

Son of God and marketing Jesus movies to ministers

by [Paul Putz](#)

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Film critics have spoken: [Son of God is a dud](#).

Just don't tell that to the film's producers, Roma Downey and Mark Burnett. They [found evidence](#) of divine favor in the film's release, citing the "truly miraculous" support they received as Catholic and evangelical leaders from [Charlotte](#) to [Los Angeles](#) threw their influence behind the movie. Clearly, their efforts were successful—a film that was a re-packaged version of scenes that aired during last year's *Bible* miniseries brought in [\\$26.5 million in ticket sales](#) for its first weekend.

Burnett and Downey attribute the wave of support to a grassroots movement and the "quiet commitment of people of faith to spread the word about the life-changing love of Jesus to their friends and neighbors."

Yet, Burnett and Downey's words came before the film had actually been released. Rather than a grassroots campaign, this was a movement from the top down: Burnett and Downey skillfully targeted influential institutions and individuals in the evangelical and Catholic world, highlighting the potential evangelistic uses of their movie. With leaders such as Rick Warren, T.D. Jakes, and Jose Gomez on board—in some cases buying out entire multiplexes in advance—individual congregants followed.

Burnett and Downey's marketing approach makes good business sense and has plenty of precedent. Take, for example, the first feature-length Jesus film in America, [From the Manger to the Cross](#). Directed by Sidney Olcott and written by Gene Gauntier, the movie debuted in cities across the U.S. in early 1913.

To soothe the consciences of Americans wary of viewing sacrilegious images, the filmmakers sought first to win over Christian ministers. Newspaper advertisements for the film carried recommendations from clergy such as Philadelphia's J.K. Dixon, who assured Americans, "It seemed more like a solemn church service than moving

pictures."

As the movie premiered in city after city, a pattern emerged. First, the city's leading clergy were invited to a special screening. After viewing the film, the ministers invariably gave it their stamp of approval, endorsing it (in the case of San Francisco) as "reverent" and "true to biblical, historical, and geographic details." Then, movie showings became available for everyone. For its time *From the Manger to the Cross* proved to be a box office success, bringing in over \$1 million in 1913.

In [*Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry*](#), Terry Lindvall detailed the high hopes that Protestant leaders had in the wake of *From the Manger to the Cross*. They believed that movies could be used as a form of evangelism, providing a medium "more far-reaching than the Bible" (as New York minister Charles H. Parkhurst put it) for the gospel. Many churches even took on the task of making and showing their own movies. But by the 1920s, Christian leaders largely left the film production to Hollywood, instead choosing to maintain a critical eye to ensure that biblical portrayals—such as Cecil B. DeMille's blockbuster *The King of Kings* (1927)—remained appropriately reverent.

The influence of Christian clergy in mainstream American culture has declined since the 1910s, and Hollywood no longer operates under the Production Code instituted in the 1930s that banned any irreverent religious depictions. Yet, when it comes to Bible-based movies, the approval of Christian leaders still matters to a film's bottom line. Hollywood no doubt remembers *The Last Temptation of Christ*, a film which, despite receiving critical acclaim and widespread media attention, turned only a marginal profit when conservative Christians protested the film. Sixteen years later *The Passion of the Christ*, despite accusations of anti-Semitism, became a runaway success thanks in no small part to Christian support and promotion.

With *Son of God*, Hollywood has seen again that Jesus can translate into box office success. What happens if a future Jesus film does not get the approval of conservative Christian leaders?

Although no more Jesus films appear to be on deck, as 2014 gears up to be the [year of the biblical movie](#) we may get some hints to that question. [Like others](#), I'm hopeful that someday there will be room in the inn for both creative reinterpretations of biblical stories and depictions that seek above all else to remain inoffensive to the faithful. Perhaps believers, rather than prodding biblical films to fit

into a devotional mold, can learn from a director's creative engagement with the biblical stories and begin think about the old stories anew. The films may not feel like a "solemn church service," but they may preach beyond the choir.

Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#), who also wrote a [historically minded review of Son of God](#).