

Hollywood May Be Selling Bible Movies for Money, but God's Still Moving

In the midst of the typical theatrics surrounding the 2015 Grammys, few may remember that Christian rapper LeCrae Moore was nominated in the category of Best Rap Performance (for All I Need is You) alongside mainstream industry heavyweights like Kendrick Lamar and Eminem.

Although Lamar won, Moore's nomination was a milestone in the development of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), which has undoubtedly come a long way since the 1960s' folk tunes of the Jesus Movement. The explosion in talent, variety and production quality in CCM raises the possibility of similar success with other art forms. Might we see a Christian film nominated for an Oscar or a Golden Globe sometime in the future?

Filmmaking has historically been the territory of glamorous and highly secularized Hollywood. But like CCM, Christian filmmaking has been growing steadily, largely outside of Los Angeles.

And like CCM, many Christian filmmakers are hoping to break past the niche audience of faithful church goers to reach those who might not otherwise hear the Christian message.

"Christian movies have historically meant very bad movies," Canadian filmmaker Paul Lalonde told *The Huffington Post*, "and I can say that as a guy who made some of them. You were just preaching to the choir, which was great, because the choir loved them and we were having fun doing them. But they never really broke beyond the Christian audience, and that was something I always wanted to do."

Many hailed 2014 as the Year of the Christian Film, since several high-profile movies were written and produced by Christians or based on biblical stories. These included *God's Not Dead*, *Heaven Is for Real*, *Left Behind*, *Exodus: Gods and Kings* and *Noah*. The latter two were produced with enormous budgets by mainstream studios. *Noah*, directed by Darren Aronofsky, boasted an A-list cast, a production budget of \$125 million and was distributed by Paramount.

It made no apologies about deviating significantly not just from the details of the biblical narrative, but from its message as well.

Exodus: Gods and Kings, directed by Ridley Scott, cost \$140 million. It portrayed God as whiny child and Moses as mentally ill. Both directors were quite public about their contempt for the source material, with Aronofsky proudly declaring *Noah* the "least biblical film ever made," and Scott calling religion the biggest source of evil in the world. Grossing just over \$101 and \$64 million domestically, both *Noah* and *Exodus* might have enjoyed more box office success if they had welcomed Christian audiences rather than alienating them.

By contrast, *God's Not Dead*, *Heaven Is for Real* and *Left Behind* were made by Christian studios.

God's Not Dead, produced for just \$2 million but grossing nearly as much as *Exodus*, spoke directly to the Christian experience in America. Many could identify with the main character having his faith belittled and ridiculed by an antagonistic professor.

Heaven Is for Real told the true story of Colton Burpo who had a near-death experience during surgery at the age of 4. Colton stunned his family by describing events that were taking place during the surgery—his father crying out to God not to let him die, his mother calling for people to pray in the waiting room—as well as meeting his sister who died when his mother

miscarried her. It was produced for \$12 million and grossed over \$91 million.

Left Behind, which had a relatively large production budget of \$16 million and a well-known headliner in Nicolas Cage, grossed just \$14 million, despite being based on a best-selling book series and aimed at mainstream audiences. Perhaps the most successful Christian film—both in terms of profit and reaching past a niche evangelical audience—was Mel Gibson’s 2004 *The Passion of the Christ*.

The film’s remarkable accomplishment reminds us how rare it is to see a combination of masterful storytelling and reverence for the source material.

At the end of the day, Hollywood producers may not care about the Bible or the Christian message, but they do understand the language of money. Ted Baehr, founder of the Movieguide: The Family Guide to Movies and Entertainment, has pointed out for years that movies geared toward families enjoy much greater financial success than films laden with profanity and graphic sexual content.

This was undeniably true of many of the highest grossing films of 2014, which included tales of heroism, good and evil like *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *The Lego Movie* and *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*.

Our culture needs the influence of biblical truth. In perilous times we will need a huge dose of faith, optimism and hope. Missionary “movie makers” can have a high and holy calling. As Christian filmmaking continues to mature, I believe we will see an increase in the number of films that convey a clear Christian message to encourage the faithful and convince the masses.

Let the culture games begin!

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