

Will Hollywood Help Christianity Make a Comeback?

It's the Day of Pentecost—not long after Jesus' resurrection and ascension to heaven.

Suddenly, a cacophony of voices begins to build.

A sound, like a “rushing mighty wind,” fills the house in Jerusalem.

As the disciples and others pray in Aramaic, Greek, Hebrew, Parthian, Latin, Egyptian and in Mesopotamian tongues, flames grow brighter and brighter around them.

A light in the room intensifies, whitening out the disciples, and others in the room cower and cover their heads. The flames gather and swirl around the disciples—now ecstatic—as they recite The Lord's Prayer.

The wind, noise and flames reach a climax and then stop as suddenly as they arrived.

Now there is silence, darkness and stillness as the disciples stand in a circle—shaken by the encounter. They slowly open their eyes. All are out of breath as if they've just run for miles.

Peter then breaks the circle and goes to the shutters, flinging them open as the dark room is bathed in the dawn's light—the light of a dazzling, new Jerusalem. He glows with a supernatural energy as he turns to the room full of disciples and others.

“Now we can leave this place,” Peter says. “Now we spread His Word.”

For this Easter, the Day of Pentecost comes alive as producers

Mark Burnett and Roma Downey's 12-part *A.D. The Bible Continues* television series starts on *NBC*—featuring an unexpected new star.

"The Holy Spirit is the star of *A.D.*," Downey, best known for her role in *Touched by an Angel*, told *Charisma* during a recent interview at her Malibu, California home overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

"The Holy Spirit is mentioned (nearly 60 times) in the book of Acts and when He arrives in our show it's in a beautiful, incredible Pentecostal scene. You are going to love it when you see it."

As millions of people throughout the world watch this powerful scene this Easter, many are asking whether the *A.D.* series and a flood of Bible films and TV shows could help Christianity not only make a comeback and regain its lost influence in the culture, but take the gospel message to a lost and deceived generation.

In recent years, it's seemed as though the world's largest faith has been on the rocks. Overall church attendance is plateaued or declining—though the Pentecostal/charismatic movement is growing rapidly. The percentage of the "nones," the religiously unaffiliated, has soared from 8 percent in 1990 to 20 percent. Meanwhile, the "New Atheists" are declaring the pending death of Christianity, many believe the "Great Falling Away" is underway, and most agree morality is in a free fall.

Amid these disturbing trends, something completely unexpected has occurred—Hollywood has inexplicably stepped up and is releasing a flurry of faith films and TV shows.

"In 2015, Christianity may be making a comeback," says Phil Cooke, a filmmaker, media consultant and an internationally-known writer. "Hollywood apparently saw it coming."

Is Jesus Making a Comeback?

Kate Linder, a longtime actress on *The Young and the Restless* who starred in the recent film *Miss Meadows*, says it seems Hollywood is trying to figure out how it can “get back on track.”

“I think what’s happening is the world has just gotten a little crazy and people are searching for things to hang onto,” Linder told *Charisma* while attending Movieguide’s 23rd Annual Faith & Values Awards Gala in Universal City, California. “For me, it’s always important to go back to the basics and remember where we have come from.”

The *A.D.* television series is just one of many Bible-based TV shows and films coming out over the next few years. Arriving on the heels of last year’s record-breaking box office hits *Son of God*, *God’s Not Dead* and *Heaven is for Real*, Hollywood is releasing a deluge of faith entertainment. In fact, these films and TV shows were so plentiful—and profitable—that commentators dubbed 2014 “The Year of the Christian Film.”

Largely driven by the runaway success of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (\$630 million) a decade ago, *The Chronicles of Narnia* series (\$1.6 billion) and more recently Burnett and Downey’s *The Bible* series, which has been seen by more than 100 million people, numerous faith films and TV shows are now on their way to theaters and people’s living rooms.

This includes a new film from the producers of *God’s Not Dead* entitled *Do You Believe?* (March), Pastor John Hagee’s *Four Blood Moons* (March), *Hillsong: Let Hope Rise* (April), *David and Goliath* (April), *Mary* with Ben Kingsley and Julia Ormond (April), Alex and Stephen Kendrick’s *War Room* (August), *Captive* (September), *90 Minutes in Heaven* (October), Bill O’Reilly’s *Killing Jesus* (2015), *Polycarp* (2015), Anne Rice’s *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt* (March 2016) and *Ben-Hur* (2016).

Meanwhile, Brad Pitt has mulled playing *Pontius Pilate*, director Ridley Scott is considering a *King David* film and there are plans for a remake of *The Ten Commandments*.

"I think God is definitely working in this," says Korie Robertson, a star on the A&E show *Duck Dynasty* who accepted The Epiphany Prize at the Movieguide gala. "I've been talking to people in the industry who are telling us how their attitudes have changed toward Christianity over the last few years. It's just unbelievable. It's definitely God at work."

Robertson says Christians "better take" advantage of this opportunity to spread the gospel via the world's most influential medium.

"Don't let it pass us by," Robertson says. "I think it's time for us to jump in there with both feet and do what we are called to do—spread His Word."

Will Jesus 'Change the World' via Hollywood?

In an especially inspirational scene in the *Son of God* film produced by Burnett and Downey, Jesus (played by actor Diogo Morgado) tells Peter (Darwin Shaw) to drop his nets again even though there are "no fish out there."

After pulling in a net bursting with fish, Peter asks Jesus, "How did this happen?"

Jesus tells him, "Come with me." "What are we going to do?" Peter asks. "Change the world," Jesus says.

Since Christ walked the earth 2,000 years ago, He and his followers have certainly done that. Now, many are asking whether Hollywood could be the vehicle through which Jesus radically changes the world once again.

"Are we changing the world?" Morgado asked rhetorically as he fielded questions from *Charisma* on the red carpet. "We're always trying to change the world and for me all that matters

is that we keep pushing for good things and for love because the message of Jesus Christ was that—it was being kind to each other and loving each other.”

Morgado says the world is in desperate need of Jesus’ love and the massive popularity of *The Bible* series, the box office success of *Son of God* and the *A.D.* series are “just a reflection of that sense of craving.”

“I think the younger generation is a little bit lost sometimes with no sense of direction and so I’m saying there is definitely a new wave of opportunities (with faith-based films and TV shows) that can inspire and touch people—and that’s tremendous,” Morgado says.

Shaw, who accompanied Morgado on the red carpet, says the doors of Hollywood are open for “re-examining these amazing stories which have shaped the foundations of Western society for the last 2,000 years.”

“I think a lot of people have sort of forgotten these stories and they have been sort of lost to the younger generation,” says Shaw, who played Adam in the remake of the 1979 *Jesus* film that has been seen by billions of people and resulted in more than 200 million decisions to follow Jesus. “So anything that actually helps people ... in this complicated world that we are living in is a wonderful thing.”

Will Billions See *The Bible* and *A.D.*?

Just as the *Jesus* film is considered “one of the greatest evangelistic tools of all time,” Burnett—producer of *Survivor* and *The Apprentice*—believes *Son of God*, *The Bible* and the *A.D.* series will also be viewed by an innumerable multitude. In an interview in early 2014, Burnett said *The Bible* series will be “seen in every country of the world. More people will see this series than everything we ever made together—combined. Billions of people will see this series.”

“What we have here, because we are on network television, is the potential to reach an even bigger audience (than *The Bible* miniseries),” Downey says.

The 12-part *A.D.* series begins on April 5, picking up where *The Bible* series left off, and follows the first 10 chapters of the book of Acts exploring the aftermath of Christ’s death and its impact on the disciples and political and religious leaders of the era—“an impact that would completely change the world.”

At a time when films about the Bible are “often gross distortions of what actually happened,” Saddleback Church Pastor Rick Warren says, “you can always count on Mark Burnett and Roma Downey to stay true to the Scriptures, treating miracles as actual miracles.

“With a stellar track record of both *The Bible* television series and *the Son of God* movie, Mark and Roma are now bringing *A.D.*, the exciting story of ... Acts, to the screen as a gift to the entire church,” Warren says.

Number of Faith Films Soaring

The release of *A.D.*, *The Bible*, *Son of God* and similar films and TV shows is, in a way, the culmination of decades of hard work by such figures as Dr. Ted Baehr, founder of Movieguide (), Karen Covell, founder of the Hollywood Prayer Network (), John Ware, founder of the 168 Film Project, and many others.

For 23 years, Baehr has prepared the Annual Report to the Entertainment Industry showing that moviegoers prefer “clean, heroic, family-friendly movies with Christian, biblical, redemptive, conservative, and patriotic faith and values.”

For example, 90 percent of the top 10 movies in 2014 contained strong or very strong Christian, redemptive, biblical and moral worldviews, including *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *Frozen* and *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*.

Last year, movies with very strong Christian, redemptive worldviews following biblical principles averaged \$67 million at the box office compared to \$20 million for movies with very strong non-Christian worldviews.

From 1991 to 2014, the percentage of movies with at least some Christian, redemptive content increased from 10 percent to 62 percent.

"I think God would love to have this happen consistently," Baehr says. "God is interested in redeeming the media and I just see that He's been able to get some people's hearts and minds (in Hollywood) changed so they want to do just that."

Pat Boone, a legendary singer and actor who starred in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and *The Cross and the Switchblade*, says he's thrilled by the transformation in Hollywood.

"The films like *Fireproof*, *Heaven Is for Real* and *God's Not Dead* have done extremely well at the box office and the film industry is realizing there is a huge market out there that doesn't want zombies, vampires and every kind of violence and depravity known to human beings," says Boone, who plays "Doc Woods" in the recent faith-based film *Booneville Redemption*.

"Ted Baehr keeps pointing out that if you want to be a success and make money with your films, make something that the whole family can go see. That's what built Hollywood to begin with."

Boone says film and television are "so powerful and influential" that God isn't "going to relinquish them."

"In fact, I don't think we came up with (films and TV shows) ourselves," Boone says. "I think He meant it for good because films like *The Ten Commandments* have always been huge box-office winners. The biggest ones have almost always been ones with some kind of faith element in them and now they're coming back."

Growing Demand for Bible Movies

As demand for faith-based entertainment grows, Hollywood seems to be listening. A recent survey by LifeWay Research found 56 percent of Americans indicated they want more movies with Christian values.

“Faith-based movies are no longer a niche,” LifeWay Research Vice President Scott McDonnell says. “It’s smart economics—if you make a film that appeals to that audience, they will show up.”

Randall Wallace, the screenwriter for *Braveheart*, says Hollywood has discovered there is an influential audience that craves movies that respect and recognize the importance of a spiritual search.

“I intend to do more movies that celebrate our faith because I believe everyone craves inspiration and authentic spiritual connection,” Wallace says.

It seems Hollywood is becoming more receptive to faith-based films, says Michael Scott, producer of *Do You Believe?* and *God’s Not Dead*.

“Hollywood saw *The Passion of the Christ* come and go and I think this ‘stir’ is happening a second time, except they saw it in triplicates with *Son of God*, *God’s Not Dead* and *Heaven Is for Real*,” Scott says.

Scott’s hope is that *Do You Believe?* will reach not only the Christian audience, but nonbelievers as well. “This can be our rallying cry,” Scott says.

Another indicator of Hollywood’s openness to faith-based films is the fact that Tim Gray, president of Gray Media, a media marketing company that promoted *God’s Not Dead*, was invited to speak at the Sundance Film Festival about faith on film. It was the first time such a discussion was held, Gray says.

"Sundance is the world's largest independent film festival started by Robert Redford," Gray says. "This panel discussion is a big step. They have recognized, just like the world has recognized, that we are a huge audience. We may be a niche audience, but we are a huge niche."

Ware, founder of the 168 Film Project (), says the atmosphere in Hollywood presents tremendous opportunities for Christian filmmakers and screenwriters.

"I think if we had 10 amazing scripts to sell that we could sell all of them," Ware says. "We're inviting the church back to Hollywood, which has pretty much excluded it for decades. They are very receptive and that could be a real game changer."

The Passion of the Christ Shook Hollywood

Over the past decade since the blockbuster success of *The Passion of The Christ*, Hollywood has been trying to figure out the Christian market.

Mark Joseph, the founder of the MJM Entertainment Group who helped produce the rock soundtrack for *The Passion of the Christ*, explains it this way:

"Essentially, 9 million people showed up on opening week to see this movie and Hollywood didn't know who they were! Think of Hollywood like Coca-Cola. They've been making Coke for 50 years and all of a sudden 9 million new people show up who want a little bit of a different flavor and they are wondering what to do," Joseph says. "So it's taken Hollywood 10 years to try to figure out who these people are and what they want, exactly. They are now in the middle of this process."

Joseph, who has films in the works about President Ronald Reagan and the friendship between *The Lord of the Rings* author . Tolkien and *The Chronicles of Narnia* creator C.S. Lewis, adds: "For the past 50 years, Hollywood has made this

extraordinary effort to tell stories, minus the faith. It's a bit bizarre, so if anything, there's a movement to correct that. Faith is nothing to be afraid of. It's often the driving force in a character's life."

Terry Botwick, producer of the *Captive* film about a convict who shot a judge and other court personnel and broke into the home of a woman who read Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* to him and was freed, says there have always been films that resonate with people of faith. These kinds of films have a long history in Hollywood.

"We can think of movies all the way back to *The Ten Commandments*, as a biblical story, and *It's a Wonderful Life*, when it comes to the value of someone's life," Botwick says. "I think the difference now is there's a demonstrable market, a way to reach people of faith, and this has caught the eye of the studios and networks."

What About Independent Christian Films?

In an effort to assist independent Christian filmmakers, former U.S. Senator and presidential candidate Rick Santorum is using a unique new model to allow churches to premier faith-based films.

"Movies have a way of impacting the culture like no other medium; and we want to empower these churches with great faith-based films to be one of the instruments of change that our culture so desperately needs," says Santorum, chief executive officer of EchoLight Studios (and).

Hollywood is receptive to independent films, but Santorum recognizes the entertainment industry is a tough business. One of his films is *Hoovey*, the true story of Erick "Hoovey" Elliot, a star basketball player who must learn to talk and walk again after a brain tumor surgery.

"With most movies, you put your film out there and its success

rides on getting enough audiences to see it in the first two weeks at theatres, but with our system, in premiering *Hoovey*, churches can sign up to show it by going to our website,” Santorum says. “We give the churches a two-month exclusive so they have a period of time to show this movie and other films. Our goal is to reach 1,000 churches with *Hoovey* and build from there.”

Could Hollywood Ignite an Awakening?

Given the new receptivity to faith-based films and TV shows in Hollywood, many believers are beginning to recognize that this phenomenon is opening a “big door” to spread the good news.

“I just feel like we are in desperate need of another spiritual awakening,” says Andrew Erwin, the producer of *Woodlawn*, a film based on the true story of a 1970s high school football game in the midst of the Jesus Movement and racial tensions in Birmingham, Alabama. “The only way to overcome a lot of pain that is going on right now on a national scale is to have a greater law to overcome hate and that greater law is love.”

Stephen Kendrick, producer of *Courageous*, *Fireproof*, *Facing the Giants* and *War Room* coming out in August, says all believers must pray for another spiritual awakening in America.

“We asked the Lord what our next film should be about and we believe He directed us towards the topic of prayer,” Kendrick says. “When we look at the persecution going on of believers around the world and how desperately our nation and the church in America is in need of revival and spiritual awakening, we believe that God is calling His church to their knees in prayer.”

Covell, founder of the Hollywood Prayer Network, believes Hollywood is “the world’s most influential mission field.” Over the years, she has seen the power of prayer as

celebrities and others have given their lives to Christ. She estimates about 10,000 Christians are working in some way in the entertainment industry in Hollywood.

“What we are seeing today is not just the result of one generation of Christians here, but several generations,” Covell says. “It’s been a long journey to see a spiritual impact, but we are getting to the point now after people have been working here faithfully for 20, 30, 40 and even 50 years that God is opening doors, the Christian community is growing and the mindset of people in Hollywood is changing. It’s now a place unlike it ever was before.”

In the same way as the Holy Spirit is the “star” of *A.D.*, Covell says the Holy Spirit is sweeping through Hollywood.

“I think He’s revealing Himself in miracles,” Covell says. “We are seeing many miracles. I’ve watched the Holy Spirit coming in a way that is so powerful. I believe it’s a result of years and years of praying for us to see miracles here and for us to see a revival. I believe we are seeing the beginning of it.”

‘A Blessing in the Sky’

Just as miracles purportedly occurred during the filming of *The Bible* series, a supernatural sign also accompanied the making of *A.D.*—a potential indicator of the Holy Spirit’s participation in the miniseries, Downey says.

During the filming of the scene about the trial of apostles John and Peter, Downey says a single cloud in the form of a cross appeared in the sky.

“It was totally blue skies and a clear skies’ day,” Downey says, “and suddenly a member of our crew pointed to the sky and everyone looked up and there, out of nowhere, had appeared a cloud and the cloud was in the shape of a perfect cross. It was just extraordinary. Everyone stopped.

“Cell phones, iPhones and iPads were pulled out. It was just a moment of well, you know, it felt like a moment of reassurance—that here we were in the middle of the desert (in Morocco), in the middle of nowhere, and it just felt like something approving or like a blessing in the sky. It was really lovely.”

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Roma Downey and Mark Burnett tell how the Holy Spirit guided them through their films at