Faith at Sundance

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2014 has been described as the year that Hollywood found faith. But if the first-ever panel on faith and film at the Sundance Film Festival is any indication, the discovery of theological depth is still quite a ways off.

A panel of marketers and PR professionals involved in films such as *Soul Survivor, Heaven is for Real,* and *God is Not Dead* might better have been titled, "How to Make Money Off Christians." For the most part, the only tightrope of nuance the panel walked was about how to avoid offending an audience while still maintaining some semblance of a story.

The panel was nearly unanimous in conflating the category "faith" with "uplifting" and "family-friendly" content. It was clear that, practically speaking, this meant the scrubbing of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. One panelist even highlighted an ideal case of a film that included a sex scene but made sure that nudity was creatively removed from each shot.

Film producer DeVon Franklin, who was responsible for the conversation's more thoughtful commentary, pointed out that the Bible itself contains many such themes and scenes. But in general, this was a panel afraid of throwing stones in the glass-cathedral-turned-promotional-channel otherwise known as the church.

Equally disturbing was how the panelists defined their "Christian" audience. For Bill Reaves of Working Title Agency—which is behind Christian bestsellers such as *Fireproof*—the defining characteristic is that "Christians like to be told that they are right." Reaves might not be wrong about this, and such a strategy might reduce market risk. Still, it's a woefully narrow posture. The best marketers are effective demographers who understand their audience but also craft things in a way that can *transform* them. Maybe Christians need to be provoked instead of placated. But not here.

Fortunately, the faith and film panel was not the only place one could find faith at Sundance. I spent the last few days of the festival with people from the organization

[Into the Noise](). This group of primarily 20- to 30-something adults gathered with an acute hunger for transformation by film. While the panelists described a "Christian market" underserved by Hollywood and independent studios, I found myself surrounded instead by people who didn't want Hollywood to serve them better. They wanted to engage existing films to discover transcendent truth.

They didn't want to know they were already right. They wanted to be transformed by what they didn't yet know.