

Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

January 2 2017: Is it Art, or is it Preaching?

Last year, this interesting little indie movie showed up for a few days in a limited number of theatres around the country: [Beyond the Mask](#) [1]. I really wanted to catch it there, but missed it; afterwards, Jerri found it at some shop, brought it home, and we watched it. It's really charming, even if some of the anachronistic concepts are a bit outrageous - *Mission Impossible* style agents for the evil East India Company with a precision sniper musket, a submerged secret laboratory ran by an evil scientist. Yes, there is high-stakes suspense, romance, mystery, all set in the context of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. Yes, there is a star-caliber actor - John Rhys-Davies. The writing was great, the stagecraft was incredible, and the acting was reasonably good. And the most amazing thing? It was *not* a big studio production! It was created by an extended homeschool family - the [Burns Family](#) [2]. They have two earlier productions, *Pendragon* and a sequel, that look reasonably good if not quite up to the level of *Beyond the Mask*, so I'm sure I will have to check those out, but I'm quite interested in watching the development of Burns Family Studios.



Now, here's part of the real attraction for me - it's a Christian movie, in the sense that it was created by Christians, but it's less a "Christian" movie. It's not really preachy. The gospel is in there, explicitly, but in almost a Reformed sense: There's no conversion scene, really; the character accepts and applies the truth of what he is being told without any emotional "being led to Jesus", no "asking Jesus into his heart", no praying the magic prayer. Productions by the [Kendrick Brothers](#) [3] such as *Flywheel*, *Courageous*, *Fireproof*, and the successful *War Room* film that stayed in major theatres a good long while last year, tend to be more polished productions (although, being contemporary pieces, are less demanding than a historical piece like *Beyond the Mask*). They are also very preachy. It's as if Kendrick films are "shallow" - the story is a vehicle to carry some moral message (be honest, love your wife, etc.) plus the gospel. The Burns film was "deeper" - I didn't see there was any particular "message"; there was just the story, told from a Christian perspective, and the themes just worked themselves out. However, both Burns and Kendrick films are a great improvement over the older Graham Evangelism Organization-produced films (e.g.,

Timechanger) that is primarily the gospel message.

This is great. The first people who started making "Christian" movies regarded them as merely a tool for evangelism. Of course, the knowledge that they were just video evangelism tracts turned off the very crowd they were intended for, and only the evangelical crowd went to see the evangelistic movies. They seem to be getting progressively more artistic and less preachy.

Art should be pursued for its own sake. Columnist R. J. Moeller sees this in the work of C. S. Lewis. In his piece [The Real C. S. Lewis - Fascinating and Flawed \[4\]](#), he writes

C. S. Lewis is chiefly remembered because he told great stories. He was the creator of worlds and realms outside of our own that taught us more about the one in which we live. He produced good art, first and foremost. He didn't set out to create an alternate "religious version" of something secular artists were doing. He told stories that he felt compelled to tell.

And in [C. S. Lewis' Narnia: Mouthwash for the Imagination \[5\]](#), he observes directly to the question of Christian message versus art:

C. S. Lewis did not write fiction to trick people into believing in God. The stories comprising the canon of Narnia were not penned to be Christian tracts that a faithful, church-going believer might hand out on the corner of a busy metropolitan city. Lewis wrote because he believed he had a story to tell; one worth telling.

The apparently novel concept that Christians should be producing art for its own sake is pointed out by John Stonestreet writing for [Breakpoint \[6\]](#), so I hope this is a growing understanding that will displace the "everything must be a means for evangelism" mindset. I read this AFA Journal article about the [maturing of Christian filmmaking \[7\]](#) with a mixed reaction: Yes, it's a good thing that cinematography is being taught at Christian universities, and hopefully that will impart a polish and command of professional tools and process strategies, but it's still in the evangelical world which is still dominated by a "evangelism above all" mentality.



There may be another way of looking at this. The Graham films were intentionally and unabashedly tools for evangelism, intended for an unbelieving audience - which of course didn't show up. A recent film like *God's Not Dead 2* is just as preachy as anything the Graham organization produced, but it adds faith-affirming apologetic "testimony" from expert Christian "witnesses" and a Christian contemporary music concert. As usual, the gospel presentation concludes in multiple conversion episodes, the sort of thing that gets evangelical church people all teary and choked-up. So... is this film really targeted at the unbelievers that any market research would show aren't interested, or the evangelical church crowd?

Hopefully, the trend of Christian films becoming less preachy tools and more actual art will continue. However, I note that the *opposite*

appears to be happening in the secular/atheist world. Comic books and television shows were never exactly *Art*; they were more intended for entertainment and to make money (especially through advertising), but they certainly have their artistic aspects, and have been studied as such. In the past few decades, there has been a trend to include moralistic messages, and this trend seems to be accelerating as the "Social Justice Warrior" component of contemporary society becomes more influential (or at least more vocal). The increasingly frequent appearance of homosexual characters in television shows and movies is no secret to anybody, even though the representation of homosexuals in media is far in excess of their actual share of the population. The trend of envelope-pushing seems to be picking up. A

few years ago, the popular *Doctor Who* program presented a "companion" for the Doctor who was in a biracial relationship. There is of course nothing inherently immoral in a biracial relationship, at least, if it were not explicitly promiscuous as Rose Tyler's and Mickey's is, but the appearance of the relationship on screen is definitely pushing the envelope. It's trying to get people to "broaden their minds". *It's a message*. Then the omnisexual Captain Jack Harkness appeared. Then the unveiled lesbian couple as a regular part of the Doctor's coterie. Then the male



Master who reappears in the series as the female Mistress. Then the Time Lord that dies male and regenerates female. And next season, it is a transgender companion. All of this progression of sexual progressivism in just a few years time. In the same way, now that Marvel Studios is a household word following the blockbuster Avenger movies, they feel



the need to inject "diversity" into their work. According to this [New York Times article \[8\]](#), Marvel plans to introduce a black girl with an Iron Man suit. The Black Panther has already appeared. There are plans to bring in a Latino character and a homosexual superhero. Of course, I'm not opposed to black, Latino, or female characters, but the effort to intentionally inject "diversity" into an otherwise self-consistent story *is a message*. What point is there to bringing in a homosexual character, if not to normalize sexual diversity? How long can it be before the transgender character show up? How long before polygamy and polyandry and bestiality and pedophilia themes are brought into popular media in an effort to normalize them? *It's a message*. OR... it's focused entertainment for a niche group. If *God's Not Dead 2* was made and marketed by an evangelical producer for a minority evangelical audience, maybe the current lot of television programs and movies are being made and marketed by

Social Justice Warrior producers for a minority Social Justice Warrior audience. Either way, I'm hoping that just like the evangelical "Christian" movies are a turn-off for the non-evangelical crowd, the farther the Social Justice Warrior productions venture into envelope-pushing sexual progressivism, the less general audience they attract and the more money they lose. I think this effect is already becoming somewhat visible, when the avant-garde Oscar-winning films beloved by the Academy are money-losing box-office bombs while the despised "wholesome" "family-oriented" films with patriotic or heroic themes become surprise blockbusters. It would be really ironic that the secular/atheist Social Justice politically-correct productions eventually lose market share to non-preachy Christian films and even television programs that are actually Art. I can reasonably hope for this, because the reality of how God made us is that Art appeals to the human spirit, and reality can't be suppressed or perverted indefinitely; it will eventually reassert itself. Although... yes... it may be the Next Age before that happens.

.....

1. www.beyondthemaskmovie.com/home
2. burnsfamilystudios.com
3. kendrickbrothers.com
4. acculturated.com/the-real-c-s-lewis-fascinating-and-flawed
5. acculturated.com/c-s-lewis-narnia-mouthwash-for-the-imagination

6. www.breakpoint.org/bpcommentaries/breakpoint-commentaries-archive/entry/13/19742
7. www.afajournal.org/past-issues/2015/october/the-maturing-of-christian-filmmaking
8. www.nytimes.com/2016/07/07/books/marvels-new-iron-man-is-a-15-year-old-black-girl.html