. There are still boundaries to be marked and quality issues that must be addressed, but Lalonde is confident that Christian films will one day become a staple in society's entertainment diet.

"Christian filmmakers should be making films from the Christian point of view," Lalonde says. "Let's tell the world what we believe and why we believe it in entertaining, exciting and action-packed stories. Rather than just protesting the voices of others, we should be having our own voice."

Prayer Power in Hollywood

A growing number of Christians are focusing their attention on the world's entertainment capital.

Prayer efforts have been under way in Hollywood for years. TV producer Karen Covell has been leading a monthly prayer group for 19 years, and Master Media International has been evangelizing and discipling media leaders for 18 years.

But in the last two years, the Christian community has grown stronger, notes Covell, who started the Hollywood Prayer Network () last year after sensing a need for heightened prayer. She says Christians in the industry are becoming more vocal about their faith. (Master Media has seen the number of Christians grow from 300 in the 1980s to more than 4,000 today.) More believers have descended on the region to be missionaries to the industry, and Covell says more prayer groups are emerging.

In January 2001, Jeri Penley founded the Hollywood House of Prayer, patterned after pastor Mike Bickle's International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Missouri. Roughly 30 people meet twice monthly for intercessory worship, praying for Los Angeles and the entertainment industry.

In what he calls "prophetic assault worship," pastor Don Paul leads covert groups of "musical prophets" to drive demonic forces out of the atmosphere. Recently his Mission Hollywood () team ran a covert "maneuver" targeting the American Film Market, one of the world's largest, which affects the films sent to 70 nations. "Our goal was to create an atmosphere at the American Film Market where they would think normal," Paul

says. "The talk this year was family values."

Recently burdened for Hollywood, John Robb, director of prayer mobilization for World Vision in Monrovia, California, heads up the Hollywood Transformation Coalition (HTC), a group of prayer networks that intercede for the region. In January, 175 Hollywood professionals came to Christ at an event where author Bruce Wilkinson spoke. One man even gave up a \$6 million deal involving pornography distribution because of his newfound faith.

Changing Hollywood could change the world, intercessors say, and they challenge the body of Christ to join them. HTC () offers a video exploring Hollywood's roots and encourages groups to pray, while Master Media distributes a prayer calendar to 30,000 people on its mailing list, prompting Christians to pray daily for a different media power-broker and cultural influencer.

"The worst person in media is just one miracle away from being different," says Duster Holmes, West Coast president of Master Media and editor of the prayer calendar (available at). "If God still works miracles, we should be praying for Him to do that one miracle in each person's life."

Adrienne S. Gaines