

Why Faith-Based Films Are Making Hollywood Headlines

For years, Christians bemoaned the state of Hollywood movies—the sexuality, the language, the violence—while simultaneously wondering, “Will we ever be able to go to the theater as a family?”

Those days finally have arrived, and the films are anything but cartoonish.

With movies such as *Fireproof*, *Courageous* and *Heaven Is for Real* drawing Christians and non-Christians to theaters in droves, faith-based filmmaking has entered a historic moment that should not be overlooked.

At no point in film history has there been so many successful Christian movies backed by Hollywood studios, and at no point has there been so many rising directors, actors and actresses with one goal: making faith-based films that change lives. Christian films that once would have gone straight to DVD now are given a larger budget and a path to the big screen.

Sure, there have been Bible-themed films here and there—*Ben-Hur* and *The Ten Commandments* in the '50s, for instance—but there have never been this many faith-based theatrical films in this short of a time frame, with more on the way.

The “cheesy” element is vanishing—even if there is still room for improvement.

“Where we are in the Christian film arena is kind of where Christian contemporary music was in the early '80s—where it's just finding its feet,” says Alex Kendrick, the faith-based mainstay who directed *Facing the Giants*, *Fireproof* and *Courageous*. “There's so much room to grow. We're so grateful for what the Lord has done, but we all want to continue

growing.”

There’s plenty of congratulations to go around, but Affirm Films, a Sony Pictures Entertainment company, deserves much of the credit. Consider:

- Affirm’s *Heaven Is for Real* opened at No. 2 in April this year, besting one opening weekend film (*Transcendence*) that had a budget eight times its size.
- *Courageous*, an Affirm film, opened at No. 4 in 2011, which placed it two spots in front of another first-weekend movie (*Dream House*) that had a budget 25 times its size.
- Affirm’s *Fireproof* was the top independent film of 2008 despite a budget of \$500,000—pennies in Hollywood’s eyes. It opened at No. 4.

Those films were even more successful when considering the so-called per-theater average—the amount each movie made, on average, at each location. *Heaven Is for Real* and *Courageous* were No. 1 and *Fireproof* No. 2.

Affirm also was behind *Soul Surfer* (2011) and *Moms’ Night Out* (2014), two films that had respectable openings, and the studio has two more films slated for release this year: *When the Game Stands Tall* (Aug. 22) and *The Remaining* (fall).

The modern-day faith-based film movement got its spark from Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), which grossed \$370 million in the U.S. and showed Hollywood—and everyone else, for that matter—there was a gigantic market hungry for faith films.

Two years later, Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia, put together *Facing the Giants*, which was made for \$100,000 and grossed \$10 million—100 times its budget. The lesson? A good message, and not a massive budget, was what attracted Christians.

Kendrick and his brother, Stephen, began casting for their fifth feature film in April of this year. They have yet to release a subject or title.

“It’s still a young arena,” Alex Kendrick says, referencing the faith film industry. “It’s very exciting.”

It’s also exciting for fans to watch Christian films attract more well-known talent. *Moms’ Night Out* featured Sean Astin (*Rudy*, *Lord of the Rings*), Patricia Heaton (*The Middle*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*) and Sarah Drew (*Grey’s Anatomy*), while *When the Game Stands Tall* will star Jim Caviezel (*The Passion of the Christ*).

Some debate what constitutes a faith-based film, but not Alex Kendrick. The Kendricks mostly target the church with their movies, with the goal of awakening and convicting Christians. Other directors and producers, though, seek to make movies that have more crossover appeal. Both types of movies, Kendrick says, are needed.

Besides, he says, there’s very little competition among Christian moviemakers. Kendrick starred in two faith-based films (including *Moms’ Night Out*) in which he was “only” an actor and not part of the crew. He says he wants to see all faith-based films succeed.

“This synergy that we’ve got going is wonderful and needed,” he says. “We all want to grow in our presentations, honoring the Lord with the right stories that He wants us to tell, and certainly with our production quality.

“We’re able to help each other raise the bar.”