

Faith and Film in a Visual Age – a reflection

(This article reviews the development of film from a Protestant perspective. An article on Catholic perspectives is planned for a future edition.)

Precursors to Film

The Christian church has long used mediums other than the printed word to tell its story. Story-telling has taken many forms, and in certain historical periods there has been significant use of painting and graphic art.

In medieval times, forms of theatre were developed with religious plays, mostly arising from the Catholic mass. By the 15th century, mystery plays had emerged. Their description has its origins not in 'mystery', but as in the idea that these plays were 'acts'. The Genesis stories were often told this way, for example. (A new interpretation of the Genesis mystery play was performed in Sydney in November 2009.) The most well-known plays concerned the Passion and these developed in medieval times, focussing on Easter and Christ's death. The most well-known of these is the Oberammergau Passion Play which was first performed in 1634. It continues as a tradition to this day with the next performance in 2020.

Initially there was questioning about using drama because many early works had pagan overtones, but combined with an authorised liturgy these questions were mostly overcome.

New technologies were developed to provide visual images in the 17th century using the 'magic lantern'. These forms of presenting images projected onto a dedicated wall or cloth screen continued into the 19th century.

With the development in the 19th century of photography, and its use in visual presentations, it was only a short step to early forms of film.

The History of Christian Film

In the 20th century, film took over as the pre-eminent visual art. Terry Lindvall's research presented in *Sanctuary Cinema* (2007) records the significant number of Christian evangelists and teachers who used visual mediums of photography, art, lantern films and then celluloid to present Christian stories from the Bible early in the century.

The first celluloid use of film was actually created by a minister of religion: Rev Hannibal Goodwin of Newark, NJ House of Prayer. George Eastman became a prominent developer of film partly due to Goodwin's early death. Goodwin's patent was recognised as the forerunner and his company, Kodak Eastman, paid a substantial sum to the company which bought his patent. Goodwin had

wanted to use this technology to provide images to illustrate his Bible messages.

Australia has its own part in early cinematic development. Early in its Australian existence, The Salvation Army established a Cinematograph Department with Herbert Booth (son of the movement's founder) and Joseph Perry as the innovators and developers of this medium for the work of mission. The first recognised production of a major work (though not a full feature film) is their production, *Soldiers of the Cross*, in 1900. The production illustrated the stories of Christian martyrs and heroes throughout church history. There were two hundred slides and thirteen rolls of film (1-3 minutes) held together by a lecture from Herbert Booth.

Another significant figure was Rev. Herbert A Jump who was regarded as the main apologist for the use of film in the church. In 1910, as minister of Connecticut New Britain Southern Congregational Church, Jump gave what could be regarded as reasons for fostering 'The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture' that remain valid today:

- story-telling;
- instruction in Sunday School;
- illustrating home and foreign missions;
- education (especially for the 'needy'); and
- providing striking visual images for a preachers' points

Overall during the silent film era there were thousands of productions and in Australia many notable silent films had religion as a central element.

It was however during the period of the silent film that Christian and church involvement in film began to fall away. This was partly related to the secular development of film, particularly of themes that contrasted with the 'pure' ideas of the church. The rising cost of high quality production was also a factor in the decline of church involvement.

Many churches and denominations gave up the idea of making films, and some came to categorise film as the 'devil's work'. Perhaps ironically, the portrayal of religion in film occurred mostly in Hollywood as media moguls realised there was money to be made in religious pictures. Hollywood produced some great epic religious films, especially in the 1950s and 1960s.

New developments in technology allowed films to be made for more reasonable cost, and some Christian organisations began to move into film development again, often to enhance or promote their evangelistic efforts. The Moody Bible Institute provided churches with a significant array of film-strip shorts for church services or evangelistic events. Another major

player in the early period was World Wide Pictures (Billy Graham Association), and they continue to this day. A fascinating Australian example of evangelistic follow-up was the release of *Shadow of the Boomerang* (1960) after the influential 1959 Billy Graham Crusade in Australia. This had a starring role for the singer, Jimmy Little. The film depicted an American brother and sister in a remote area in Australia managing a cattle station. The brother's racist attitudes became the centre of many problems. After hearing a message by evangelist Billy Graham on the radio, he had a change of heart and learnt to accept the Aboriginal people.

Over the last 50 years Christian film has continued to develop, though a focus has often been on films which were biographical in nature, sometimes of famous Christian missionaries and events. The well-known founder of Times Squares Church, David Wilkerson, was played by Pat Boone in *The Cross and the Switchblade*, a film seen by many youth groups in the 1970s.

In the USA, Christian cinema has been like Christian music, a niche market reflecting the fact they have a population to make commercially viable productions and also to make films of higher quality. Some of these have used professional actors who have been in secular work. The family drama *7th Heaven* (1996 - 2007), about a Christian family with a dog named Happy, is an example of commercial religious programming.

The last decade has witnessed a renewed interest in Christian film. Previously there were a handful of companies that undertook these endeavours, but now we seem to have come a full circle again with individual churches and ministers writing, producing and distributing films.

One notable example has been Sherwood Baptist Church, Albany, Georgia. Alex and Stephen Kendrick founded Sherwood Pictures and began involving local members, including the senior pastor, in the productions. Sherwood Pictures have produced four films since 2003. Their latest film, *Courageous*, about fatherhood, was released commercially in September 2011. It became the highest grossing new film for its opening weekend. Their previous film, *Fireproof* (2008), about marriage, is now well-known in church circles, and has even been shown on Showtime Drama (Foxtel), probably as part of a movie package arrangement. This film explores the dangers of fantasy about other relationships when one's own marriage is in difficulty, and the firestorm of issues that can beset marriages. *Fireproof* attracted more than 4 million moviegoers in its commercial release, and was the No. 1 independent film in the USA in 2008. This fact reflects the sizeable Christian market in the USA, and also the level of interest in family friendly films.

The message in Sherwood films is overtly Christian and based around their desire to encourage traditional Christian faith and family relationships within

life-affirming situations. Essentially the films are about relationships with God, our neighbours, and especially our families. They are aimed primarily at men, encouraging a re-examination of their relationships with partners and children.

As well as being commercially released, many Christian films have been shown in large and mega churches. Many smaller churches today also have reasonable screening facilities and can conduct their own 'mini film festivals'. Organisations like Heritage HM have assisted in developing such events, especially under the banner of Movies Change People.

Today of course, films are watched in a variety of ways, from computers to handheld devices, the very nature of these technologies illustrating that young people are increasingly facing a visual age, especially as forms of communication such as TV and Internet, converge.

Australia and Religious Film

There appears to be little going on in terms of major Christian film production in Australia. There have been significant short film festivals. Events like Ignite (like a Christian Tropfest), which started in 2004, have given people an avenue to produce material: <http://www.ignitefilmfest.com/>

The winner of the Ignite Gold Sparky for 2011 'Abide With Me' is a topical short for this period in the lead-up to World War I centenary events. It portrays the Christian leader, John Ridley, and his wartime Bible study, and Ridley's link with Arthur Stace, the 'eternity man'.

The umbrella group Christian Media Australia (CMA), provides resources and professional contact for a wide range of groups working in various Church and Christian industries, especially radio, though the Australian Christian Channel is a key member. CMA, in conjunction with the Pilgrim Foundation, presents the Graham Wade Pilgrim Media Prize (\$10 000), which is awarded to outstanding media projects that promote or communicate the gospel.

A newer initiative of CMA is the SPARC (Screen Production, Arts Culture) group providing a "platform and environment for those who believe what they're doing professionally and creatively, has an intrinsic relationship with their faith." They have developed the SPARC Screen Media Awards to encourage creative production groups in the development of new films. SPARC hold an annual conference and regular gatherings in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. A grassroot initiative by the Brisbane SPARC community will see a collaborative feature film produced with Simon Hunter, the New York Film Academy's Australian President.

Much of the focus in Australia has been on television because Australian television companies needed to broadcast a certain amount of religious material

each week. Christian television in Australia has had a varied history from formal denominational development, through to the various state based Christian Television Associations (CTA). CTA used to produce programmes and spots for Australian commercial television. These are of somewhat varying quality and content and were oriented mostly to families and children.

Ironically one of the CTA commercials became a reasonably watched You Tube video courtesy of The Gruen Transfer which featured a session on Christian advertising. CTA (Australia), formed from NSW and Queensland CTAs, is now run as an independent venture, and produces material in collaboration with other groups, notably the Bible Society's Jesus All About Life project. CTA (Australia) now has its own You Tube channel (over 1700 uploads). They are sponsoring a major production prize for 2012. Entrants are invited to submit an Easter special that could be used on free-to-air television.

Many churches, mainly the larger mega-style churches, have gone their own way over the last two decades, producing a variety of programmes, essentially utilising their own conference materials and preachers. They have made these available through their websites, or, in the case of Hillsong TV, also on free-to-air television.

Some Australian material is also shown on the cable TV network, The Australian Christian Channel: <http://www.acctv.com.au/> and a variety of prominent Christian films are regularly aired as well, such as *Fireproof* and the more widely received *Amazing Grace*. The increasing convergence of the internet and television has increased the possibilities for the development of Christian production.

Challenges in Visual Media

Technology development has raised a plethora of issues for the churches, but also the wider community. Among them are the dangers of decreased physical exercise, along with questions about access to and the cost of technology. A major moral area facing the whole community is pornography and the depiction of women. (See the latest substantial critique in this area in *Big Porn Inc: Exposing the Harms of the Global Pornographic Industry*, edited by Melinda Tankard Reist and Abigail Bray.) The problem has deepened with faster Internet connections. The problem is significant in every part of society.

For the churches, there are specific issues about the use of technology within worship. Using various forms of presentation, worship may be enhanced, but it may also be reduced to entertainment. From the question, 'should we show a short film during a service?', we now ask 'should we twitter during the sermon?'.

In recent studies of Bible reading habits, it has been noteworthy that increased accessibility to the Bible has not increased the frequency with which it is read. While the Bible can now be carried on one's phone, it appears that the 'Word' is not able to be digested as quickly and easily as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Using Media in Church Contexts

How and why we use contemporary social media are areas the church needs to consider. In order to simply provide a point of connection with people today, there are three basic forms of media that local churches need to consider.

Websites

Websites are a major way church-goers find out about a local church when they come into an area. A good website may not stimulate more non-church attenders to come to worship, but it will provide information and a reference point, much the same way a leaflet did in the 19th and 20th centuries, so that if a need arises in a person's life and they are looking for a church in their local area, they may access a website.

YouTube and similar video sites, including God Tube, Vimeo

Video sites provide simple and cost effective ways of illustrating the work of a local church and significant ministries. They can take the form of a short (very short) sermon, a comment on a contemporary issue in the community, or a profile of an outreach and community service. The actual production does not have to be pristine, but needs to be engaging and, of course, real.

Some YouTube videos have had an incredible number of viewings. One Christian example is the wordless 'Life is Everything' skit performed to the song by Lifehouse. This has now had more than 25 million hits from the various forms that have been uploaded. I have shown this in various settings and never cease to be amazed at its impact, especially in youth circles.

Another video recommended for discussion is 'What if Starbucks Marketed Like a Church? A Parable'. This simply raises the issues in a way that would be difficult in a written paper.

Most of the major denominations use YouTube to some extent, often as a short notice or news piece. Music is a key to some churches' development and Hillsong uses YouTube extensively in their music ministry. They have a very young age for the subscribers (over 74 000), and have had over 26 million uploads: <http://www.youtube.com/user/hillsongunitedTV>.

An example of a smaller local church using YouTube is Newtown Mission (Sydney). It has videos about the drop-in ministry and also about the Revelation Ceiling. People have come to the church to see the ceiling, and also volunteers have been recruited to help with the compassion ministry from watching the YouTube video.

There are some specific Christian sites for video, with the major one being God Tube, offering a range of material, not all with specifically Christian content, but oriented towards families and inspiration: <http://www.godtube.com/>

Social Media

Many resources, people and financial, can be poured into these areas, and vigilance is needed to maintain your own brand and emphasis. However, some groups just don't worry, believing it is simpler to let material work itself through the system. At the very least, a Facebook page allows those interested to share their experience.

Engagement in these areas is not the point in itself. Visual media are tools to raise awareness and provide opportunities to make connections. The key behind these newer forms of communication is the old idea of creating community.

Richard Reising from the Beyond Relevance website (which produced the 'What if Starbucks Marketed Like a Church? A Parable') has an apt word to remind us of the longer-term picture:

"As the church has transitioned over the last few years to recognize its need for better communication, one of the largest buzzwords of choice has been the word 'relevance.' It is a great and profound word. It implies a need to meet people where they are. It challenges us to know the latest of what the world consumes or frames their perspective. It is often the key to beginning a connection that can lead people to Christ. We love relevance. Where my heart breaks is for the churches that have given themselves to the pursuit of relevance and lost their way from creating true change and leading more people deeper. There has been a sense that church success and relevance go hand in hand. While this correlation has often played true, simply put: being relevant is not enough. I have witnessed countless churches pursue relevance as an end all, only to find themselves 'cool' but confounded in reaching people."

Peter Bentley

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Appointment of a New Office Administrator at CRA

Peg Fraser has just joined the CRA as office administrator. She has replaced Luke Dewberry who held the position for several years while studying at university.

Peg has experience as the Accounts Clerk for the Australian Presbyterian magazine and in book-keeping for a Church of Christ.

She will be in the office Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings and can be contacted by phone (03 8819 0123) or email (admin@cra.org.au).



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