

When a Movie Becomes a Movement

Harold Cronk never expected *God's Not Dead* would grow beyond a simple independent film into a full-fledged movement. The director of one of the most successful faith-based films of all time says he gets emails and calls from people testifying the film changed their lives. The movie has provoked people to renew their faith and to become passionate about sharing it—so passionate, in fact, that Cronk says he may need to get a new phone number.

In the original movie's climax, hundreds pull out their phones to text friends about their faith. On one phone, one of the cell numbers still visible belonged to Cronk—who had been texting an actor earlier that day. Cronk says he's received a flood of calls and texts from eager fans who punched the number into their phones, unaware that the film's director was on the other end.

Cronk doesn't really mind, though. That vigor—that desire to share the message of Jesus, no matter who is on the other end of the phone—is exactly the response Cronk hoped this film would inspire. The first film, which told the story of a college student defending his Christian faith in an atheist classroom, resonated with many Christians and sent shockwaves through Hollywood. In 2014, *God's Not Dead* became the little independent film that could, surpassing every outsider expectation by making over \$60 million at the box office during its five-month theatrical run. Now, with all eyes on the highly anticipated sequel, *God's Not Dead 2* will prove whether the first film was a flash in the pan—or the opening battle cry of a larger movement.

Launching the Film

Before the movement, before the movie, *God's Not Dead* began as a book by evangelist Rice Broocks. As co-founder of the Every Nation family of churches and senior minister of Bethel World Outreach Church in Nashville, Tennessee, Broocks worked with college students on a regular basis. He grew concerned about a worrisome trend among students.

"You hear these alarming statistics," Broocks says. "Some people say as much as 80 percent of young people are leaving the faith when they leave high school and get to college. Now that's totally not true. ... No one quite knows how many it is, but it's an alarming figure. I think it would be conservative to say at least 50 percent that leave high school, when they get to college, will either lose or abandon their faith, and many times it's because they don't have clear enough understanding. They get presented with evidence or arguments they can't answer, and they just shelve their faith like an out-of-date cellphone. So I started writing this book to lay out the evidence for God."

Broocks was telling a friend, businessman Troy Duhon, about the book he was writing—*God's Not Dead: Evidence for God in an Age of Uncertainty*—when Duhon stopped him in his tracks. "That needs to be a movie," Duhon said. He ended up connecting Broocks with Pure Flix Entertainment.

Michael Scott, founding partner of Pure Flix and co-producer of *God's Not Dead*, says the Pure Flix team met with Broocks shortly thereafter: "We talked about the ideas of taking the Newsboys song 'God's Not Dead' and the apologetics book and turning them into a movie, and the process started. Within a year and a half after the process started, we came out with *God's Not Dead*."

Broocks began sitting down with the screenwriters and explained to them the tensions on college campuses. He says he even helped write the apologetics-heavy classroom scenes in the movie.

At the same time, Cronk was brought on board as director for the project. "Pure Flix had actually produced a couple of smaller films at my studio, 10 West Studios, in Michigan," Cronk says. "We just developed a relationship. When the script came up for *God's Not Dead*, Michael Scott called me and asked if I wanted to direct it, and I came on board."

Even as production commenced, the team never suspected *God's Not Dead* would become a breakout hit. But as early cuts of the film's scenes came into the editing room, Cronk says he had some inkling.

"I don't think anyone expected the massive support the picture got," Cronk says. "I did talk to the producers about two-thirds of the way through production after watching through some dailies and seeing some of the performances. I said, 'I think we have something special here.'"

Impacting the Lost

Indeed, *God's Not Dead* was a special achievement in Christian film—a message-based film that achieved mainstream success. The film made over \$9 million in its opening weekend alone, becoming at one time the fourth-biggest film in the U.S.

Phil Cooke, a Hollywood producer and industry veteran, says the film succeeded by striking a chord with everyday believers. "The original *God's Not Dead* was a rare phenomenon that really tapped into the dismissive attitude Christians have been experiencing a long time in today's culture," Cooke says.

But though *God's Not Dead* primarily resonated with believers, many unchurched individuals became curious after the film began to succeed at the box office.

"That's a common question: Are you preaching to the choir or impacting others?" Scott asks. "We don't always have the marketing budget to spend \$20-30 million on commercials

everywhere (like other movies do), so we primarily focus on activating the church. It's like this: You drop a pebble in the lake, and it makes an initial splash, but then it begins to ripple out. We activate the core Christian audience, and then they bring in their circle of friends until finally, as the movie creates momentum, you reach into a crowd that may never attend church. But they have to come because they've heard of it and there's a fear of missing out. Based on initial surveys, we think 25 percent of the audience was unchurched or not Christians at *God's Not Dead*. So I think, yes, these films strengthen core Christian beliefs and strengthen them to understand beliefs, but they're also an evangelistic effort to reach the lost as well."

That tension, between addressing the desires of the faithful and meeting the needs of the seekers, weighs heavily on Cronk as he prepares to release the film's sequel to an eager audience. He says finding that balance is a constant discussion for him and his team.

"We can't just preach to the choir," Cronk says. "Obviously we make films for an audience, but the content needs to be something that reaches beyond the faithful, because we are called to bring others. It's tricky. We feel that these films—if nothing else—are making people who are not of the faith at least ask the question. I absolutely believe that the films are reaching beyond just the Christian audience. It might not be having an effect on a lot of people, but on the agnostics, on the people who are on the fence, it's at least planting the seed in them."

God's Not Dead isn't the only example of this. Movieguide founder Dr. Ted Baehr says studies show Christian films go far beyond simply preaching to the choir: "We know that 40 percent of audiences who wouldn't go to church have gone to a Christian film in the past year or two. How many of that 40 percent are unchurched Christians? I don't know. Possibly a significant portion. I think there are a few others who have

no defined faith who end up watching these movies and are evangelized, and I hope there are more than we imagine.”

Raising the Cinematic Bar

The ripple effect has become a metaphor for *God’s Not Dead* as a whole. If the movie was the initial splash, then the broader movement gaining steam is the ripples spreading outward. The team at Pure Flix is aware that they have a fledgling movement on their hands, and the success of the sequel could determine the survival of the movement.

“I do believe *God’s Not Dead* is a movement,” Scott says. “I think we saw that from the first film. The movie goes to levels deep enough in faith-based circles that it’s a movement. It’s a cry: #GodsNotDead. People are using that term out there, and it’s really started a movement. I think that will continue with *God’s Not Dead 2*.”

With the sequel, Pure Flix has attempted to raise the bar, both in terms of story ambition and technical achievement. *God’s Not Dead 2* raises the stakes from a university classroom to a courtroom. Based on several real-life court cases, the movie tells the story of Grace Wesley (Melissa Joan Hart), a high school teacher who is sued for quoting Jesus in the classroom. She and her defense attorney (Jesse Metcalfe) decide that the best way to prove her innocence is to prove Jesus was a real person, rendering her quotation no different than quoting Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr.

Cooke believes this movie could be a useful tool for evangelism with nonbelievers: “This would be the moment for believers to take a nonbelieving friend who’s sitting on the fence or thinking about these issues. After the movie, take them out for coffee and have a discussion about it. If the Christian audience looked at films like this as an opportunity for sharing their faith, the result could be remarkable. After all, how easy is it to invite a friend to see a movie?”

Baehr says the film's financial success will be difficult to predict, given that *God's Not Dead 2* will have significantly more competition than the first film—*Risen*, *The Young Messiah* and *Miracles from Heaven* will be simultaneously competing for attention at the box office. But he says it's possible for all of the films to be successful—and send an even bigger message to Hollywood about the future of faith-based films—if Christians support them en masse.

"My fanboy statement is that we want these films to succeed," Dr. Baehr says. "If they're good films, you need them to do really well. Everyone needs to go out to the theater the first weekend and support their local Christian film."

Scott and Cronk echo Baehr's exhortation to believers, and both point out that increased box-office revenue means that the next films will have larger budgets—which can raise the quality and increase the potential audience size. They've seen that effect already with *God's Not Dead 2*. Cronk says the success of the first film has allowed the team to create an even better film this time around.

"Many of your readers may have noticed that the first film was lacking in some cinematic areas," Cronk says. "A lot of that was the result of a very, very limited budget and a very compressed timeline. Our production schedule for the first film was 18 days total. So in talking with the producers, we decided we are called to try and create excellence as Christians, and we owe it to our audience to try and raise the bar, not just in message but also in cinematic quality of the picture. Thanks to the success of the first film, we had access to more resources, which gave us the tools to take the next step in trying to create not only a film with a strong message for our audience but also a film that is a beautiful, well-told story."

Joining the Movement

At the initial meeting with Pure Flix's owners in 2011, Broocks laid out his vision for the *God's Not Dead* movement: "We need a million young people in this country alone who can defend their faith. This is what it's going to take."

That vision was carried by former Pure Flix CEO Russell Wolfe until his unfortunate death from ALS last May. Broocks says Wolfe's dying wish was, "Please let this become a movement."

Already his wish is being fulfilled. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Broocks' book has been translated into many different languages, and the first film has been seen worldwide by 25 million people—and that's by Broocks' own conservative estimates. Broocks is releasing a new book, *Man Myth Messiah: Answering History's Greatest Question*, which ties in with the film's sequel. And the *God's Not Dead* Facebook page alone has over 8 million likes.

"This isn't just a movie or a concert," Broocks asserts. "We're trying to create a movement, and the movement is a cross-denominational apologetics and evangelism movement that equips people of all ages to defend their faith."

Early screenings of the sequel have been highly positive, suggesting the movement could grow even larger when *God's Not Dead 2* opens April 1. Whether the second film surpasses the original's success or sputters short, Cronk gives the glory to God and gives thanks to his audience. The director says he's been overwhelmingly blessed by the positive response of Christians who have supported his work—although he doubts he'll include his phone number in the closing credits this time around.

"Many people are calling it a movement," Cronk says. "I think it's amazing that the stories are reaching the audience and giving them confidence to stand up for their beliefs, to not be afraid of saying 'Jesus is my Lord and Savior.' I think it's helping people to be more confident in their faith. It's

crazy the way that God is using the picture. We never could have fathomed what He'd be doing with it."

The film is officially out of Pure Flix's hands and in the hands of God—and moviegoing Christians. The only question remaining is how many more believers will join the movement.

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Listen to how *God's Not Dead 2* actors think the film will impact culture's view of Christianity at .