

Hollywood's faith in religious films

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[The Bible miniseries](#) finished this Easter with the grand finale of Jesus Christ's resurrection. Overall it drew more than 30 million viewers, the History Channel's largest-ever audience. It's considered a triumph for "in your face" faith films. With a possible sequel (and the current batch of Bible-based films currently in production), *The Bible* may represent a modern resurrection of Bible-oriented cinema.

The fervent desire to place the Bible on film dates to the very beginning of the Hollywood industry. In fact, the inventor of reel-to-reel film was an Episcopalian minister, [Hannibal Goodwin](#). He wanted to make the Bible come alive and thus keep the attention of children for religious instruction. But Thomas Edison's stereopticon—an early film projector—was dangerous to children because the glass slides broke easily. Concern for safety and hopes for religious instruction motivated Goodwin's invention of *celluloid*, the core technology that sustains the distribution and presentation of film today.

From then on, a visionary group of pastors, missionaries and denominational leaders were among the earliest advocates for the use of film. Religious films depicting the events of Christ's passion were produced as early as 1897, and by 1900 churches were exhibiting motion pictures not only for their own congregations but also for the broader community. Clergy wanted to keep immoral films away from the public—but also to generate and promote films that highlighted the values and beliefs that they treasured.

Herbert A. Jump was an especially articulate enthusiast for the use of motion pictures. His 1911 pamphlet [The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture](#) argued that film is the most important invention since the printing press. Films would make the gospel story vivid and interesting. For Jump, film projectors could become consecrated machines that attract the unchurched:

The great cry of the unchurched millions ought to ring in our ears permitting us no rest until we have availed ourselves of every conceivable device to attract

them to the higher life in Jesus Christ.

Across the country, some churches purchased projection equipment, installed permanent machines in their auditoriums, and integrated film clips into their Sunday services. Short films became sermon illustrations. Other films were shown before Sunday school. Some pastors rented equipment and raised giant screens in large, outdoor venues. By 1920 more than 2,000 churches were actively using motion pictures in their services, and up to 15,000 church schools and clubs were using them as part of their ministry.

But the great majority of church leaders avoided films altogether. The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America established its Committee on Religious Pictures in 1923 to prime the pump for more pictures. They hoped to connect the motion picture industry with the needs of churches and help church leaders understand the problems involved in meeting the demand—especially their cost to produce. Little happened. Two years later, they tried again and it flopped again. Funds simply failed to turn up to support the expense of moviemaking for such a limited audience.

Not until the 21st century did Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) decisively sanction the promotion of religion among industry insiders. Until then, mainstream Christian films were dogged by lackluster sales at the box office.

Other films found support from church leaders, including *The Cross and the Switchblade* (1970), *Joni* (1980), *The Omega Code* (1999), *Jonah: A Veggie Tales Movie* (2002), *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005) and *The Nativity* (2006). But nothing in the history of the relation between Christianity and filmmaking comes close to the overwhelming support and financial success of Gibson's *Passion*. An independent project produced for only \$30 million, it brought in \$370 million in domestic ticket sales and \$610 million worldwide, becoming one of the top-grossing films in history. The film became symbolic of the triumph of faith in the movie industry.

Financially successful films focused on the Christian faith offer evidence to producers and network executives: explicitly religious themes and professions of faith on film do not automatically mean the loss of a mass audience. Recent productions' success paved the way for *The Bible*, and its own success will likely spur the production of more films like it in the near future.

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