

How a God-Inspired Ministry Helped Redeem Hollywood Movies

Nothing succeeds like success.

Reportedly, this oft-repeated proverb was first put into print in 1854 by Alexandre Dumas, the author of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Now, 160 years later, Christians are seeing the truth of this proverb bearing much fruit. This year, the movie industry is releasing more than 15 faith-based movies in theaters nationwide, and so far these movies are having a tremendous success at the box office.

In March and April, for example, faith-based movies made it into the top five movies at the box office, sometimes at No. 2 or No. 1, and sometimes at No. 3, every week, including *Son of God*, *Noah*, *God's Not Dead* and *Heaven Is for Real*.

Truth be told, most of the other top movies at the box office these days are faith-friendly.

For example, the science fiction movie *Divergent*, which led the box office the weekend it opened, was written by a Christian and features Christian themes. Also, in the new Captain America movie, *The Winter Soldier* (which was fast on the heels of the No. 1 movie at the box office, *The Lego Movie*), Christian themes show the hero risking his life to save a lost sheep and undergoing a symbolic baptism, itself a metaphor of death and resurrection.

All this good news is to a large degree the result of God's calling the son of two 1930s Hollywood stars to redeem the mass media of entertainment.

The Rest of the Story: A Personal Reflection

"In 1946, at the height of the Golden Age of Hollywood, I was born to Theodore Baehr (whose stage name was Robert "Tex" Allen) and Evelyn Peirce. Both of my parents were successful stage, screen and television actors," says Dr. Ted Baehr, founder of Movieguide. "Growing up in New York with extended times in Hollywood and on location with movie productions in which my father was starring, I followed reluctantly in my parents' footsteps, performing in commercials, movies, television and stage, but I was not fond of being in front of the camera or even waiting in the background."

What Baehr did enjoy was living the high life, which included everything from horse shows to fancy trips to debauchery from a very, very young age. After his mother died in 1960, when he was a young teenager, he renounced the concept that he thought was God and dove completely into the sordid life of drugs and looking for love in all the wrong places.

"I even tried to bring as many people as I could with me on the road to perdition by throwing parties with lethal concoctions," Baehr says. "Some never recovered. Some ended their precious lives."

After studying abroad, Baehr graduated with high distinction in comparative literature and as a Rufus Choate Scholar from Dartmouth College. He then received his Juris Doctor from New York University School of Law, where he served as the editor of the NYU Law School newspaper, the editor of the *Drug Law Review* and the editor of the *Environmental Law Review*.

At the same time, he got involved in radical causes, including leading the Law School Coalition to End the War and the National Lawyers Guild and starting the environmental movement at the U.S. Attorney's Office SDNY and the environmental studies focus at NYU Law, motivated by a particular hate for capitalism and business.

God Rescues Him

"Then in 1975, God rescued me from debauchery," Baehr says. "While I was financing independent movies for Canon Films, an older friend who had come to know Jesus Christ at the Billy Graham crusade in New York City in 1957, suggested that I read the Bible to show her what was wrong with it. Reading God's Word written to refute it changed my perspective both professionally and personally."

"God rescued me. Suddenly, life made sense. Chasing after empty promises lost their appeal. Hedonism relinquished its hold on me. I stopped the debauchery by God's grace alone. There was no withdrawal, only the peace that comes from a personal encounter with Jesus Christ."

Immediately, Baehr was compelled to marry his beloved. The week before the wedding, a friend asked him if he wanted to accept Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior and be filled with His Holy Spirit. He did.

"Filled with the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ, I decided to attend seminary at the Institute of Theology at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine," Baehr says. "To support myself through seminary, I was miraculously offered a position as the director of the Television Center at the City University of New York and was hired at the same time to head the television and radio ministry of Trinity Church at Broadway and Wall Street."

God Directs Every Step

During his tenure at CUNY, Baehr worked closely with academia, researching the impact of the media. He joined with more than 60 professors to develop and test the first intergenerational media literacy course.

Convicted by his previous financing of salacious and despicable movies, he started the Good News Communications

ministry in 1978 to redeem the mass media of entertainment.

"Miraculously, I was elected president of the Episcopal Radio & Television Foundation in 1979 and began conceptualizing another ministry, the Christian Film & Television Commission," Baehr says.

During his tenure, the Episcopal Radio & Television Foundation won an Emmy Award for best animated special for *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, which aired on CBS and was watched by more than 37 million viewers.

Baehr was nominated for another Emmy Award for the one of the programs in the PBS "Perspectives" series, *War and Peace*. He served as the executive producer, creative director and host.

In 1983, while serving on the communications board of the National Council of Churches and the National Religious Broadcasters, the great movie producer Ken Wales (*The Pink Panther*, *Christy* and *Amazing Grace*) introduced Baehr to George Heimrich and his work at the Protestant Film Office. Ken and George reminded him of the history of the Motion Picture Code that used to improve movie content.

"George told me the story of the breakdown of morality in the entertainment industry," Baehr recalls. "He said that part of the reason for the breakdown of morality in movies and television today, and in the culture at large, is that people of faith retreated from being salt and light in the culture."

From 1933 to 1966, Christians were one of the predominant forces in Hollywood. During that period, the Roman Catholic Legion of Decency and the Protestant Film Commission (which started several years after the Legion of Decency) read every script to ensure that movies represented the largest possible audience by adhering to high standards of decency. As a result, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Bells of St. Mary's* rang out across the land.

“It took 10 years and God’s grace acting through three dedicated Christian men to position God’s people to be such a powerful moral influence on Hollywood,” Baehr says. “As the videotape *Hollywood Uncensored* all too clearly demonstrates, prior to the involvement of these Christian men in 1933, American movies were morally bankrupt—full of nudity, perversity and violence.”

From 1922 to 1933, churchgoing men and women tried everything, including censorship boards, to influence Hollywood to make wholesome entertainment. Nothing succeeded until Christians volunteered to work alongside the Hollywood studios to help them reach the largest possible audience.

When the Protestant Film Office closed its advocacy offices in Hollywood in 1966 (in spite of many pleas to stay by the top Hollywood filmmakers), Baehr says not only did its closure open the floodgates to violence (*The Wild Bunch*), sex and satanism (*Rosemary’s Baby*), as well as perverse anti-religious bigotry (*Midnight Cowboy*), but it also caused a severe drop in movie attendance, from 44 million tickets sold per week to about 17 million.

“Inspired by George Heimrich and George’s beloved wife, Lucille, I began contacting prominent members of the entertainment industry,” Baehr says, “and in 1985, formed the Christian Film & Television Commission ministry and Movieguide: A Family Guide to Movies and Entertainment.”

“In his will, George Heimrich donated his Protestant Film Office files to the Good News Communications, Inc.—Christian Film & Television Commission ministry, where they now reside,” he says. “The ministry uses the same vision for positive change in those files to redeem the values of the mass media of entertainment according to biblical principles by influencing key entertainment executives to adopt higher standards and by informing and equipping the public, especially parents with children and families.”

God's Call

As a result of an unexpected and miraculous telephone conversation with Sir John Templeton beginning in 1988, the Christian Film & Television Commission ministry initiated the Annual Movieguide Faith and Values Awards gala and its Report to the Entertainment Industry in 1992 in Los Angeles.

The gala now features the prestigious \$200,000 Epiphany Prizes for the most inspiring movie and TV program, supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, for the movie and television program that helps people know God and understand Him better; the Friess Free Enterprise Prize, supported by a grant from the Friess Family Foundation, for the one movie that, through fine craftsmanship and inspirational storytelling, does the most to encourage appreciation of free markets, ownership and stewardship; and the Faith and Freedom Awards for promoting positive faith and values.

The gala also features the \$50,000 Kairos Prizes for spiritually uplifting screenplays by first-time and beginning screenwriters, supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation; the \$50,000 Chronos Prize for spiritually uplifting screenplays by established screenwriters, also supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation; the annual Grace Awards for the most inspiring performances in movies and TV, given to the two actors whose performances best displayed God's grace and mercy toward us as human beings; the Movieguide Teddy "The Good News" Bear Awards for the 10 best movies for families; and the Papa Bear Awards for the 10 best movies for mature audiences. Baehr seeks to acknowledge those movies, TV programs and actors truly deserving of praise and those persons responsible for bringing them to the screen.

"To add glamour to the event, actors and actresses are invited to emcee and to be presenters of the awards," Baehr says. "Music and entertainment are also added to make it a memorable event. We also hand out Bibles and other redemptive materials

to carry out our mission to reach Hollywood for Christ. Within the context of an elegant affair, I present Movieguide's 'Report to the Entertainment Industry.' Through careful analysis of box office figures and Movieguide criteria on all the major movies released (nearly 300 a year) by the six studios controlling the industry, I present valuable and unique information to the highest-level Hollywood leaders through a high-impact report."

The purpose of the gala and the report is:

- To encourage filmmakers to continue to make movies with moral and spiritually uplifting values
- To share the concerns of the majority of the American public in regard to the negative influences of today's movies
- To present an in-depth study of the annual movie box office and not only dispel myths that extreme sex, violence and nudity sells, but also to show that family movies and movies with morally uplifting, Christian values and positive Christian content make the most money by far

This annual report is having an impact. When Baehr started Movieguide in 1985, the major studios in Hollywood released few movies with any positive Christian content or values—less than 3 percent! By the time Baehr started the annual Movieguide Faith and Values Awards gala and Report to the Entertainment Industry in 1992 and 1993, however, there were 27 such movies, or about percent of the market share. Incredibly, 22 years later, in 2013, at least 179, or percent, of the movies released by the movie industry contained at least some positive Christian, redemptive content. That's a numerical increase of almost 563 percent and a percentage increase of nearly 532 percent.

"Also, when we started in 1985, less than 6 percent of the major movies were aimed at families," Baehr says. "In the past

several years, movies marketed to families have increased to nearly 40 percent of the top movies released in your local movie theaters. Finally, since we started in 1985, there were only about one or two movies being made with strong, explicit Christian content or values, but now there are 65 or more such movies each year! That's at least a 3,150 percent increase."

The former chairman of a major Hollywood studio told Baehr he attributed all these positive shifts directly to Movieguide's influence as well as the Christian Film & Television Commission's box office analysis and the annual Report to the Entertainment Industry. Many major movie studios now have a Christian, faith-based film division, and several studios are doing major movies with strong and overt Christian or biblical content. Also, now all the major studios, not just Disney, are doing movies for young children and families.

"This doesn't mean, of course, that the studios aren't doing bad or horrible movies anymore, but it does mean there are fewer and fewer bad movies and an increasing number of good ones," Baehr says. "It's our prayer that the movie industry will make more and more commendable movies and remove all offensive elements from them."

All along the way, Movieguide has been helping and encouraging Christian filmmakers and even non-Christian filmmakers to put faith-based, family-friendly content in their scripts, movies and television shows and improve their storytelling abilities so they can reach and influence as many people as possible.

Transforming Hollywood

"By God's grace, we've seen an explosion of inspiring, faith-friendly family movies being produced, including some of the potential Epiphany nominees listed above," Baehr says. "Many of these movies are animated and reach the top of the box office charts, such as *Frozen*, which Movieguide picked as the best movie for families in 2013. *Frozen* promotes a Christian,

biblical view of love and has grossed more than \$ billion worldwide so far.”

The success of faith-based and faith-friendly movies and television shows like *Son of God*, *Heaven Is for Real*, *God’s Not Dead*, *The Bible* miniseries, the *Duck Dynasty* reality TV show, *Frozen*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *Noah*, *Despicable Me 2* and *The Blind Side* is no fluke. In fact, Baehr calls it a miracle from God.

When Christians abandon the mass media, they abandon their culture and their fellow man. When Christians get involved in the mass media, as Baehr with the staff at Movieguide and people like George Heimrich have done, God honors that commitment with success.

Nothing Succeeds Like Success

Movieguide’s long-term strategy of redeeming the values of the entertainment industry is working. God has blessed these efforts tremendously, as recent history has shown. Of course, Movieguide needs the faith and support from Christians all over the globe.

“That faith and support is vital, especially if we are to continue the never-ending struggle to transform our culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ for the benefit of future generations—our children and grandchildren,” Baehr says. “The mass media creates the culture that shapes the hearts and minds of our children and grandchildren.”

By lending Movieguide your faith and support, you help and protect the weakest among us. By helping and protecting them through Movieguide, you honor God and His Word, the Holy Bible, by promoting His love (1 Cor. 13:1-6), commending “those who do right” (1 Pet. 2:14), exposing “the fruitless deeds of darkness” (Eph. 5:11) and focusing on “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, and whatever is admirable” (Phil. 4:8).

“It only took Jesus Christ 11 apostles—12, if you count the apostle Paul—to change the world and create the liberty, righteousness and prosperity that Western civilization produced under Jesus and His church,” Baehr says. “Imagine what billion Christians could do with the mass media, applying biblical principles through Movieguide and the Christian Film & Television Commission!”