

Why 'Heavenquest' Is Not Your Typical Christian Film

In 2014, I had just released *Holy Ghost* and was gearing up to get its sequel, *Holy Ghost Reborn*, out to the world, when my brother-in-law, Matt Bilen, came to me with an idea he had been kicking around for years. One night, he was reading an illustrated version of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to his kids, and he realized that this story had the potential to make for a very cool movie if it was done right. He wondered if this might be something that my production company, WP Films, might be interested in partnering with him on.

I had only ever made documentaries, but my training in storytelling came from the world of narrative films, and the vision Matt had for this retelling was highly intriguing. Plus, Matt had worked with me on literally every film I've ever done, and I'd always told people he was my secret weapon. When you film movies the way I do, where everything is predicated on trusting God to show up when you go out to film, you need to have a little levity in your life, or filming can become a high-stress, overly religious exercise. Matt always brought that fresh air that both the crew and I needed. We used to have a joke on set that there seemed to be different levels of the prophetic, and Matt would always say he's probably just getting past level 1, which is, "Hey, Jesus loves you." We'd laugh, but in reality, that's probably the most important level!

Matt is one of the most creative people I've ever been around, and I really wanted to see what would happen when he got his chance to make a passion project like this. We had recently completed the most successful Kickstarter campaign in history for a Christian film (*Holy Ghost* & *Holy Ghost Reborn*), so it only made sense to return to what we knew to try and get this film funded. We spent months gearing up for the campaign, and

I even wrote an initial script for the movie.

Matt's vision was to do something very different for a narrative film. He wanted to film the movie in a looser fashion than is typical, with a small, very mobile crew; actors who were up for improvisation and allowing, as much as possible, for the Holy Spirit to guide various creative decisions. It was going to be a Christian film that didn't look like your typical Christian film—what Matt liked to refer to as “a dirt under the fingernails kind of movie.”

Films are very collaborative things, and unfortunately my team and I slowly moved away from Matt's original vision with what we thought would be a “more robust” film experience. The film's budget ballooned to over \$1 million (an unheard of sum for us) and while Matt was excited to have more creative liberties the larger budget would provide him, deep down, he feared we were going a little too off course from what he had wanted this film to be. It was only later, when everything course-corrected itself back to Matt's original vision, that I finally realized the core of what he was going after.

As a filmmaker, I've always tried to push the boundaries of what you can do with film and the Spirit, and most of the time my crew and I have no real idea what we're doing or how we're going to accomplish something. We've created techniques over the years to, as much as possible, remove the “normal” approaches to filmmaking and get creative in how we film a movie. Matt's original vision had locked into that same mindset, and he wanted to make a faith-based movie that tried to do things differently. As artists, Matt and I have some serious issues with the basic approach of most faith-based films, and we have always strove to make movies that are truly unique, raw, honest and powerful. What I didn't realize at the time is that by trying to make a “legit” narrative film, I was taking away from Matt the one thing that drove him to do this in the first place.

As usual, God typically steps in when I'm being an idiot and gently turns me around so that I'm heading back in the right direction, and He stayed true to form here as well. Our kickstarter campaign for the film didn't get the traction it needed, and we fell far short of our goal for raising funds. That's when I realized that maybe this wasn't supposed to be my thing—it was *always* supposed to be Matt's baby. So we handed ownership of the entire project over to Matt to do whatever he wanted with it. That was a good day.

Eventually, the movie returned to Matt's original vision: a film with a huge scope but a small crew, a story that had direction but was malleable, and a cast and crew that were so bought into the idea of doing something new that almost everyone worked for far less than their normal wage, with some high-end Hollywood veterans even gifting their time and skill for nothing. Everyone was just excited to be working on a grand experiment.

Heavenquest is finally finished, and we are finally ready to show it to the world. It took over four years to complete, but on Oct. 25, we will be having a worldwide online sneak peek of the film over a 48-hour period. The movie itself will be released in 2020, but we wanted to give people a chance to see it for themselves as soon as possible. You can visit for all the details.

I've talked with Matt a lot about his first feature film, and like any filmmaker, there's a lot he'd love to change, a lot he'd like to make better, and he wishes he had a little more money to do this or that. But he has done what he set out to do, which is more than many people can say. *Heavenquest* may not be perfect, but to me it is a perfect example of what God's creative spirit in us provides. A seed of an idea is planted in us and we partner with God and others to bring this seed, this vision, to life. Along the way we grow, fail, push ourselves, face our fears and are stretched to the breaking point. But in the end, something is born from within

us—hopefully something that brings glory to God.

For this film, I prefer to look beyond the movie to the man who made it. As Bono once said, “If you’re going to dream, then dream out loud.” Dream so all the world can see.

We’ll all be better off for it.

(To sign up for the sneak peek of *Heavenquest* on Oct. 25, visit).