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Cinema Sans Sin:

Imaginatively Transforming Evangelical Cinema

“Where is Hollywood located? Chiefly between the ears. In that part of the American brain lately vacated by God” (Jong). Over one-quarter of Americans subscribe to Evangelicalism, a number twice exceeding the entire population of California (Pew Research Center). Yet dissimilar to their ample presence on bookshelves and radio stations, Evangelical Christian values remain noticeably absent from American cinema. Recurrent anti-Hollywood rhetoric from the pulpit confines Christ to traditional media such as literature and music, forsaking the millions more inclined to sit in a theatre seat than a church pew. Such negligence, coupled with unimaginative filmmaking, isolates Evangelical worldviews into a singular genre, effectively effacing its influence from American cinemas and their respective audiences. Evangelicals are inadvertently responsible for this alienation, and urgently need to transform their film production, their film distribution, and their entertainment priorities to promote Christ-centered values within the industry. If Evangelical filmmakers commit to transforming American cinema with imaginative narratives, and if Evangelical audiences simultaneously embrace nuanced cinematic entertainment instead of palatable entertainment, their collective influence upon the medium will evolve from obscurity to stability.

Before delving into the current issues facing American Evangelicals and their cinema, terms such as ‘Evangelical’, ‘Evangelical films’, and ‘Evangelical filmmakers’ require detailed

definitions. The word 'Evangelical' is difficult to define, yet broadly refers to sects of Christianity which proclaim faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, adhere to the Gospels, and seek to evangelize the world at large. The terms 'Evangelical film' and 'Evangelical filmmaking' are not exclusive to films that have an explicit connection to the Gospels or Christianity. Rather, these terms broadly refer to films that are guided, either by a screenwriter, director, or producer, to promote Evangelical Christian values within their work. Following this concept, an 'Evangelical filmmaker' refers to a screenwriter, director, or producer who seeks to promote these aforementioned values within their work. Thus, Evangelical filmmaking encapsulates overtly Evangelical films such as *God's Not Dead*, but also pertains to films with marked Evangelical themes such as the adaptation of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Finally, for the sake of brevity, only theatrical twenty-first century American releases with such Evangelical ties will be explored at length in this discussion.

Modern Evangelicals and modern Hollywood have an estranged relationship to say the least, yet before the polarization of both entities during the counterculture movement of the 1960s, the two coexisted in relative tranquility. During its formative years in America and internationally, filmmaking was no more or no less moral than any other art form. Literature, painting, sculpture, and music each had centuries of Christian and secular influence, but filmmaking was an infantile and malleable medium lacking the centuries of Catholicism that helped shape the other arts. Certainly, this newfound technology of capturing and projecting light would appear to lend itself well to Christian themes and biblical recreations. Films such as Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The King of Kings* (1927), and *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) exemplified how well biblical stories could translate to film. By the early 1930s, however, secularized films quickly grew in number. Films such as the 1933 *Baby Face* and the

1934 *Murder at the Vanities* began souring theatres with gratuitous nudity, lewd dialogue, and explicit drug references. Audiences, primarily pious women and children, grew agitated with such content, and quit regularly attending theatre showings. Coinciding scandals, most notably the infamous alleged rape and murder of actress Virginia Rappe by actor Roscoe Arbuckle, brought unwanted attention to Hollywood's declining morals. Religious and political institutions alike took issue with audiences, particularly adolescents, having access to such morally questionable content. With the immediate threat of public backlash, several Hollywood studios knew a change was necessary (Thompson and Bordwell 131).

Headed by highly-regarded public servant Will H. Hays, regulation was inevitably crafted. In 1934, the Motion Picture Production Code was created and adopted by each of the major Hollywood studios of the decade. The specific and lengthy moral guidelines that comprised the code were written primarily by a Catholic layman and a Jesuit priest, both of whom were concerned about the religious repercussions of children watching suggestive content in theatres. The Motion Picture Production Code was a turning point for the industry as a whole, but also for Christian guidance over film as well. For better or worse, Christian morals were adhered to out of legal respect for the code. Depictions of rape, sympathy toward gangsters, drug abuse, and using the Lord's name in vain were strictly prohibited. For the next two decades, major American film releases more or less abided by these moral guidelines. This newfound production code, however, proved to be short lived and fragile.

Following the landmark *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.* Supreme Court case in 1942, adherence to the production code gradually lessened. A legal loophole pertaining to theatre ownership inevitably allowed production companies to ignore their previous commitment to the Motion Picture Production Code. Thus, directors such as Otto Preminger began ignoring the

code altogether, releasing the sexually suggestive *The Moon is Blue* without Motion Picture Production Code approval in 1953. Over the next two decades, films with explicit content gradually pervaded theatres once more. To the studios' benefit, this revival of gratuitous content among screenwriters, directors, and producers coincided with the 1960s counterculture movement, and the profits lost from pious pew-sitters were eclipsed by an emerging adolescent audience. Seen as an extension of a newfound sinful, humanistic, rock-and-roll culture, drive-in theatres soon became a symbol of rebellion to the Evangelical church. Thus, tension between church and cinema festered. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Protestants and Catholics alike began painting the movies as toxic, and the movies responded by creating content that suited their new, non-religious audience. Films such as the 1976 *Carrie* and 1984 *Footloose* painted Bible-thumping Christians as villains, the latter of which directly pitting an adolescent protagonist against a self-righteous preacher. Christian worldviews were confined to profitable biblical epics, while films in popular genres either scoffed at Christianity or ignored it altogether. Film critic James Russell describes the situation as follows:

Hollywood seemed happy to leave the Evangelical market alone, because its potentially massive size did not seem to translate to massive revenues, and because any association with Hollywood seemed to actively deter a sizable proportion of Evangelical viewers. (Russell 397)

Exemptions apply of course, but a distinct decline of Christian veneration in cinema can be traced back to the counterculture-Evangelical split of the 1960s.

This estranged relationship between Hollywood and Evangelicals continued through the 1980s and 1990s, yet the turn of the millennium and the subsequent September 11th tragedies in 2001 soon ushered in a wave of unity and piety among Evangelicals nationwide. Such accord

among Evangelicals was reflected in the entertainment industry as well, most notably with the outpouring of Evangelicals to the 2004 premiere of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. According to aforementioned critic James Russell, Mel Gibson's heavily marketed film caught the attention of Evangelicals and Hollywood alike, regardless of Gibson's denominational affiliation with Catholicism, "Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* seemed to undercut almost all of the industry's assumptions about the commercial viability of Christian film" (Russell 397). Grossing \$370,782,930 domestically, Mel Gibson's big-budget film caused a more nuanced relationship to form between Evangelicals and Hollywood (Aquilina). Since then, Hollywood has gradually expanded its interest in funding Christian films, and an assortment of Evangelical films have likewise been released. Films such as *Fireproof*, *End of the Spear*, and *I Can Only Imagine* epitomize the revival of faith-based, theatrical releases in twenty-first century America. While Evangelical box-office success stories continue to emerge, and the market is saturated with these technically sound productions, an issue remains: critics and Evangelicals alike are dissatisfied with these films. English professor and theologian Andrew Barber argues such dissatisfaction comes from within the narrative when he states, "The problems with Christian films must be addressed, because they are not just issues of technique or stylistic preferences. They are issues of integrity" (Barber). If integrity is the culprit, transformation must occur within the priorities of Evangelicals, not just their studios, to revitalize Evangelical cinema.

Now that the complex history between Evangelical Christianity and Hollywood has been discussed, the issues plaguing Evangelical cinema require deliberation. Multiple distinct, intertwined issues are at fault. First and foremost, unimaginative narratives remain a persistent issue that critics have with Evangelical films. Crafting creative, relevant screenplays should become a top priority for any Evangelical wishing to transform the film industry. Unfortunately,

this first step often remains the one most overlooked. Since their resurgence in the twenty-first century, Evangelical films have been continually criticized for their inability to tell compelling stories. Film critic James Russell's theory on why Evangelical narratives are so weak pertains to the target audience of such films. While Russell believes Evangelical films are arguably finding their niche in the industry, he believes that niche is an unhealthy one. In his review of the 2009 film *Fireproof*, Russell argues the artistic quality of these films frequently becomes lost in an effort to make them palatable: "Ultimately, the film [*Fireproof*] does not seem designed to speak to those outside the confines of the Evangelical community" (Russell 404). Within this critique lies many of the issues affecting Evangelical film narratives; their message often directs toward catering to a specific Evangelical audience and not to the culture at large. Ironic is an understatement, as evangelizing is what gives Evangelicals their name. According to the New Testament, Christ controversially converses with a Samaritan woman, both relating to her emotionally and guiding her spiritually (*Christian Standard Bible*, John 4.4-26). Numerous times in the Bible, Christ openly speaks to the broken, the neglected, and those on the margins of society. Evangelical filmmaking sacrifices effective evangelizing and artistic imagination when the target audience are those already within the faith. Alissa Wilkinson, film critic and self-proclaimed Christian, echoes Russell's claim in her dissection of the popular *God's Not Dead* franchise:

The glaring problem with *God's Not Dead*, and most other films made for and marketed at the 'faith audience,' is that instead of exercising and challenging the imagination of their audience in ways that would make their audience better Christians, they shut down imagination and whisper sweet nothings into their ears instead. (Wilkinson)

Films such as *God's Not Dead* are not created for the skeptic, nor are they created for challenging those within the faith. Instead they serve as a metaphorical comfort blanket for their audience, rarely straying from church-friendly topics. Adapted literary successes are also victims of narrative dilution, one such example being the 2005 remake of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. While this classic high fantasy tale isn't explicitly Christian, the immense Evangelicalism of Lewis presents itself nonetheless. For film critic Peter Travers, however, the dissatisfying elements of the film come not from its Christian undertones, but from its lack of dynamism. Travers argues, "This PG-rated movie feels safe and constricted in a way the story never does on the page. It leaves out the deep magic of a good movie, or a good sermon: the feeling that something vital is at stake" (Travers). The depth of the original book series comes from Lewis' ability to tell an unrestricted tale, free from having to reinforce his audience's theology. Evangelical cinema, however, often lacks the narrative depth of these literary classics.

These questions of narrative quality speak not merely to Evangelical filmmakers, but also to Evangelical audiences who prefer faith-affirming exclusivity over issue-oriented, potentially provocative narratives. Connected with this problem lies a second, intertwined issue plaguing Evangelical filmmaking: how Evangelicals perceive cinema. As previously touched upon, the 1960s ushered in a polarization between the American church and American popular culture. While the influx of recent Evangelical films indicates progress has been made in this regard, a persistent anti-Hollywood demeanor from fellow Evangelicals continues to limit Evangelical filmmakers. This issue grows most apparent when discussing the distribution aspect of filmmaking. Distribution pertains to marketing, selling, and mass producing any given film. Usually the costliest aspect of filmmaking, distribution requires substantial funding to be noticed

by theatre chains and their respective audiences. Unfortunately for Evangelical filmmakers, distribution is often where their own religious rhetoric gets in the way of their own success. Tracing back to the counterculture movement and the abolition of the Motion Picture Production Code, Evangelicals have widely vilified Hollywood as a modern-day Babylon. Michael Medved, author of *Hollywood Vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* presents the Evangelical-Hollywood relationship as a war: "Tens of millions of Americans see the entertainment industry as an all-powerful enemy, an alien force that assaults our most cherished values and corrupts our children" (Medved 3). This unfortunate rhetoric often causes Evangelical filmmakers to feel guilt-stricken when accepting funds from a Hollywood studio to fund their film production or distribution. Stephen Kendrick of Sherwood Pictures, the aforementioned production company responsible for *Fireproof*, went as far as to boast at the 2006 San Antonio Independent Christian Film Festival for not accepting Sony Pictures International's offer to purchase *Facing the Giants*. A short time later in San Antonio, however, Kendrick admitted that the film's distribution was paid entirely by Provident Pictures, a production company owned by Sony Pictures International (Russell 405). Such damaging hypocrisy artificially limits Evangelical filmmakers in their ability to disperse their film and have it exhibited, primarily out of fear of backlash from their own religious group. The same insecurities found in faith-affirming Evangelical films are the same insecurities exhibited by the church in response to cinema as a whole.

Now that the issues of Evangelical cinema have been thoroughly addressed, solutions are required. For current and aspiring Evangelical filmmakers, imaginatively working outside the confines of the 'Evangelical genre' is a *must*. Evangelizing with a film about Christian oppression (*God's Not Dead*), a Christian marriage (*Fireproof*), or Christ himself (*The Passion*

of the Christ) hardly differentiates movies from sermons, attracting primarily those already within the faith. Instead, Evangelicals must progress outside their narrow genre and produce films in alternative genres with Christ-centered themes. Instead of a Christian drama, Evangelicals could craft a drama with a Christian worldview. The difference is subtle, but key. One such example is the 2015 film *Beyond the Mask*. Chad Burns' Evangelically-rooted film centers on an ex-mercenary working with the British East India Company at the height of the American Revolution. Film critic Richard Propes compliments this swashbuckling action-romance for working in a unique genre. Propes also notes how excellent special effects, chemistry among the cast, and a well-plotted screenplay sets this film apart from other films with Christian subplots:

Beyond the Mask is a giant step forward for the Christian filmmaking industry, a film seemingly constructed out of the realization that it is possible to weave together genuinely entertaining cinema without surrendering one's core values. In other words, it is possible to experience adventure without giving into the excessive and gratuitous violence so often found in contemporary adventures. It is possible to be thrilled without being offensive. It is possible to be romantic without nudity or sexuality or even really hints of such. (Propes)

Beyond the Mask orchestrates what most Evangelical films fail to attain: a strong plot that reflects, yet is not weighed down by, Evangelicalism. Another recent example of strong Evangelical narrative comes from the 2016 film *Priceless*. Following an emotionally barren truck driver in need of a job, *Priceless* places the protagonist and the audience alike into the revolting world of domestic sex-trafficking. Film critic Joe Leydon's conflicted review of Ben Smallbone's 2016 film certainly doesn't praise every element of the production, but it does

compliment the handling of the subject matter. The plot of *Priceless* boldly tackles the issue of sex-trafficking within the United States. And while many Evangelical films avoid such potentially scandalous topics, *Priceless* covers sex-trafficking in a manner that demonstrates its horrors, while also avoiding the sexual exploitation of actresses frequently associated with Hollywood. In his review, Leydon asserts, “*Priceless* achieves greater impact through understatement and implication than many other similarly plotted movies do with R-rated explicitness” (Leydon). Delving into topics such as these permits Evangelical filmmakers an opportunity to attract audiences who aren’t explicitly Christian, craft compelling narratives, and work within various genres. Evangelical screenwriters and directors first need to devise characters and plots that drive narrative interest, and *then* incorporate their Christian worldview organically into the plot.

Secondly, and equally important as crafting genuine, heartfelt narratives, Evangelicals as a whole must transform their entertainment priorities to support films like *Priceless* and *Beyond the Mask*. Unlike their lengthy history with literature, painting, sculpture, and music, Christianity often finds difficulty adapting its message to film. In a mere century, cinema has evolved from simple nickelodeon theatres to unprecedented worldwide popularity, a popularity that has left the church perplexed for an entire century. Peter E. Dans, author of *Christians in the Movies: A Century of Saints and Sinners*, calls on Christians to challenge their uncertainty with cinema. In his applicable call to action, Dans implores Christians to be more active in their transforming of society through media:

For Christians to be dealt with more fairly in the years ahead, devout Christians will have to speak out against false and unjust betrayals and, in addition, as Spike Lee once urged blacks, to play a more active role in filmmaking, other media,

journalism, the internet, and the law that are so influential in molding public opinion. (Dans 300)

Unfortunately, such unity is often difficult to achieve. Many, such as Trevin Wax of *The Gospel Coalition*, pose a counterargument to Evangelicals wishing to transform their culture through secular media:

I never subscribed to the fundamentalist vision that saw holiness in terms of cultural retreat or worldliness... But sometimes I wonder if evangelicals [sic] have swung the pendulum too far to the other side, to the point where all sorts of entertainment choices are validated in the name of cultural engagement. (Wax)

Wax's inquiry poses valid questions for Evangelical filmmakers. Should Evangelical filmmakers have an explicit connection to faith within their films, and are Evangelical filmmakers 'swinging the pendulum too far' by limiting the Gospel to an undertone in their films? The answer is nuanced, and beliefs vary from individual to individual. However, this argument may be where Evangelicals have misinterpreted cinema the most. Cinema is an art, much akin to pottery. Just as an Evangelical who learns the art of molding pottery should not craft dishes exclusively for church fellowship meals, neither should an Evangelical filmmaker be obligated to craft films that cater exclusively to church members. Rather, the potter uses his talent and social platform to reflect God's glory, as does the filmmaker use her cinematic talent to achieve the same.

While these issues of cultural engagement are widely debated among seasoned Evangelical filmmakers, young Evangelical filmmakers are noticeably eager to challenge such disputes. In a roundtable discussion with several young, aspiring Evangelical filmmakers at Milligan College, a distinct distaste for contemporary Evangelical films was unanimous. Furthermore, most complaints regarding Evangelical films were directed toward narrative issues.

Each interviewee expressed interest in creating content that exhibited their Evangelical worldview in films not marked explicitly Evangelical, and each interviewee shared their reasons why they wished to dissociate from the Evangelical film market. In his interview, freshman filmmaker Travis Kyker describes the problem with Evangelical films as the following:

I think that they [Evangelical filmmakers] prioritize putting out a sermon over making a good film. And part of a good film is having a message that's engrained into every aspect of the film, but that can't be the only thing that you prioritize over craftsmanship. (Kyker)

Kyker's statement resonated with the other interviewees as well, each verbally agreeing with his indictment of American Evangelical filmmaking. Mandy Lorch, a fellow filmmaker and junior at Milligan College, echoed Kyker's thoughts by adding, "There's a nice little thing called subtlety" (Lorch). Lorch continually expressed great disdain for the current Evangelical film market, stating:

It [the Evangelical film market] fosters exclusivity... If people see that something is a Christian film, people who are not Christian, or people who have had issues with the church—they're not going to go see a film like that. But people who already are Christians, and who probably don't question their faith a lot, are the ones who are going to go see those films. (Lorch)

Simply stated, these young Evangelical filmmakers guide the future of cinema.

Moreover, growing avenues for distribution and exhibition offer an optimistic future for Evangelical filmmaking. Spenser Shaver Denver, a Christian film producer, believes there are ample opportunities for Evangelicals to create attractive content and exhibit it. Denver implores

Christians to widen their catalog of film genres to attract a broader audience. Additionally, Denver suggests the future of filmmaking may lie within streaming services when he states:

I do think that these [Christian films] will start streaming more widely on platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime. There also isn't a lot of variety in the Christian film industry at the moment as far as genres are concerned. It would definitely be interesting to see more comedy, sci-fi and hey, even horror Christian films. (Hunter)

Reimagining narratives and transforming entertainment priorities are equally essential to guiding Evangelical filmmaking toward a stable future. Recognizing the need for strong production value coupled with imaginative narratives is the first step for Evangelical filmmakers to resolve.

Evangelical audiences, on the other hand, must not paint Hollywood and cinema as an evil to be vanquished. Rather, much like the counterculture audiences of the 1960s, they must vocalize which media they morally agree and disagree with. Production companies are businesses, and businesses desire money and customers more than they desire making a political or religious statement. If Evangelicals utilize their population majority and the power of their purses to vocalize their support, the film industry will inevitably change accordingly. Such a collaboration between Evangelicals may prove difficult, but it is far from unprecedented. Regardless of its Catholic affiliation, Evangelical impact pushed *The Passion of the Christ* past domestic box-office records in 2004, and such support is possible again given the statistical majority of Evangelicals in America.

With only a century of guidance, cinema is a young and malleable art. Evangelical influence has grown over recent years, and a new generation of filmmakers will soon enter the industry. Distribution opportunities continue to evolve, and a gradual mending of Evangelical-

Hollywood relations has unexpectedly begun in the past decade. History suggests that the arts are ever-changing and reflective of their culture. In reflecting their worldview, Evangelicals must, as Christ often did with parables, speak truth to audiences through powerful narratives. By transforming their entertainment priorities and reimagining their art, Evangelicals can propel the next century of cinema, and the culture at large, toward a Christ-centered worldview.

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