

Clear Proof the Holy Spirit Is Moving in Hollywood

Eventually Hollywood will stop being surprised when Christian films outperform expectations. When *The Passion of the Christ* made \$622 million worldwide, industry analysts were stunned. When Sherwood Pictures' *Fireproof* made 60 times its original budget, box-office reporters were shocked. By the time *God's Not Dead* earned \$60 million in North America alone, the fact that industry reporters still found it "surprising" was the only surprise left.

After many years of box-office exclusion, Christians are seeing big-budget, faith-friendly films—and they're rewarding studios for that investment. Christians are also finding opportunities to let their proverbial light shine in Tinseltown despite the widespread notion that believers are persecuted for their faith in the heart of the entertainment industry.

"I was told ever since I was a kid that you cannot be a vocal Christian, go into Hollywood and find success," says DeVon Franklin, producer of the film *Miracles From Heaven* and president and CEO of Franklin Entertainment. "By the grace of God, I am proving that incorrect. Just like Daniel, you can publicize God in a hostile environment and find success."

God's Not Dead, *Heaven Is for Real* and *War Room* demonstrate that Hollywood will embrace strategic films with strong storylines in any genre. In fact, Christian film executives say followers of Christ have more influence than ever before—and are in a position to use that influence for the kingdom of God.

Proof That Prayer Is Paying Dividends

Hollywood and the church have not always had the best

relationship, but relationships are mending every day. Christians occupy key positions in many major studios, and several Christian groups and organizations have been formed to support believers in the industry.

Karen Covell founded the Hollywood Prayer Network (HPN) in 2001 because she hated the tense, mutually disrespectful relationship between the church and Hollywood. The church would boycott films and send individuals in Hollywood hate mail; Hollywood would respond with contempt and refused to listen to the church's complaints, many of them valid.

Covell says she was compelled to be part of the solution, rather than complaining from the outside, and knew the only way to change hearts was through prayer. "We will never see a change in the content of Hollywood until we see a change in the hearts of those creating content," she says.

Over 10,000 Christians in the industry are affiliated with HPN. HPN members' goals are to challenge the church to pray for Hollywood rather than focus on the negatives. They ask believers to pray that new Christians in Hollywood would get plugged into a church community and that non-Christians would encounter the gospel.

Similarly, Ted Baehr established Movieguide with dual purposes: to show studios how to make movies that appeal to a Christian audience—and, thus, make money—and to teach parents how to guard children from harmful content. The advocacy group has worked with many major studios on important projects, including recent films like *The Young Messiah* and upcoming projects like *Paradise Lost*.

Baehr says Christians in Hollywood have an obligation to share their faith through their work. He says, "If we're not going to take these gifts God gave us to communicate with others, we deserve what we get."

The Gospel Compels Them

For some, sharing their faith is the primary motivation for joining the entertainment industry. Franklin says he was captivated by the power of storytelling to change hearts at an early age: “As early as I can remember, I felt it was part of my calling to be a part of entertainment because I feel entertainment is one of the most influential mediums in the world. You can change someone’s life with the type of content they view.”

Franklin says he picks projects—like *The Pursuit of Happyness* or *Miracles From Heaven*—that reflect his Christian worldview. He’s in the process of making *Heaven Is for Real* into a television series on NBC, with more series in the works. He’s even written a book, *Produced by Faith*, about how Christians don’t have to compromise their faith to be successful.

“My faith is very integral to who I am, and it was important to not hide that because I really feel that God will honor that boldness, and He certainly has,” Franklin says.

St. Francis of Assisi is credited as saying, “Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.” Rich Peluso, senior vice president of Affirm Films, says he takes those words to heart.

“I guess there are three ways you can go about sharing your faith,” Peluso says. “One is to try and convert everybody you meet who are nonbelievers in the film industry. Another is to try and hide it. The path I go is I strive to live out my faith in a way that impacts the people I work with and people who may not be believers in a way that I hope makes them think there’s something different about me. Then they’re curious about it. It’s a subtle way of living your faith.”

Filmmaking to the Glory of God

Though Christians in the industry *Charisma* spoke with had different approaches to sharing their faith, they all shared one common idea: They believe creating excellence in their

industry was the greatest testimony of all.

“What I try to focus on is doing excellent work for the glory of God,” Peluso says.

David Oyelowo, star of *Selma* and *Captive*, agrees. He says he is driven to excellence by a need to honor God: “Anyone who knows the parable of the talents knows that the parable in the Bible illustrates being given gifts that God wants you to invest and multiply. I take that very seriously.”

Hollywood is a cutthroat industry, where only the best in their field can thrive. The drive for excellence will only continue to open industry doors for Christians. Baehr says the biggest hindrance to many independent Christian films is poor quality—and even that can change with discipline and further experience.

“You get some Christian movies now that are pretty good,” Baehr says. “But they don’t understand the structural aspects of making a movie. They haven’t helped the cause of Christian movies, but not because there’s an industry-wide prejudice. It’s because Christians, I think, don’t take Paul seriously when he says to run the race with excellence.”

As Christian movies get better, they will make more money. And if Christian films make money, Baehr says, then Hollywood will continue making more Christian films.

Holy Spirit Moving in Hollywood

Prophetically, Covell sees the Holy Spirit changing the entertainment industry in the coming days: “I see Christians building community. I see Christians on shows, changing content. The lines are blurred between the Christian and secular industry. Huge changes in our industry are happening.”

Yet the transformation isn’t complete yet. What’s more, it won’t happen without the support of believers in the rest of

the country. Franklin says he can do everything in his power to follow God's will and create excellence, but without an audience to watch the projects, even the greatest plans fall short.

"I've convinced studios to not only spend millions making films like *Miracles From Heaven*, but also spend tens of millions more to publicize it, market it and so on," Franklin says. "The area of prayer and activation is I'm putting my faith on display. Faith without works is dead. I put my whole career on the line. My greatest prayer is that the faith community will get behind this film, and will continue to embrace authentic content made in Hollywood. When you embrace it, pray for it, and it's successful, more will happen. We need to make our voice known because, if we stay silent, the portrayals we want won't happen. The only way it'll happen will be through us being unified."

Peluso and Franklin both emphasize that the biggest way to promote Christian values in Hollywood is to see faith-affirming films. Theatrical releases like *Miracles From Heaven* and *Risen* represent significant gambles by major studios, and box-office success could lead to even more projects like them.

Some Christians stayed away from films like *Noah* and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* due to controversial theology. Others don't appreciate films that aren't explicitly Christian, in their view. But boycotting these films does not promote more Christian films—and even mildly Christian films can advance the kingdom, as Peluso points out.

"There is a time for something that is bold and in-your-face like a *War Room*, and there is a time for something that is subtle and nuanced like a *Soul Surfer*," Peluso says. "*Soul Surfer* really connected with 8- to 15-year-old girls and their moms, the majority of whom were unchurched. A little bit of salt in that movie was very salty to them. If we had packed it with a Bible message and salvation story and someone accepting

Christ and reading the Bible, we might not have had as many people engage with the story who were unchurched.”

Peluso admits, however, this is a thin line that can often be difficult to discern. He asks Christians to intercede for industry executives regarding this matter: “The prayer would be for all of us in this space to have wisdom and also boldness in seeking out what we believe God is leading us to do in each and every story ... that we would seek direction and leading from God, as opposed to what the box office will do.”

Enthusiasm about the future of Christian films is infectious. Could Christians transform Hollywood from the inside out? Franklin certainly believes so.

“I’ve been in the industry for going on 20 years and I’ve never seen the industry more open to faith than they are now,” Franklin says. “I think the door is opening, and we can blow the door off the hinges if we keep supporting what’s coming out. At the box office, people want hope. They want inspiration. They want love. They want God. More of these types of projects are making their way to theaters, and I’m excited about the future. It’s as bright as it’s ever been.”

Taylor Berglund is the assistant online editor at Charisma Media and co-host of the “C-Pop” and “Charisma News” podcasts.

DeVon Franklin offers a glimpse into his upbringing, which fostered in him a passion for God and Hollywood, at .