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# Movies as the Vernacular of Adolescence

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This research is a product of the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program at George Fox University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

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**GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY**

**MOVIES AS THE VERNACULAR OF ADOLESCENCE**

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO:  
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

**BY**

**JACOB YOUMANS**

**ORANGE, CALIFORNIA**

**APRIL 2008**

# DISSERTATION ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

JACOB YOUNG

DATE: MARCH 4, 2008

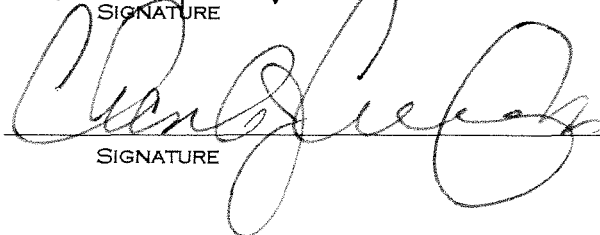
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MOVIES AS THE VERNACULAR OF ADOLESCENCE

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## **Abstract**

### **Audience:**

The primary audience/user of my project will be Christian teenagers with a desire to share their faith in a missional way in the vernacular of their peers. I also hope the project will be a resource for those who minister to and work with teenagers and desire to connect with them as well as inspire them to go out and be the church to their friends that do not know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

I hope my users will have more confidence in sharing their faith and will learn skills to talk about the sacred in the midst of the secular, not just with movies, but with all things in life. I hope the readers of the book will be able to notice God at work in all things and then direct their friends who do not see God at work to see Him!

### **Written Statement:**

Is the church relevant to life as a teenager? Does the church address the issues of adolescence in ways that they will understand? Does the church even attempt to speak the “vernacular of adolescents?”

I believe that the vernacular of adolescence in USAmerica is Popular Culture. To reach them with the Gospel, we need to use the same strategies that a cross culture missionary would, mainly find a way to speak God’s grace and eternal truths in their cultural language. Once the church

speaks the language of adolescence, they will be better equipped to share their faith with their peers in that vernacular. The historic church has embraced high culture and folk culture, it is time for the church to engage popular culture and speak the vernacular of teenagers.

### **Multimedia Project:**

The goal in this multi-media, track two project is to craft a popular book specifically for Christian teenagers to help them find Jesus at work in almost any movie, and then teach them how they can turn a movie going experience in to an opportunity to share the Gospel. Due to the popularity of the film medium, many books have been written dealing with spiritual themes in a specific movie, especially for the movies that were made to glorify God, such as *The Passion of the Christ* or the *Chronicles of Narnia*, but I hope to give tools to help people find God alive and at work in *any* movie, even perhaps in a movie that some might find offensive to God. This project will walk a fine line, as well as follow the command of Jesus to be in the world but not of the world.

### **The Problem**

Topic: I am studying popular culture, specifically major motion pictures, as the vernacular of adolescents

Research Question: How can a Christian teenager turn a night “hanging out” with friends at a movie into a mission trip

Research Problem: in order to help teenagers connect to Jesus

Practical Problem: so that my teen readers can find an effective, non-threatening way to share their faith in the vernacular of their peers in a way they will fully understand, comprehend and live.

### **Other Proposed Solutions**

1. Relational ministry by someone who understands and loves teenagers (similar to a missionary to a different country or culture who truly loves that people group) will always help them connect to the church.
2. Some churches have attempted to use short clips from major Hollywood movies as teaching tools during the usual weekly worship services or during a traditional Bible Study format.
3. Some churches focus on other areas of popular culture such as youth relevant music, video games or television as opposed to movies. While these are all incredibly important parts of most teenagers' lives; however, due to the massiveness in size of popular culture, I limited this study to major motion pictures.

### **The Thesis**

I believe teenagers can be taught how to effectively turn a simple night out at the movies with friends into an opportunity to share the Gospel in a way their unchurched friends will understand. Almost every movie contains characters, situations and themes that can teach



the scriptures or Biblical principles, and when discovered, movies can be powerful evangelistic tools.

I claim that more Christian teenagers will be able to share their faith with their unchurched friends if they are given the tools to “translate” movies using the Holy Scriptures and Biblical principles.

- Because teenagers tend to view movies with their peers and are at a developmental stage where they value peer friendship above most other relationships. (warrant: with more independence from their parents, they rely more heavily on their peers for the answers to life’s questions)
- Because most teenagers interact with movies on a very regular basis, some go to a movie theater, while others host DVD movie nights, it can be a distinctive way to connect with them
- Because most teenagers see movies with the hope of taking away “something”, i.e. a clever or repeatable line, a good story, a relatable character, etc.

## **The Project**

I hope to write a book for teenagers that will help them understand how to watch a movie with non-Christian friends and turn the post-movie conversation into an opportunity to share

the Gospel. The book will be written in a style that is easily understood and applicable to the average teenager.

Rationale: I chose this media form as a starting point. The book will be driven by images and quick, short, “quotable” phrases and questions. I envision it looking similar to a “teen magazine”, and hopefully this little book will become a connecting point that will bridge different mediums.

## Introduction

What is it about movies? Since Thomas Edison first invented the motion picture machine, way back in the late eighteen hundreds, the popularity of movies has only risen and risen. Movies are literally everywhere. Movies are available on digital video disks, compact disks, video tapes, internet digital downloads, ipods, websites, television, and movies are even still available for viewing in movie theaters all around the world. Movie stars and characters grace everything from toothpaste tubes to lunch boxes. Movies are turned into video games and theme park attractions.

As citizens of the United States of America we need to understand that movies are one of our most profitable, and controversial, exports to the world. Hollywood is capitalizing on the globalization of the movie business by releasing movies all over the world on the very same day, while in the past a very limited number of Hollywood movies would be released in foreign countries much later after the USAmerican release. People all over the world are watching USAmerican movies everyday and believing that what they see in the darkened theater on the large silver screen is how life really is for those lucky people in the United States of America. Some people in the world despise *all* Americans due to the content contained in our movies and popular culture, while others move to the United States hoping to live the lives of their favorite characters in the movies. My own mother-in-law immigrated to the USAmerica with her new US Airforce husband and was extremely disappointed that the United States of America did not look more like what she saw in the movies growing up.

Movies are really nothing more than visual storytelling; our dreams play out like movies every night. The quality of the story is the key to movie making business. The better the overall story, the better the movie has the potential to be. In almost every movie there is at least one character one can identify with and relate to. Movies deal with the simple themes of everyday life such as: life, death, redemption, grace, hope, love, friendship, betrayal and the ultimate triumph of the human spirit. While the themes are familiar, the settings could be anything from a galaxy far, far away or the fictional lands that only exist in the mind of C.S. Lewis. Movies can take us as far away or as close to home as the human imagination will allow. Big blockbuster movies have in many ways become our common language as a country. Just try to find someone who has not heard of *Star Wars*.

Teenagers everywhere drop movie lines into casual conversation and even use knowledge and information gained from movies as “proof” in arguments and discussions. If an idea is present in a movie, it must be truth; otherwise “they” could not put it in the movie... right? Some of my students consider watching an I-MAX movie of the Grand Canyon, for example, as good, if not better, than actually going to visit one of the seven natural wonders of the world. Popular culture expert Dr. Allen notes, “We’re awash in pop culture, our consciousness is soaked in it. We sprinkle conversations with movie lines, references to TV shows, song lyrics and find kindred spirits among those who speak the same code.”<sup>1</sup> In my work with teenagers it is nearly impossible to have a simple conversation with an adolescent without a movie being referenced or quoted, and without the ability to speak the “code”, ministry would prove to be much more difficult.

Movies have converted and trained naïve, young minds into “experts” on all kinds of subjects. Much of the “training” goes against the work of teachers, ministers and parents, yet

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<sup>1</sup> J.L. Allen, *'Simpsons,' Pop Culture and Christianity*. National Catholic Reporter, 1998. 34(34): p. 25.

they need to understand that many teenagers look to movies for answers to some of the biggest life questions. Is there a way to use the “training” done by movies to compliment and enhance the work done by those who strive to teach? Parents are often presented as the bumbling idiots who do not know anything in movies, is there any wonder why students would not go to their parents with their deepest, darkest questions and fears? The vast expansion of movies released with a PG13 rating goes to further show how studios are marketing and promoting movies to teenagers. PG13 movies can contain more violence, perverse language and sex than PG movies, while not quite getting an R rating, which would vastly limit the number of teenagers who could see the movie, legally.<sup>2</sup>

Movies ignite our passions, inspire and provoke dialog more than any other current medium. Missional Church experts, Hirsh and Frost understand the power of movies, “Movies have changed expectations about how we receive communication, with the average American seeing around one hundred movies a year.”<sup>3</sup> That breaks down to one movie every three and a half days. That is a tremendous amount of time to promote and influence people’s attitudes and behaviors.

If movies have changed how we communicate, then what is the vernacular of the people, especially during the often confusing and fast-paced time of adolescence? Has the church changed how it communicates to people over the years? What can we do to make sure people clearly understand the message of love that comes in the person Jesus? In his study of the mass

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<sup>2</sup> The Motion Picture Association of America has established the following rating system to assist parents: G- General admission, PG- Parental Guidance suggested, PG13- Parental Guidance suggested- no one under the age of thirteen will be admitted without a parent or guardian, R-Restricted, no one under the age of seventeen will be admitted without a parent or guardian, and NC17- no one under the age of seventeen admitted. For more information on the rating system see [www.mpa.org](http://www.mpa.org).

<sup>3</sup> M. Frost, and A. Hirsch. *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*. [Book; Internet Resource] 2003.

media, Dr. Tatarnic reminds us that, “The medium is the message.”<sup>4</sup> In trying to communicate the most important message of all time, the unconditional love and grace of God through Jesus, what will be our medium, and therefore, our message? If the Gospel is presented in an outdated medium, will the timeless Gospel itself be viewed as outdated? The joke in Lutheran circles is, “How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb?”... “Change???” It is time for the church to change. Changing is an inevitable reality, especially considering how quickly culture has changed.

Movies are the vernacular of teenagers, and therefore must be utilized and “spoken” for any meaningful connection to take place. Of all of the things that Martin Luther did by God grace to change the world, perhaps the great reformer’s most important accomplishment was to put the Holy Bible into German, the vernacular of the Germanic people he ministered to. The church at the time fought with great fervor against this change, but God worked through the change. For the first time in the history of the world, the inspired Word of God was in the language of the everyman.

Saint Paul used the vernacular of the Greek and Roman people during his sermon on Mars Hill using the temple of the unknown god. The people worshiped numerous gods, yet were so afraid to forget about a god that they created a shrine to the unknown god just to be on the safe side. Saint Paul knew he could connect with the people using the things they knew and understood. He even used a popular culture musical tune of the time, a hymn written to Zeus, to bring glory to God in a way the people would understand. The hymn was not written to honor Yahweh God, but the song did as Paul used the vernacular. In the same way, to effectively share

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<sup>4</sup> M.S. Tatarnic, *The Mass Media and Faith: The Potentialities and Problems for the Church in our Television Culture*. Anglican Theological Review, 2005. 87(3): p. 447-465.

the life changing news of the Gospel, the church needs to find a way to speak the vernacular of the people.

The film experience eliminates distractions and allows the viewer an escape from the real world into a completely different world, with different places and situations through the safety of their comfortable seat in an entertaining and, intentional or not, an educational way. "The basic ingredients of the film itself- the illuminated screen, the quality of projected light, the magic of different shots and cuts- can induce a 'devotional' attitude, helping us peer more closely at the physical world and thereby gain a glimpse into the spiritual realm."<sup>5</sup> Films can be a door to a multitude of spiritual discussions.

The movie theater complex is often more like the church should be, than the local church currently is! In our new church building project, we have hired an architecture firm that worked on the designing of "Downtown Disney", which is another Walt Disney perspective of what the perfect town would be like. When designing the place they needed a "cathedral" to put in the heart of the "city" and they chose to put a movie theater there. Movie theaters are the new Cathedrals. Even with home theater technology as good as the local Cineplex, movie theaters offer a safe sense of community and connectedness that the home theater does not. A packed movie theater showing the latest, greatest Hollywood blockbuster is a place bursting with excitement and energy!

The church, for the most part, has been afraid to entertain the congregation. In the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod in particular, traditionalists use the word "entertainment" as an insulting label for those who do not use the "officially" approved Lutheran Worship Hymnal and all of the liturgies, responsive readings, chants and hymns contained in it. But if the vernacular of the people is a form of "entertainment", is it not time for the church to bring the life changing

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<sup>5</sup> D. Sterritt, *Hollywood Peeks at the Spiritual*. Christian Science Monitor, 2001. 93(97): p. 15.

message of Christ's unconditional, everlasting love in an "entertaining" way? Worship is not entertainment, but to speak the vernacular, it needs to be entertaining to hold the attention of and teach the concepts of faith, especially to youth.

The Lutheran Church has a history of embracing and using technology to God's glory. Whether it is Martin Luther using the printing press to spread God's message or The Lutheran Hour radio program being one of the first Evangelistic radio shows, we have a great history of using new technologies to spread the Gospel; however, that history tends to be forgotten. A desire to cling to the past and tradition has perhaps crippled the future of our church. We need old tradition with new imagination. The "imagination" business is what Walt Disney said the movie business is all about.

"The root of all art is storytelling."<sup>6</sup> No one is telling stories better than the folks in the motion picture business, and no one has a better story than the folks in the church. All of history is the story of God at work in the world through the heart and the lives of imperfect human beings. Then God sent us one perfect human being, His one and only Son, born of a virgin and raised as a "normal" child, and we crucified Him! Our story is one of redemption and grace that needs to be told to a world longing for both.

Christians have the most powerful message in the world, and yet many people feel bored in the church pews. The freedom we have in Christ has turned to complete boredom in the pews; fulfilling our duties, but not really connecting with anything bigger than ourselves. The messages from the pulpit do not connect or unite with stories and emotion; they simply speak what the people usually already know. Movies sometime have no message or maybe even negative messages, yet they are saying it in a way that people catch onto right away and are inspired!

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<sup>6</sup> K. Gire, *Reflections on the Movies: Hearing God in the Unlikeliest of Places*. Reflective Living Series. 2000, Colorado Springs: Victor. 215.



Even *Time Magazine* has noticed that, “Christian Evangelicals are among the most frequent movie goers.”<sup>7</sup> Movies are providing inspiration for permanent life change that the church is sorely missing.

### **Inside the Movie-Maker’s Mind**

The question of why movies are popular needs to be followed with the question, why are movies made? What are the hopes, dreams and goals of those making, directing and producing movies? What are filmmakers trying to communicate through the medium of film and talking pictures? While many a “Bohemian” will tell you it is all art for art’s sake, some insiders’ say Hollywood is increasingly all about the bottom line and the almighty dollar. David Puttnam, a Hollywood insider who ran Columbia pictures, reminds us that, “There’s a natural war in Hollywood between the business men and the artists.”<sup>8</sup>

In the current North American mass consumerism culture in which we live, popular culture and specifically movies have become complex, blatant and effective money making machines. Again, the people at *Time Magazine* remind us, “Moviemakers are happy to be the money changers in the temple.”<sup>9</sup> If money is the bottom line, is there any integrity in visual storytelling?

The question also arises, are movies culture for the people, or culture of the people? Mr. Puttnam, Hollywood producer and insider reminds us that, “Hollywood movies appear to have become little more than gigantic exercises in corporate merchandising.”<sup>10</sup> While walking through Walmart or Target, it is impossible to not see literally hundreds of movie promotional

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<sup>7</sup> R. Corliss, et al., *The Gospel According to Spiderman*. Time, 2004. 164(7): p. 70-72.

<sup>8</sup> D. Puttnam, *Movies and Money*. 1st American ed. 1998, New York: Knopf. xii, 4.

<sup>9</sup> R. Corliss, et al., *The Gospel According to Spiderman*. Time, 2004. 164(7): p. 70-72.

<sup>10</sup> D. Puttnam, *Movies and Money*. 1st American ed. 1998, New York: Knopf. xii, 337.

items for sale. Hollywood is using people to market and advertise their movie and then charging them to do so! Many recent blockbuster movies have forgone the art of storytelling for the art of special effects and computer graphics. Many of these special effect laden movies lack a soul and leave the audience feeling completely unsatisfied. Yet at the heart of even the most ridiculous Hollywood premise is the opportunity to see and share the Gospel!

Jeffery Overstreet from Christianity Today says that finding a Spiritual message in movies is, “a way of affirming that God’s truth is inescapable and can be found even in the stories of people who don’t believe in Him.”<sup>11</sup> Whether movies are culture “for” or “of” the people, God’s eternal truths are still alive and present in them! In Scripture God speaks through a bush, a donkey, and countless guilty sinful people, so speaking through a Hollywood movie is directly in line with how God has operated in the past.

The filmmakers I had to privilege to dialog with during research for this project all insisted on their and their fellow filmmaker’s passion for stories and storytelling. Movies really are about the art of the moving picture and storytelling for many of Hollywood’s directors. While promoting his movie *Apocalypto*, Mel Gibson said that he wanted there to be as little dialog as possible. He wanted the images to tell the majority of the story. It is easy to point to Hollywood and the movie making business as completely focused on the profit margin; however, they reminded us that more and more movies are being made and released that are story driven and “smaller” in budget.

There is a unique challenge of living a life of faith in a business that is so often against Christianity. Several of the Directors expressed this personal struggle. One director said that he foresaw more and more active, professing Christians getting involved with filmmaking. He stated that the music business went through a transformation twenty years ago that now allows

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<sup>11</sup> R. Corliss, et al., *The Gospel According to Spiderman*. Time, 2004. 164(7): p. 70-72.

Christian artists in the mainstream, and he foresees the same revolution currently taking place in film.

Devout film fanatic and Christian author Gareth Higgins says that, “Making a film is a profound act. When you put people in an auditorium and turn out the lights, you can do anything you want with them. This must be respected.”<sup>12</sup> We will discuss the importance of the filmmaker or author’s intent latter in this paper; however, the point needs to be made that while Jesus said he who is not with me is against me in Matthew 12:30, He also said, whoever is not against you is for you in Mark 9:40. Is this a restatement of the same idea or a completely different teaching all together? Movies that were not intended to be spiritual in natural can, by the grace of God, teach His eternal truths in a way people might better understand them. God’s truths are inescapable, and God’s truths are even more powerful when heard in one’s own heart language or vernacular.

## **Movie Translation**

If movies are vernacular then how does one “translate” God’s Word into them? Some of the same techniques used to interpret and translate the Bible (or any book or work of art for that matter) can also be used in interpreting and “translating” movies. Lutheran Church Missouri Synod Seminary professor Dr. James Voelz is one of the most respected Lutheran theologians and Bible scholars today. Dr. Voelz states that the key to interpreting scripture is to view it through three different and separate lenses: the lens of the author, the lens of the art itself and the lens of the audience. Interestingly enough, popular culture expert and theologian Gordon Lynch, author of the extremely helpful and insightful book, *Understanding Theology and Popular*

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<sup>12</sup> G. Higgins, *How Movies Helped Save My Soul: Finding Spiritual Fingerprints in Culturally Significant Films*. 2003, Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books. 256.

*Culture*, uses the exact same lenses in interpreting and searching for meaning in popular culture. The two authors and books are radically different, yet have found many similarities in their ways of interpreting. As Mr. Higgins reminds us, "Film can help us if we know where to look."<sup>13</sup> Both Dr. Voelz and Mr. Lynch know where to look, and they have found God alive and well and at work!

The first lens is that of "the author." What did the author themselves intend to say with their piece of work? Dr. Voelz states, "Any text is intended to communicate what an author wants to say."<sup>14</sup> In regards to movies there are multiple "authors." There are authors, screen writers, directors, producers, studios executives, actors, actresses, and many others that all bring biases, passions, motives and intentions of communication. Their backgrounds, experiences motives and passions will seep through into their art. To truly understand the text, movie or art, one needs to understand the author and their intentions.

This is why one of the most popular features on the Digital Video Disc format is the "commentaries" section where actors, writers, directors and the like will share their thoughts on the film and the making of the film while watching the film together. Everyone gets a little inside look at the movie and the movie business by watching the commentary. Some in the movie business thought commentaries would destroy the magic of movies; yet, they seem to greatly enhance the overall entertainment experience and it feels as if one is participating in and experiencing the movie making process by watching a commentary. Some directors are now filming the entire film-making process to create a "making of" mini-movie feature on the DVD release. These added features have given the audience an opportunity to develop a deeper relationship with the artists as well as the art itself.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>14</sup> J.W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-modern World*. Concordia Scholarship Today; 1995, St. Louis: Concordia. 368.

As an example of understanding the artist contributing to understanding the art, longtime and successful Hollywood director Steven Spielberg has made several movies about World War II and the Holocaust, such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *Band of Brothers* and *Shindler's List*. Growing up a Jewish boy in the nineteen-forties and fifties, those images and stories haunted him. It is very important for him to tell those stories, and honor their sacrifices. Gordon Lynch uses the example of Rap superstar Marshal Mathers, known around the world as Eminem. The rapper's music and message can best be understood, "by understanding more about him as a person and performer."<sup>15</sup> The rough up bringing and difficulties in trying to fit into a world that did not want you have been fueling Eminem's fire for quite some time.

The second lens is that of the actual text by itself. Dr. Voelz reminds us that, "Texts by their nature intend to communicate."<sup>16</sup> This concept is especially useful in translating movies, because spiritual themes and concepts that were never the intention of the author can be found by dissecting the movie itself. Dr. Voelz goes on to say that, "By studying the text itself, we may therefore gain a wider perspective of the meanings within it than we get simply through exploring what the authors themselves has said or written about it."<sup>17</sup> When one allows the text to stand on its own, God's Word can be seen throughout. If one truly believes that God is omnipresent, then he has to be alive and well in movies. There is great power in serving a God that can be praised, revealed and glorified by "things" that were not created specifically to do those things.

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<sup>15</sup> Lynch, G., *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. 2005, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing. 236.

<sup>16</sup> J.W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-modern World*. Concordia Scholarship Today; 1995, St. Louis: Concordia. 368.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

Dr. Voelz gives us some interesting questions to ponder as we evaluate the text. “What meanings do its words convey? What is the significance of the actions depicted by the words?”<sup>18</sup> In movies much of the communication is done with images, and images need to be evaluated the same way Dr. Voelz would evaluate a “word.” Watch the film with an observant eye. Examine camera angles, lighting, listen to the sound effects. Allow all the subtleties of the art of film come together as you watch a movie.

What makes good art? Austin’s book, *Explorations in Art, Theology and Imagination* examines what good art does, “Art engages both our emotions and our intellect. It makes demands of us intellectually, morally, emotionally and I am certain, spiritually- demands which we need to accept in order to develop our powers of imagination and understanding... Art excites me, thrills me, heals me, judges me, touches me at a depth which nothing else can reach. Art for me is salvific.”<sup>19</sup> Allow the movie to over take your senses. Experience it. Participate in it. Connect with it.

Even the smallest details in a film are checked and rechecked. With the rise of digital recorders that allow viewers to skip over commercials, product placement is becoming more common and more important. Why did the film makers use that product? In product placement the “commercial” is lived out in daily live, not during a set “commercial break.” There is a purpose and a meaning behind every minute detail. That is a powerful metaphor for the Gospel. Is the Gospel lived out during the “show”, or is it only applicable during a “commercial break? God might be doing his greatest work in the details that few people notice!

As an example of the text standing on it’s own, The hit baseball movie *Field of Dreams* inspired men to call and reconcile with their fathers due to a powerful scene of reconciliation and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 368.

<sup>19</sup> M.A. Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination*. [Book; Internet Resource] 2005 [cited; x, 178 p.; 23 cm.]. Available from: <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0420/2004016813.html>

previously unspoken feelings between Kevin Costner's Character and his long lost, "ghost" father. The author of the book, *Shoeless Joe* (upon which the movie is based), and the director of the movie both have acknowledged that they never intended to reunite fathers and sons, yet their images and "text" spoke for itself. Analyzing the text and just the text itself produces insights that cannot be found by viewing through the lens of the author or through the final lens, that of the audience or reader. As Mr. Lynch reminds us, "The meaning that we get from watching a film arises out of the way in which particular words, images and sounds have been collected together which are then 'read' by the audience."<sup>20</sup>

The final lens is the audience lens. It is the experience of the individual or group interacting with the text or movie. Dr. Voeltz provides several key questions for the audience or readers. "Who was to receive the text? Under what circumstances did they read? What abilities did they have or need to understand the text?"<sup>21</sup> The film audience will most likely experience the movie without knowing any details about the author's intent and will usually not invest the time and energy to have a detached perspective on the movie as a text alone, so the audience lens is most likely to be the most common. The audience lens requires the least amount of "work" and allows the viewer to simply become a consumer of the given movie.

For example, I have a former student whose mother had recently and suddenly passed away from cancer. Unknowingly, a friend took him to see the movie *Stepmom*, which is all about two kids losing their birth mom to a quickly spreading cancer. The movie affected him very differently than anyone else in the audience, and therefore, his "translation" of the movie would be greatly different than anyone else in the audience. I saw the movie *Fat Albert* while on a

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<sup>20</sup> G. Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. 2005, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing. 236.

<sup>21</sup> J.W. Voeltz, *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-modern World*. Concordia Scholarship Today; 1995, St. Louis: Concordia. 368.

mission trip to Inglewood, California in a predominantly African American neighborhood. I enjoyed the movie a great deal more in that setting as I was in a packed, excited theater, surrounded by people who understood nuances of the film that I did not. The audience adds to the experience for the individual.

The circumstances surrounding the audience and environment in which a movie is viewed can drastically alter the interpretation and effect of the movie. This is sometimes a good thing for growth and reflection and sometimes a dangerous thing. Bible translator and scholar Dr. Fee warns us that, "Sometimes what we bring to the text, unintentionally to be sure, leads us astray, or else causes us to read all kinds of foreign ideas into the text."<sup>22</sup> Whenever trying to translate movies, we need to make sure we are true to the Word of God as spoken in the Holy Scriptures.

In translating a movie, all three lenses need to be viewed separately and then also together to provide the full possibilities and potential for teachable moments and to find God's Word to be in, with and under the movie. Dr. Voelz reminds us that, "all proper application of sacred Scripture involves theological interpretation of its texts."<sup>23</sup> Interpretation of a movie done in a theological way is the foundation for understanding the concept of movies as vernacular of adolescents.

### **Inside the Adolescent Mind**

Being a professional in youth ministry for over a decade now, I am amazed at the number of well meaning adults who simply do not like teenagers, and are very vocal about it. While I

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<sup>22</sup> G.D. Fee, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*. 3rd ed. D.K. Stuart. 2003, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 276.

<sup>23</sup> J.W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-modern World*. Concordia Scholarship Today; 1995, St. Louis: Concordia. 368.



believe the dislike is usually just “fear” and the fear usually comes out of sheer ignorance, the fear is real none the less. I have periodically asked random adults to share a story from their teenage years, and surprisingly, most people “pass” on the opportunity, either not remembering their trials and tribulations during adolescence or not finding their past relevant to the world today.

Either scenario paints a dangerous picture, for as Christina Baldwin in her book *Storycatcher* says, “Words are how we think; narrative is how we link.”<sup>24</sup> Stories might be the missing “link” between the adult world and the adolescent world. If we want adults to link with teenagers, maybe we need to have them first link with the stories of their teenage years. Doctors Strommen and Hardel, both family ministry experts, have stated in their book, *Passing on the Faith*, “When family members hear and tell stories of a faithful God at Grandma and Grandpa’s fiftieth wedding anniversary, the children, grandchildren, and great grand children present are all shaped by the lived values related in the stories... ‘Personal testimony’ can be more powerful than an average sermon.”<sup>25</sup> Family stories help to connect and unite in a time when there are so many things trying to tear families apart. Stories can be used by all to communicate effectively.

Storytelling has the power to melt away fears, and the power to create new ones. Fear of sharks skyrocketed after the release of *Jaws*, UFO sightings increased dramatically after the release of *Independence Day*. Movies at their heart are stories, stories that can connect and unite. We will look more in depth at the power of “story” later in this paper.

Particularly, in my church body, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, we have a tendency to verbally state we value adolescents, but our church budgets do not usually reflect that value in any way. About ten years ago, our national church body in Saint Louis, Missouri

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<sup>24</sup> C. Baldwin, *Storycatcher*. 2005, Novato, California: New World Library. 252.

<sup>25</sup> D. Hardel and M.P. Strommen, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry*. 2000, Winona, Minn.: St. Mary’s Press/Christian Bros. Publications. 368 p.

annually invested four hundred thousand dollars in youth ministry specific staff, programming, events, resources and training. In 2007 they invested exactly zero dollars in youth ministry. Anything our Synodical office does in youth ministry needs to be raised through fundraising or “overcharging” for our national youth gatherings, which by God’s grace still draw thirty thousand youth and adults.

In my undergraduate work we were advised to pursue making one percent of the over all church budget designated to youth ministry. That does not sound like a great deal of money, but how many churches spend even one percent on youth ministry? I had a youth pastor friend who said that the majority of churches spend more a year on toilet paper then they do on youth ministry. While both are very important, what hope for the future does the church have without a strong youth ministry program?

There is an old joke about a Catholic Priest and a Lutheran Pastor swapping stories about their respective parishes. The Priest shares how they have been having a problem with bats in their bell tower. No matter what he has tried, he just cannot seem to rid the church of the bats. The Pastor chuckles a bit, but then goes on to explain that they too once had a problem with bats, but they figured out that the best way to have them leave and never come back was to baptize and confirm them... and sure enough, they never came back. Like so many old jokes, there is a scary grain of truth to it. Eighth grade confirmation is an important rite of passage in our old Lutheran tradition; it is basically our version of the Bar mitzvah.

What scares me is how confirmation looks and feels a great deal like a graduation. On confirmation the students wear white robes, they go up front and shake the Pastor’s hand and get a certificate, they pass a “final examination”, they invite all their family and friends to come watch, they have a big party in their honor, and they get money and gifts from everyone. It all

feels like a graduation, where when completed, one never has to go back. We have also found that in our current context of ministry, confirmation is the last church experience parents “force” their children to attend. It seems that once they get confirmed, there is no longer a reason to go to church, Bible study or youth group. Needless to say, we have a serious disconnect.

The working definition of adolescence that I have used throughout my ministry is adolescents are neither adults nor children. They are somewhere in between, and being “between” is the cause of a great deal of confusion and distress for both the adolescent, the parents and the adults trying to work with and love the adolescent. Too often adults treat teenagers as adults when they need to be treated like children and then they are treated like children when they need to be treated like adults. Finding that harmony, is the key to the parent and adolescent relationship.

There is also not a great deal of adolescent history. Dr. Chapman reminds us that, “the word ‘teenager’ first came into popular use around the Second World War.”<sup>26</sup> The whole modern concept of adolescence is really only sixty or so years old. Before the Second World War, teenagers were forced to be adults: make money, pay one’s own bills, raise a family, etc. High school only became mandatory in the 1930s. I wonder how today’s teenagers would be able to handle being full fledged adults? Many experts are suggesting that adolescence is starting younger and lasting longer, so understanding this “between” is now more crucial than ever before. Youth Ministry expert Jim Burns greatly believes that, “adolescence is a time of major transition that brings long-lasting effects.”<sup>27</sup> Before we can look at the means in which the church can connect with adolescents, we need to first explore their world a little bit, and to do so, we will explore several myths and truths about teenagers.

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<sup>26</sup> G. Chapman, *The Five Love Languages of Teenagers*. 2000, Chicago: Northfield Publishing. 259.

<sup>27</sup> J. Burns, *Youth Builder*. 1988, Eugene, OR: Harvest House. 325.

## Myths about Teenagers

Due to the lack of history and the fear or dislike of some in the “adult” community, many myths have been created about teenagers. Perhaps the biggest myth has provided the biggest trap for those who minister to and work with youth and that is the idea that teenagers need to be constantly entertained. That is a huge myth. Youth want to learn, grow, explore and experiment, not just be entertained by MTV style programming.

In discussing her youth group experience one college student said, “Youth group was fun, but no one taught me anything.”<sup>28</sup> That statement absolutely break my heart; yet, I believe that comment sums up what many teenagers feel about their youth ministry programs. Fun and entertainment has its place, everyone wants to enjoy what they are doing, but “fun” should not be the foundation of the youth ministry program. Jesus is the foundation, and connecting, growing, exploring and experimenting what life with Him is like is the only way faith will “stick” past the high school years. When the Gospel of Jesus Christ is watered down into mere “entertainment”, permanent life change becomes very rare.

Another myth is the “evilness” of youth culture. In looking at the history of teenagers, Dr. Chapman reminds us that, “clearly teens were developing their own culture. And interestingly, then, as now, parents, educators, and church leaders often decried what they considered to be the downward drift of teenage culture.”<sup>29</sup> One of my youth ministry professors said that Plato in ancient Greece did not think the world could possibly survive another generation due to the “evilness” he saw in the younger generation.

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<sup>28</sup> C. Ross, *Jesus Isn't Cool: Challenging Youth Ministry*. Christian Century, 2005. 122(18): p. 22-25.

<sup>29</sup> G. Chapman, *The Five Love Languages of Teenagers*. 2000, Chicago: Northfield Publishing. 259.

Helping parents see the value in youth culture may be one of a youth minister's toughest roles as we stand in the gap desperately trying to help both sides understand each other. Every young generation has had their issues, but as a whole, youth culture is always going to be one of rebellion from authority as they move from dependence to independence. Loving adults who can help them make that difficult transition is what so many teenagers lack. A speaker from Search Institute once said at a conference I attended that a teenager needs three significant adult relationships besides their parents to "succeed." Where can adolescents find those significant adult relationships?

One of the most common myths I hear about teenagers is that they are selfish and lazy. Those two adjectives always seem to go hand in hand, is it possible to be lazy and not be selfish? Many view them as only looking out for themselves and not willing to lift a finger to do anything except for themselves. That is why when it came time to select the core values of St. Paul's youth ministry program we specifically selected the phrase "selfless service" as a core value. "Selfless service" goes directly against societies stereotypes of selfish teenagers. We wanted our teenagers to be the hands and feet of Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth, as Jesus Himself outlined in Acts 1:8.

We threw the expectation and value out there, and the teenagers have responded by being leaders in our mission and outreach ministry as a church. They have an incredible passion about helping and serving others. In *Simply Christianity*, Dr. Wright reminds us that "passion is a central feature of all human life."<sup>30</sup> Teenagers need to be inspired, and once inspired, their passion is near unstoppable! Upon working with USAmerican college students for the first time, British university professor Dr. Bloom stated that, "The Americans (students) discovered that

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<sup>30</sup> N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*. 2006, New York: HarperCollins. 240.

they had a boundless thirst for significant awareness, that their souls had spaces of which they were unaware and which cried out for furnishing.”<sup>31</sup>

The final myth that we will explore is that teenagers do not like adults. I cannot express enough how untrue that idea is. Teenagers need adults. Teenagers need adults to model healthy adulthood. Why is being an adult different from being a kid? As teenagers strive to make the transition, they need to learn from someone. Too often adults try to be “cool” and be peers as opposed to being adults. Youth ministers fall into this trap all of the time; it can be a very difficult trick to master. Relationship expert Dr. Chapman says is best, “Contemporary teens are looking for authenticity in adults.”<sup>32</sup> Teens are looking for adults to be real and honest. Authenticity will lead to respect.

### **The Truth about Teens**

In the hit movie *A Few Good Men*, Tom Cruise’s JAG Navy Lawyer character famously shouts, “I want the Truth!” to an unimpressed and gruff Marine, Jack Nicholson, sitting in the witness stand, who calmly replies, “You can’t handle the truth.” If the church is serious about reaching teenagers, they need to be able to handle the truth, and the truth will be difficult sometimes. The truth may go against the “way we’ve always done it.” But the Truth will set us free!

*Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* has become the definitive book of research on the faith lives of teenagers. They describe teens as, “incredibly inarticulate about their faith,” and have “confused Christianity with Moralistic Therapeutic

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<sup>31</sup> A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*. 1987, New York: Simon & Schuster Inc. 173.

<sup>32</sup> G. Chapman, *The Five Love Languages of Teenagers*. 2000, Chicago: Northfield Publishing. 259.

Deism.”<sup>33</sup> This actually ties into the first “myth” we discussed. With so many youth ministers focusing on entertainment, the basics of the faith are being brushed aside. We can use entertainment, such as movies, to teach, but our teaching needs to be much more than just entertaining. We do not need to teach Bible trivia, but we need to make sure faith is established and lived out in the lives of teenagers.

One of the scary truths is that many teens do not feel safe. With Columbine and many other horrific school shootings taking place even in the safe suburban, with students getting killed over things like ipods, or Nike athletic shoes, students do not feel safe. Movies such as *Bowling for Columbine*, try to show how an American culture of fear has been created, and that really there is nothing to fear, yet one cannot deny the fact that teens live in a very different world than the one their parents grew up in, and they are afraid. With feeling unsafe a reality, faith becomes even more important. Some of the latest research has found that, “Psychologists are starting to recognize the role that religion and spirituality can play in emotional well-being... research has shown that spirituality has been shown to be associated with several positive psychological outcomes.”<sup>34</sup> Jesus overcomes even the deepest of fears! The great physician can heal soul, body and mind!

Another truth that is crucial in youth ministry is helping parents understand the paradox that exists between their memories of the world when they were a teenager and the way the world is today. It is great for parents to share stories of when they were a teen. I encourage parents to write down some of their teenage stories so they can share them with their kids and grandkids. It is good for parents to share how they felt when they were teens; however, it is

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<sup>33</sup> C.D. Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. 2005, New York: Oxford Press. 368.

<sup>34</sup> T.L. Davis, B. Kerr, and S.E.R. Kurpius, *Meaning, Purpose, and Religiosity in At-Risk Youth: The Relationship Between Anxiety and Spirituality*. *Journal of Psychology & Theology*, 2003. 31(4): p. 356-365.

extremely important for parents to understand that the world is a very different place today. The paradox is, yes, parents were once teenagers, but they were teenagers in a very different time and place.

The final truth that will be discussed here is about teenager's self-worth. In a book of affirmations for teenagers, we are reminded that, "in real life, many teenagers believe they aren't valuable- that they aren't even worth wasting a compliment on."<sup>35</sup> Knowing this truth, it is extremely important for parents and significant adults to verbally affirm teenagers; they are at a time in their lives when they need it, and literally can not live without it. All people need affirmation, but especially when you are stuck "between" the two worlds of adulthood and childhood. One of the biggest keys to verbal affirmations comes from Dr. Chapman and his *Five Love Languages*, of which "words of affirmation" is one of the five (along with: acts of service, physical touch, gifts and quality time). He suggests that, "When you can't praise results praise effort."<sup>36</sup>

Too often we see images of parents praising their offspring for being super-stars, but even if one's children are not stars they still need positive affirmation. We need to find ways to praise teens for who they are, who God is dreaming them to be, and for the positive effort they put forth, regardless of whether or not the outcomes of their efforts could be deemed successful by anyone. In the sequel to *Meet the Parents*, *Meet the Fockers*, Ben Stiller's character Greg has a "shrine" dedicated to his mediocrity with tenth place ribbons and honorable mention trophies. Greg's parents were so proud of their son, even if no one else was! Even when behavior, accomplishments or effort is not where it needs to be, use an affirmation to teach the lesson instead of a criticism.

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<sup>35</sup> M. Warden, *101 Affirmations for Teenagers*. 1994, Loveland, CO: Group. 96.

<sup>36</sup> G. Chapman, *The Five Love Languages of Teenagers*. 2000, Chicago: Northfield Publishing. 259.



## Sharing the Gospel with Teenagers

Hundreds, if not thousands of books have been written on the subject of teen evangelism. Every church in USAmerica and across the world would love to have a large, thriving youth ministry program. The first question one needs to look at in this discussion is what is the role of Christianity or even in a broader sense, religion, in the lives of teenagers? Doctoral student Chanon Ross writes, “Religion may help teens find a sense of purpose, stay focused on schoolwork, avoid drugs, drive responsibly, and so on. These are good and important things and they are all part of the ‘religious package’, but they are not the point.”<sup>37</sup> So, what is the point of youth ministry and Christian education for teenagers? Is the “point” the same for youth ministers and parents?

Again, many answers have been presented over the years to those questions, but the common thread in any answer needs to be the old “Sunday School” answer... Jesus! Everything that is done in a youth ministry program needs to be done in a way that will bring youth closer to Jesus Christ. Not the teachings *of* Jesus or the teachings *about* Jesus but Jesus himself, crucified and risen again. Our calling is to assist students as they develop a personal relationship with Jesus. Missiologist Walls says for, “The Christian is certain that Jesus is central in human history.”<sup>38</sup> It can be hard to feel a sense of history when one has only been alive for fifteen years, so the role of evangelism in youth ministry is to help students make Jesus central in their life and then see how He is central in all of human history.

It is of crucial importance to view youth ministry as a “cross-cultural ministry”, since youth culture is very different then either child or adult culture; again, teenagers are in-between

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<sup>37</sup> C. Ross, *Jesus Isn't Cool: Challenging Youth Ministry*. Christian Century, 2005. 122(18): p. 22-25.

<sup>38</sup> A. F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*. 2005, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 284.

childhood and adulthood. "Crossing cultural boundaries," Dr. Walls states in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, "has been the life blood of historic Christianity."<sup>39</sup> No God fearing missionary would ever walk into a foreign mission field telling people, "Jesus loves you... but you need to change the way you dress, the way you talk, the food you eat, the games you play, etc." they would not hear about Jesus love, they would only hear the rules and regulations. Yet, how many well meaning adults tell teenagers those exact same things?

In *The Shaping of Things to Come*, we are reminded that the, "Task of the cross-cultural missionary: (is) to engage culture without compromising the Gospel."<sup>40</sup> Engaging the culture can be messy, especially if the culture is radically different then the culture one is used to; yet, it is impossible to impact a culture without engaging it. One of the most impactful ways to engage culture is through the use of the cultural vernacular. Again, movies provide a non-threatening engagement tool that one can use to connect with teenagers. Movies can be conversation starters among people who have nothing else in common. They are a shared experience that allows for participation among the "critics."

In viewing teens as a cross-cultural ministry, I found Andrew Walls book *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* very helpful and insightful. Through a youth ministry lens, many of Walls' insights and observations are exceptionally applicable. As Walls reminds us, "Christian faith is repeatedly coming into creative interaction with new cultures, with different systems of thought and different patterns of tradition; that its profoundest expressions are often local and vernacular."<sup>41</sup> It is this creative interaction that might be the most lacking in our desire

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<sup>39</sup> A. F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*. 2005, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 284.

<sup>40</sup> M. Frost and A. Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come : Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*. [Book; Internet Resource] 2003 [cited; xi, 236 p.: ill. ; 23 cm.].

<sup>41</sup> A. F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*. 2005, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 284.

to connect with teenagers. Often we think that in just “dumbing down” an adult Bible study or sermon series we are connecting with the vernacular of adolescents. The church used to be the zenith of creativity in the world. It is time to reclaim that creative interaction in our dealing with adolescents.

It is this very idea of vernacular and striving to “speak” it that needs to drive ministry. To effectively share the life changing news of the Gospel teenagers, the church needs to find a way to speak the vernacular of teenagers; however, this may not be the vernacular of younger or older people in the congregation. Churches will need to use movies, music, or language that is offensive to some but completely understood by the main target audience. As E. Stanley Jones reminds us in his book on Gandhi, “God uses many instruments.”<sup>42</sup> God uses many instruments, sometimes without the instrument knowing they are being used. Human egos need not get in the way when God is involved!

It is also very important to note that movies have the great power to offend as well as inspire. This is the norm with many cultural “vernaculars.” Knowing which hand to “shake” with, when to bow, what is appropriate clothing, what is appropriate touch, or how and when to talk to people of the opposite gender are all powerful ways to connect or repel depending on the vernacular of the specific culture. If fear of offending others were a driving factor in Christian missions, would missionaries ever leave their home? One needs to step graciously, all the while relying on God, without a fear of being offending. That is not an excuse for ignorance; however, if we are loving people in an incarnational way, our love for them will overcome any potential offense.

*The History and Expansion of Christianity*, by Dr. Kenneth S. Latourette, is the book Dr. Andrew Walls used as the basis for much of his research on Christian Missions. Dr. Latourette

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<sup>42</sup> E. S. Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi*. 1948, Nashville: Cokesbury. 160.

specifically outlines three criteria of Christian expansion: the Church, the Kingdom and the Gospel. All three of the signs fit very well into a view of youth ministry as cross cultural ministry, and it is important to remember that, “There is never a ‘pure’ Christianity in the sense of an unacculturated Christianity.”<sup>43</sup> Yong, in his book on Pneumatology, the study of the Holy Spirit, titled, *Beyond the Impasse*, goes on to say, “Rather, the Gospel has always already been translated into the categories of first-century Palestine, then later into those of Samaria, Rome, and even the ends of the earth”<sup>44</sup> It is time the Gospel becomes translated into teenage culture and vernacular.

Walls’ believes very strongly in the power of the local congregation. “The first effect of Christian expansion is not the production of saved or enlightened individuals, but of congregations.”<sup>45</sup> Walls’ goes on to further prove his point by stating that, “it is doubtful that the New Testament provides a single example of an individual convert, a ‘saved individual’, left to plough his lonely furrow without family or congregation. The influence of Jesus not only produces group response; it works by means of groups and is expressed in groups. The influence of Jesus, that is, operates in terms of social relations.”<sup>46</sup> Youth “groups” going through life’s pressures and struggles, joys and successes together is still perhaps the most effective way to connect teenagers to Jesus.

Youth ministry expert Denny Rydberg reminds us that, “a collection of individuals becomes a (youth) group as the Holy Spirit meets the individuals and makes them into a family.”

<sup>47</sup> Students involved in youth ministry often have nothing in common but Jesus. In school they

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<sup>43</sup> A. Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*. 2003, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. 205.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>45</sup> A. F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*. 2005, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 284.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>47</sup> D. Rydberg, *Building Community in Youth Groups*. 1985, Loveland, CO: Group. 177.

have their own different little clicks: jocks, nerds, Goths, skaters, surfers, preps, etc., but at church as a youth group they are all connected to and dependent upon each other as a family of Christ.

One of the current debates in our Lutheran circles is the benefits of intergenerational education versus age specific education. The answer lies in both hands coming together. The church is perhaps the only place in society where senior citizens and teenagers can live and work and grow side by side, most other groups target members based on age; however, one must never forget the importance of peer to peer connectivity and ministry. Teenagers are not only part of the congregation, but they need to become a “congregation” of their own as well. *No More Us and Them* is a perfectly titled book that gives practical ideas on how to bring the youth-church and the church-church together, and the book states, “because of their specific needs and challenges, it’s easy to see teenagers as a specialized group, forgetting the importance of recognizing their valuable place in the church at large.”<sup>48</sup> It is always important to find ways for the teenagers to be involved in the larger picture of the ministry of the church, while at the same time not forgetting the importance of creating and having a youth “sub-culture” in the overall culture of the church.

By “kingdom”, Latourette and Walls are referring to the church being the hands and feet of Jesus in the community. There is an old cliché that good works do not get one into heaven, but good works bring heaven to earth. Even in the Lords Prayer we pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We desire the Kingdom to come now! The kingdom of Heaven comes to earth when God’s people are out in the world loving the “least of these.” Scarily enough, Walls reminds us that, “The church without the signs of the kingdom becomes a counter-sign of the

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<sup>48</sup> A. Simpson, *No More Us and Them*. 1999, Loveland, CO: Group. 109.

kingdom, hiding Christ instead of revealing him to the world.”<sup>49</sup> “Hiding Christ”, sounds a lot like being lukewarm, and in Revelation 3:16, Jesus gives us a big warning on the danger of “lukewarm.” Peter Scholtes’s 1966 campfire song, “They’ll Know We are Christians by our Love”, is perhaps more true now in a post-Christian world than ever before.

They’ll Know We are Christians by Our Love

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord;  
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord  
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.

And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

We will walk with each other, we will walk hand-in-hand  
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand-in-hand  
And together we’ll spread the news that God is in our land.

And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

We will work with each other, we will work side by side.  
We will work with each other, we will work side by side.  
And we’ll guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride.

And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

All praise to the Father, from whom all things come.  
All praise to Lord Jesus, his only Son.  
And all praise to the Spirit, who makes us one.

And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

In 2007, my current Parish is celebrating its one hundred year anniversary. What was mind boggling to me is that until the youth ministry started doing mission trips six years ago; our church had never done an over-night mission trip. Now, six years later, we are doing eight to

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<sup>49</sup> A. F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*. 2005, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 284.

twelve a year all over the world. People have caught the “kingdom” bug. People are experiencing what Dr. Yong calls, “the Spirit who groans in, with and through us, in order to bring about the liberation of the creation itself.”<sup>50</sup> The power of missions is not just what one does, but also in what happens to the one who is serving.

Serving sets one free! People in our church are experiencing the Spirit working in them and through them, some for the very first time! Hirsch and Frost make it clear in *The Shaping of Things to Come*, “Our evangelism in the emerging culture needs to offer a real encounter with Jesus, and not merely a doctrine of Jesus.”<sup>51</sup> Our students are encountering Jesus by serving Him all over the world! Doctrine has its place, but it is no substitute for a genuine encounter with Jesus.

Our Lutheran culture has such a deep history and tradition of quality education. Our schools are rated some of the best in the world! People move into town and seek out the local Lutheran school knowing our commitment to excellent education. Yet we have often forgotten the importance of being out in the world loving people. The concept of orthopraxy before orthodoxy is very new and scary to many in my church body. In what is arguably the definitive youth ministry text, Jim Burns’ *Youth Builder* states, “Getting young people involved in mission and service is not an option for Christian growth and maturity; it is a necessity”<sup>52</sup> The key is having students *want* to go out and be in mission and service. Missions and service can become contagious when done right!

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<sup>50</sup> A. Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*. 2003, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. 205.

<sup>51</sup> M. Frost and A. Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*. [Book; Internet Resource] 2003 [cited; xi, 236 p.: ill.; 23 cm.].

<sup>52</sup> J. Burns, *Youth Builder*. 1988, Eugene, OR: Harvest House. 325.

The “Gospel” sign that Latourette writes about is “the effect of Jesus on individual lives and civilizations.”<sup>53</sup> Changed lives change lives. Jesus changes people’s lives from the inside out. This is especially important in dealing with teenagers. Who are just starting to discover who they are and who God has dreamed them to be. Teenagers are moving from a protected world to the real world and that reality can be scary. “At every level at which the good news is heard,” Walls states, “It corresponds with reality, with a real victory secured by Christ over the forces of evil and death.”<sup>54</sup> Jesus has won the battle for us! As St Paul said, if God is for us who can be against us?

Walls outlines a powerful story of the first missionaries in New Zealand. They had to wait over fifteen years for their first baptism conversion, and several missionaries were killed over the years, (and some were even eaten by a people group that practiced cannibalism) but what they learned was that, “They (the Maori, the indigenous people of the New Zealand islands) turned to Christ when they came to an end of themselves and of the resources of their society”<sup>55</sup>. So much is made of teenage rebellion and searching, and both of those are true in certain circumstances; however, when they come to “an end of themselves”, will the church be there as the hands and feet of Jesus, loving, speaking their vernacular and welcoming them in? The resources of the teenage lifestyle are fleeting; will the church be there with the Gospel that is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow?

Youth Ministry professor Duffy Robbins sums it all up like this, “When we shuck it down to the heart, youth ministry isn’t a matter of budgeting, publicizing, and organizing. It’s a matter of loving teenagers, spending time with them, and helping them hear and understand the

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284. <sup>53</sup> A.F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*. 2005, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 284.



Gospel of Christ.”<sup>56</sup> Again, the answer comes back to Jesus; who was and is and is to come and who desires the whole world to come unto knowledge of Him singing and praising in their own language, finding Him in their own story!

## Movies as Stories

I Love to Tell the Story  
by A. Katherine Hankey 1866

I love to tell the story of unseen things above,  
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.  
I love to tell the story, because I know 'tis true;  
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.

*I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,  
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.*

I love to tell the story; more wonderful it seems  
Than all the golden fancies of all our golden dreams.  
I love to tell the story, it did so much for me;  
And that is just the reason I tell it now to thee.

*I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,  
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.*

I love to tell the story; 'tis pleasant to repeat  
What seems, each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet.  
I love to tell the story, for some have never heard  
The message of salvation from God's own holy Word.

*I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,  
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.*

I love to tell the story, for those who know it best  
Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.  
And when, in scenes of glory, I sing the new, new song,  
'Twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long.

*I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,  
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.*

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<sup>56</sup> D. Robbins, *Youth Ministry Nuts and Bolts*. 1990, Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 270.

That hymn was one of my favorites growing up. I loved going to Sunday School and learning the story of the week and seeing how all the stories fit together into God's big story, who's name is Jesus! Dr. Wangerin reminds us that, "Religions do exist without doctrines and theologies, but no religion has ever existed without a story at its core."<sup>57</sup> The core of who we are as Christians is a story, a story that is filled with the themes of love, betrayal, denial, forgiveness, redemption and salvation. Those are themes that almost everyone on the face of the planet has experienced in one way or another. Those are themes that Hollywood has been playing with in major motion pictures since the beginning of the movie business.

Movies are stories and stories have a unique power to communicate. Even the simplest of stories can be used to communicate very complicated concepts. Kate Ristow, a noted catechism teacher, notes the power of stories, "Stories make us laugh and they make us cry. They illuminate life and help us to reflect on our life experiences. They entertain us. They encourage us to explore new worlds and to walk in the footsteps of others. Stories validate our beliefs. They teach us about compassion, love, and respect for others. They can be spring boards for prayer and make the content of a lesson come to life."<sup>58</sup> It is nearly impossible to deny the power of a good, well told and constructed story.

As I have been exploring movies and the film industry, I have to wonder what will come next. What will be the next vernacular and artistic vehicle that people will use to communicate their thoughts, ideals and emotions? What other means will people be using to tell their stories? It would be interesting to do a timeline of vastly different, yet at the same time similar ways stories have been told throughout the known history of the world: from cave drawings to oral tradition, from the written word and the printing press to the major motion picture. People have

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<sup>57</sup> Walter Wangerin Jr., *Making Disciples By Sacred Story*. Christianity Today, 2004. 48(2): p. 66.

<sup>58</sup> K. Ristow, *The Power of Imagination: Storytelling in the Classroom*. Catechist, 2005. 39(3): p. 20.

always related in stories, they may have told them differently, but they always found themselves in each others stories.

Jesus spoke in stories. Eugene Peterson refers to the parables as “stories” in his message “translation” or paraphrase of the Holy Bible. Martin Franzmann sums up the entire Bible in terms of story, “This living and active Word is therefore a force in history; it ‘speeds on’ in the world and triumphs there, in time and place and among men; it is enmeshed in events; tied up with the world, and it involves people. The Word of God is God in action, for God is not a lecturer.”<sup>59</sup> God’s people have quite a story to tell. Is the fragmentation of the meta-narrative a result of Christians not taking the Great Commission seriously? If we “love to tell the story” why do so many people have no saving faith?

As Walt Wangerin Jr., one of the most famous modern day Lutheran “storytellers” says, “Storytelling conveys the realities and the relationships of our faith better than almost any other form of communication we have.”<sup>60</sup> The difficult reality is Christians have the most powerful story in the history of the world, yet are we telling the story with the power it deserves? Are people bored with The Story? If the people in the pews are bored, there is no hope for the people not in the pews. Are there new and fresh ways to present the greatest story of all time? How can the church incorporate modern modes and means of storytelling using film, maybe even films that were not designed to glorify God?

If we are going to take faith formation seriously, then all of those called to share the Gospel need to learn some basic storytelling techniques and skills, for, “Storytelling is the key ingredient in faith formation.”<sup>61</sup> People’s hearts are ripe for the gospel message when it is

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<sup>59</sup> M.H. Franzmann, *The Word of the Lord Grows: A First Historical Introduction to the New Testament*. 1961, St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House. x, 324 p. 24 cm.

<sup>60</sup> Walter Wangerin Jr., *Making Disciples by Sacred Story*. Christianity Today, 2004. 48(2): p. 66.

<sup>61</sup> K. Ristow, *The Power of Imagination: Storytelling in the Classroom*. Catechist, 2005. 39(3): p. 20.

presented in a relatable story. The scriptures say that faith comes from hearing, and storytelling is the vehicle in which most people will hear the Gospel.

### **Other Proposed Solutions**

I imagine that evangelism strategies started being developed right after Pentecost. There are thousands of theories and strategies on the best ways to reach people with the Gospel. Thank God for the variety, there are billions of people to reach; we need variety in this area! There are two specific curriculums that I want to examine in a little more detail as “other proposed solutions.”

The first is the Kennedy Evangelism Program, based on his book *Evangelism Explosion*, that I among thousands of others were taught in our undergraduate Lutheran education. My father was taught this program in the late sixty- early seventies and I was taught it in the late nineties. The program is a door to door program where people are taught to memorize their personal testimony, and then upon knocking on someone’s front door, after a few pleasantries, they are told to boldly ask the question, “If you were to die today would you go to heaven or hell and why?” That is quite a discussion starter question, no doubt!

The intent and heart of the program is excellent, especially in how it taught people to tell their stories; however, I do not believe it will work in a post modern context. First off, no one is very welcoming to strangers randomly knocking on their doors anymore. I have had some Mormon friends over the years go on their mandatory two year mission, and they tell me that the average Mormon Missionary out riding bikes in ties and knocking on doors only converts one person in two years. Knocking on doors is not the best way to start a relationship, and until a

relationship is established, postmoderns do not care what you have to say until they care about you.

Secondly, do people who are atheists or agnostic believe in a heaven or hell? If one does not believe in heaven or hell, the question is inherently irrelevant. Hell as a consequence and heaven as a reward is not a motivation to those who have no concept of God and His love personified in Jesus.

The second evangelism curriculum is the new curriculum from Youth Specialties, *The 3Story Evangelism Training Curriculum Kit*.<sup>62</sup> This is a great resource and is very different in context from the “old school” Kennedy Training. This resource acknowledges and emphasizes the importance of relationships in sharing one’s faith.

The basic idea of *3Story* is to have students connect how their story fits in with God’s story and then how their and God’s story fits in with their unchurched friends stories. This is a worthwhile program and will help teenagers think more about opportunities to evangelize. What I want to suggest through my project is that a movie can be a uniting story that connects people to God’s story. A shared movie experience can connect a Christian and non-Christian alike to God’s story at work in the world.

## **The Project**

My project will be a book for teenagers called: *Talking Pictures: How to Turn a Trip to the Movies into a Mission Trip*. The book will be designed for adolescents, but usable by all ages. I will be “testing” the project by having some of the teenagers in my ministry as well as ministries around the country read and attempt to apply the book. I intend the book to be very

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<sup>62</sup> <https://shop.youthspecialties.com/store/product.php?productid=320&cat=324&page=1>

visual, with a great deal of graphics and images as well as large print to draw the eyes to key areas. The basic outline of the book will be as follows:

*“Talking Pictures”: How to Turn a Trip to the Movies into a Mission Trip*

1. Introduction
  - a. Power of Stories
  - b. Power of Movies
  - c. Power of Relationships
2. Relatable Character(s)
  - a. Relatable to You
  - b. Relatable to Biblical Characters
  - c. Relatable to friends/family
  - d. Quotes
  - e. Questions
3. Relatable Situations
  - a. Relatable to You
  - b. Relatable to Biblical Characters
  - c. Relatable to friends/family
  - d. Quotes
  - e. Questions
4. Redemptive Themes
  - a. Relatable to You
  - b. Relatable to Biblical Characters
  - c. Relatable to friends/family
  - d. Quotes
  - e. Questions
5. Bringing it Home
  - a. Focus on Jesus
  - b. Pray!
  - c. That’s Not All Folks

The title “Talking Pictures” is meant to be a play on words. The first motion pictures to have sound were called “talking pictures” and the goal of the book is to have people use movies as an excuse to talk about the grace given us in Jesus. If a picture is worth a thousand words, how many words is a motion picture worth? At twenty-four frames per second, the average two hour movie contains one-hundred-seventy-two-thousand-eight-hundred pictures, or at a thousand words per picture, 172,800,000 words! With that many words at stake it is time to start talking! The “meat” of the book will focus on the ideas of: relatable characters, relatable situations and redemptive themes.

### **Relatable Characters**

Stories “provide narratives about character’s lives that can be used as a resource for reflecting about one’s own experience and aspirations.”<sup>63</sup> Character development is a key to a good movie and story. The characters need to be whole, complete; not a simple stereotype, or two dimensional personas, but effective characters that have some depth and distinct, understandable and relatable motivation. Effective characters show their good and bad sides; they show they are human.

As we tell the story that “we love to tell”, we need to remember it is ultimately a love story. “Genuine conversion is ultimately a question of falling in love.”<sup>64</sup> We want people to fall in love with Jesus for all He has done for them. The realities of what Christ did are not a pretty

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<sup>63</sup> G. Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. 2005, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing. 236.

<sup>64</sup> R. Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search For a Christian Spirituality*. [Book; Internet Resource] 1999 [cited; 1st in the U.S.A.: [xi, 257 p. ; 22 cm.]. Available from: <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/bios/random058/98046109.html>.

picture, but the whole story, suffering, rejection, betrayal and all, needs to be told. What about Jesus' story would cause one to fall in love with Him? Love stories have their ups and downs, but in the end the boy gets the *right* girl, not always the girl he thought he wanted, but the right girl. In the same way, Jesus is longing for His bride, the church!

The Bible contains hundreds of powerful stories. Chap Clark said at The National Director of Christian Education Conference of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod back in 2006, that people will learn more about love from the Biblical story of Hosea and Gomer found in the first three chapters of Hosea, then from the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, known as the "love chapter", which everyone has read at their weddings.

Most people have never heard of Hosea other than he has a book of the Bible named after him, but they all know someone who was cheated on by a girlfriend/boyfriend or a spouse. The story of Hosea teaches about love in a way no list of definitions of love ever could. Hosea is a real, comprehensible character that deals with some of the same problems we all deal with, and yet by God's grace he was faithful to his commitments.

Jesus Christ is the ultimate perfect "character." Jesus is love personified. As Saint John says in John chapter one, Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus usually did what was least expected, ultimately, willingly laying down his life for unrighteous people. We have all been wronged and hurt by someone, but how many of us have prayed for our persecutors the way Jesus did? We have all been betrayed by someone, but how many of us have still loved and reconciled with our betrayer the way Jesus did with Peter? Christians and non-Christian scholars alike have marveled at His leadership philosophy, ethics and wisdom.

I have a career missionary friend called to work with Middle-Eastern International Muslim students at Arizona State University in Phoenix, Arizona. He has found the best way to



“evangelize” to these students is to tell them “Jesus Stories.” From the Quran and other Islamic teachings, they know who Jesus is, to a certain degree, but they do not know what He did. They do not believe in the cornerstones of virgin birth, crucifixion and resurrection. He does not preach to them, walk them down the “Roman’s Road” or judge them, he simply tells them stories from Jesus’ life and ministry. When Jesus is the central character of our story, who He is will come across in who we are.

All of that being said, I caution one from looking for the “Christ Figure” in a movie or story. Characters may exhibit Christ like characteristics and bring about redemption or offer them selves as a sacrifice for others; yet Jesus was perfect, and no one else is. I believe that to look for the Jesus Character lessens the impact that Jesus wants on our lives and in our stories. Human beings can do Christ like things, but only Jesus is the Christ, and that is an important distinction.

Children seem to understand the importance of the characters of the story. According to Cheryl Magrini who researched children retelling Biblical stories, “A child might put herself into the Bible story as one of the characters when retelling the story.”<sup>65</sup> We are the fifth Gospel, our story is the continuation of the story of God at work in the world in the four Gospels we have in Holy Scripture. We are the twenty-ninth chapter of Acts, our lives are the continuation of the stories of the “saints” in the twenty-eight chapters of the book of Acts. Our lives are a testament and story of God’s grace and love for the world. We are a character in the “greatest story ever told!” That is what “Talking Pictures” is all about; finding ways to live out our faith by making spiritual connects to secular things.

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<sup>65</sup> C.T. Magrini, *Children’s Interpretations of Biblical Meal Stories: Ethnographic Intertextual Voicing AS the Practice of Hospitable Pedagogy*. Religious Education, 2006. 101(1): p. 60.

## Relatable Situations

The “sit” in “sit com” stands for “situation.” The setting or situation of a story or movie is very important. The effectiveness of a story greatly depends on the relate-ability of the environment and themes of the story. “If you were to take any story, lifting it’s characters and it’s plot out of the place in which it’s set, and put it in another place, you would have another story.”<sup>66</sup> It is important when using or comparing any Biblical story to know the setting. The ancient world was very different from today, how might those differences affect the hearers understanding of the story? How can we “translate” the setting of ancient times to post-modern times? Who are today’s: Samaritans, fishermen, shepherds, prodigals, Pharisees, Zealots, Romans, and such?

The Biblical authors knew how important the setting was. Dr. Hearon says, “In John, the story of the woman who anointed Jesus is described in reference to three settings: a temporal setting (six days before Passover), a geographical setting (Bethany, already established in the minds of the audience as the village of Mary and Martha), and a setting defined by persons (Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead).”<sup>67</sup> It is also interesting to notice how the other Gospel writers present the same story. By using the setting effectively the author is able to get across the main point of the story.

The four Gospels all tell the same story in a little different way. Dr. Hearon again reminds us that, “Each storyteller has filled in the empty spaces in ways that invite the audience to hear the story in particular ways.”<sup>68</sup> The different perspectives are a strength of the Gospels. The different Gospels were written for different audiences so that through the four of them, all

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<sup>66</sup> B.C. Lane, *Fantasy and the Geography of Faith*. Theology Today, 1993. 50(3): p. 397.

<sup>67</sup> Holly Hearon, *The Art of Biblical Interpretation: Re-Membering The Past Into The Present*. Encounter, 2005. 66(3): p. 189.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 189.

people might come into the knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord as Savior. Different perspectives of the same story strengthen the overall story.

Jesus is the ultimate storyteller. “Jesus used objects and story subjects that were familiar to His listeners... He started where they were. He knew that effective learning builds upon what the learner already knows.”<sup>69</sup> Jesus always set the stage for what the “kingdom of God” was like by relating it to something everyone knew and understood at that time, we are called to do the same thing today in our preaching and teaching. The setting can provide relatable images and familiar places setting the listener up for the main points of the story.

Stories are especially effective when they contain dramatic and familiar themes. The drama of a story gives it emotion people can connect to. Like Jesus, we are called to tell stories in the vernacular of the people. We need to use setting everyone will understand in communicating God’s eternal truths and concepts. Movies are a powerful medium for that type of storytelling.

## **Redemptive Themes**

Life here on earth does not always have a “happy ending.” In fact, rarely does the ending of any particular episode of life allow one to live “happily ever after.” On the television show *The Brady Bunch*, the family was portrayed as the perfect USAmerican blended family; however, in real life, the “father” of *The Brady Bunch*, was a homosexual who died due to complications from A.I.D.S.

Do stories need a happy ending to be good stories? Some would argue no, one could learn a great deal from a story with a “bad ending.” But, hopefully, even though there is a bad

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<sup>69</sup> T. Schultz and J. Schultz, *Why Nobody Learns Much of Anything at Church: And How to Fix It*. 1993, Loveland, Colo.: Group Pub. 237.

ending to a particular story, one could argue that if you learn from the story and avoid the mistakes by the main characters that your story will turn out better and provide the “happy ending” lacking in the original tale.

It is fascinating how often redemptive themes come up in movies and stories. Everyone needs to be redeemed from something: the sins of our parents, the sins of our community/country, the sins of our enemies, the sins of our own making, or the sins of pure bad luck. All movies have some sort of redemptive theme to them and when discovered, it is a powerful tool to share the redemptive love of Jesus.

## **Reflection**

Should all preaching and teaching use movies and stories? Lutheran Theologian Marty Martin has a healthy perspective, “If we are to be faithful to the Biblical testimony, we will not always speak in narrative voice- humanity does not live by narrative alone, but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God- but finally we are compelled to tell the Story and the stories of God who acted mightily in many and diverse ways and most profoundly in the raising of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead.”<sup>70</sup> I use movies constantly in my teaching and preaching, but as Dr. Martin said, it all needs to point back to Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and work still among us today! The point is not to show a movie for the sake of the movie, or because someone outside of one’s context of ministry tells them they should use movies. The point is in speaking the vernacular of the adolescent audience and by God’s grace, for the advancement of the Kingdom of God.

One of the biggest mistakes I see made by Pastors today is the desire to be “stand up comedians” and tell funny or amusing stories or use amusing movie clips that have nothing to do

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<sup>70</sup> Marty Martin, “Storied Preaching.” *Context* 37, no. 12 (2005): 2.

with faith, Jesus or even the “theme of the day.” Storytelling experts say, “Don’t tell a story just because you like it or you think people will enjoy it. Relate the stories to what you are teaching and help people get the connection.”<sup>71</sup> The temptation is to fit an amusing movie or clip into scripture; however, the key is to let scripture stand on its own and find movies or clips that connect with it.

Despite all the best film making and storytelling techniques, a story is powerful because of the way people connect to it. As Christians, our call is to not only tell The Story, but to live The Story. The Story of God so loving the world that He sent His one and only Son into the world to live the perfect life that they couldn’t. His great love for His people caused God to become human and experience everything they experience, except He never sinned, and the people, full of sin, put Him to death; but, His love was so great, death did not overcome Him and three days later He rose from the dead. Today He lives and works in us and through us to change the world.

Many churches are just starting to realize the power of “talking pictures.” Jesus reminds us in Luke that if we keep silent, “the stones will cry out.” “Talking Pictures” is allowing those “stones” to speak and testify to the glory of God! By God’s grace may His church learn to speak the vernacular of all people and all tribes!

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<sup>71</sup> Kate Ristow, “The Power of Imagination: Storytelling in the Classroom.” *Catechist* 39, no. 3 (2005): 20.

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*“Talking Pictures”*

*How to Turn a Trip to the Movies into a Mission Trip*

Designed for Teenagers

By Jacob Youmans

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: THE THREE QUESTIONS

#### QUESTION NUMBER ONE:

#### *HOW MANY MOVIES DO YOU WATCH A WEEK?*

Have you ever really even thought about it before? Major Hollywood hit blockbusters, cool, edgy and trendy independent films, action/adventure, romance, westerns, science fiction, mystery/suspense, comedy, drama, documentary, there are nearly unlimited choices today. And it seems like they are making a gazillion more choices every single day!

Do you realize that even if you watched a movie a day for a year, you wouldn't be able to watch all the movies that are released just this year? Movies, movies everywhere. How many do you watch in a week?

Now before you answer, don't just think about the movies you've seen while sitting in the increasingly comfortable seats of a state-of-the-art movie theater with a warm bucket of golden buttery popcorn and an ice cold cherry coke. Think also about the movies you watch on TV, on DVD, on your video ipod and, of course, count the movies you watch on the big old silver screen. Movies can be seen everywhere from the big screen to the two inch video ipod nano screen. Movies are available "on the go" like never before. Movie rental companies don't even need or expect you to come into a store anymore; you just make an on-line list of all the movies you want to see and they'll send your movies to you in the mail, so the "snail mail" United States Postal Service is still good for something after all. Adding all of those up, how many movies *do* you watch in an average week?

According to the web site answerbag.com, "The number of films the average American watches all together including rentals, movies at home, cinemas, and movies at friend's houses would be a nearly-impossible number to find." This isn't mission difficult my friends, it's mission nearly-impossible! I don't think even Tom Cruise himself could help us figure out questions like this. Needless to say, we all watch a lot of movies!!!

## QUESTION NUMBER TWO:

### *DO YOU WATCH MOVIES ALONE OR WITH OTHERS?*

Be honest now, do you watch the majority of those movies all by your lonesome wearing your "High School Musical" pajamas, or do you tend to view your movies with friends and family, you know, the people that really matter to you (Wearing, of course, a wide variety of outfits)?

I had a very wide variety of odd jobs in high school, yeah I'll admit it, I couldn't keep a job, but by far my absolute favorite High School job was working at the beautiful Redrock Theaters movie theater in Las Vegas, Nevada (my least favorite job in high school was being a telemarketer for the Shriners, but that's a different book all together!). The theater actually doesn't exist anymore, they tore it down, but man I have a lot of great memories of that place; that's where my fascination of the power of movies really was born.

I did it all at the theater: selling tickets, ripping tickets, making and serving popcorn, snacks and beverages, cleaning the theaters, starting the movie, ushering people in and out of the theater, kicking out kids that snuck in or theater hopped, I was a movie theater employee machine. They asked if they could clone me to create the ultimate movie theater employee team,

but I respectfully declined. I learned quite a bit about life while working in that theater, made a lot of friends, ate way too much popcorn, drank too much soda, got a bunch of free movie posters and memorabilia and most importantly, I got to watch a ton of movies for my favorite price... free!

While working at my beloved movie theater, I noticed a near universal trend; almost no one goes to the movies alone. It's sometimes a couple (only two people) and most often a group experience. Movie time is a time to connect with other people. You most likely won't utter a single word to each other for two hours (unless it's "excuse me" when you need to get up to go to the bathroom), but you're connecting none the less through the shared movie experience. Movies are way more fun in a packed house, where everyone's in on the inside jokes and everyone knows when to laugh and when not to laugh.

I really enjoy going to the midnight premiers of the big movies, because everyone who's there really wants to be there and really gets into the overall motion picture experience. You don't go to a movie at midnight that you're not dying to see! Many of these midnight moviegoers even come in costume! While seeing the second Star Wars Trilogy at midnight I've sat near several wookies, Darth Vader, Princess Leah (who wasn't even in those movies!), guys with lightsabers and of course guys sporting the very cool ancient "Jedi ponytails". Movies are much more fun when you have loved ones to be amused, scared, shocked, moved, laugh, or maybe even cry with.

I'm not saying your weird or a loser if you go to the movies alone, to each their own; but I am saying you're unique. The vast majority of people go to the movies with a group of friends. I still remember who I saw certain movies with years and years ago. Seeing movies with

friends is a way to make lasting memories. Often times, who you go with is much more memorable than the movie itself!

### QUESTION NUMBER THREE:

#### *DO YOU TALK ABOUT MOVIES?*

Immediately upon viewing a movie do you talk about what you just experienced with your movie-going companions? Again reflecting back on my dog days of summer donning the sharp black vest and crisp bow tie at the local multiplex, no one exits a movie theater not talking to the people around them about what they just experienced together. No one. Movies are social events and there are perhaps few more natural discussion starters.

The legacy of movie critics, the late Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert is that we have all been taught how to talk “intelligently” about movies and how to be movie critics as well giving a movie a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down”, a passing or failing grade or a certain number of stars. Movies start conversations, discussions, and debates as everyone tends to develop an opinion very quickly.

A lot of people will even talk to complete strangers following viewing a movie together; because face it, after sitting through a movie together, are you really still “strangers”? When you’ve just been through a one and half to three hour adventure with someone, you’ve got to talk about it!

Have you ever been to a movie on a first date? I think most of us have, and there’s a very good reason that a movie makes a great first date, no matter how comfortable or uncomfortable you are it gives you something to talk about. The irony is we’re not supposed to talk during a



movie, trust me, I've been loudly "shhhhhhhhhhhhsed" before! And yet talking and movies go hand in hand.

So think through these questions...

- How many movies do you watch a week?
- Do you watch movies alone or with others?
- Do you talk about movies?

And turn the page...

## CHAPTER 2

### THE EVANGELIST/TRANSLATOR

#### WHAT'S THIS BOOK ABOUT?

Here it is, this is what the little old book you're holding in your hot little hands is all about. It's all about, the post-movie chatter that we all have. We all have it, and God can use it to His glory! Your conversations about movies are a huge opportunity that you have to see Jesus in, with and under the celluloid film, and most importantly, show Him to your friends.

Those conversations after a shared movie experience could be turned into... get ready for it... EVANGELISM!!! Does that word send shivers down your spine like when the hyenas in *The Lion King* hear "Mufasa"? Well it doesn't have to; I hope to show you in the pages to follow how evangelism can be as simple as taking a friend to the movies and talking about it. That simple trip to the movies could very well turn into a mission trip, and just might provide you with some of the most effective evangelistic opportunities of your life!

I understand if you're a little scared of evangelism. Most of us are at first. We want people to like us and not think we're weird Jesus freak kind of people. Is it possible to be "normal" and be evangelistic? Ultimately, I believe our fear of evangelism is a fear of rejection, a fear of failure. In the movie *Game Plan*, the character played by Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson is a self-centered star football quarterback. In the movie he doesn't know he has a child until his ten-year-old daughter shows up at his doorstep. As he gets to know his long-lost daughter, his life and personality radically changes and toward the end of the movie as his transformation is near completion, he is forced into a custody battle over his daughter. When questioned about why his daughter needs a father he says, "Fathers give us courage to do things we don't think we can do." As a father, I sure hope we can give courage to our children!

That's exactly what your heavenly Father is going to do with you and your career as an evangelist. He's going to give you the courage. The courage to tell the whole world about His everlasting love is coming. God will give you the courage! Don't let your fear stop you. It's not about failure because it's not about us, it's about God working in us and through us and God doesn't fail! God says in Isaiah 55:11, "My word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." God purposes are so much greater than ours, and God's purposes are always fulfilled.

God then goes on in Isaiah to say that, "You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace." Evangelism will lead you to joy and peace. Aren't we all looking for a little peace and joy? All we need is love... but a little peace and joy sure would be nice too. Knowing and living your God given calling will give you joy and peace. I don't know about you, but I know a whole lot of people who do not have any joy or peace.

My favorite definition of joy comes from the letters that make up the word. Joy is a matter of priorities. Joy is about putting Jesus first, Others next and Yourself last. Jesus, Others, Yourself, that's joy! Joy isn't going to be found in selfishness, but in living for Jesus and others, it's found in selflessness.

Peace and joy go hand in hand. Peace comes out of joy. Peace is a direct result of proper priorities lived out. St. Paul says it like this in Philippians 4:4-7, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Think about it, the peace and joy that transcends all understanding, and that we all long for, can begin with a trip to the movies!

### WAIT A MINUTE!

Now I know what some of you are thinking, "Wait a minute; the vast majority of Hollywood movies are not made with Christian evangelism in mind". Very astute of you. You are very wise. Your mother raised you right. Yes, you are correct. Not every movie is as blatantly, in-your-face Christian as *The Passion of the Christ*, or *The Nativity Story*. And not every movie has completely obvious spiritual connections leading to deep conversations like *The DaVinci Code* or *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

In fact many major motion pictures are perhaps made with a very different kind of "evangelism" in mind than Christian! Movies can be great "evangelists" for premarital sex, drug use, vulgarity, and all other sorts of things that are against God's plan for us. Many movies that

are rated PG13 are actually filthier then previous R rated movies. The goal of the filmmakers at times seems to be to push the limits of what the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) censors will allow. (The MPAA is the group that rates movies under the system of G: General Audiences, PG: Parental Guidance, PG13: Parental Guidance and no one under thirteen years old will be admitted without an adult, R: Restricted no children under seventeen admitted without an adult, and NC17: No Children under seventeen will be admitted) Today some PG13 movies could be described as soft-core pornography, and some R rated movies blur the line between an R rating and blatant pornography. There are many, many things to be concerned about in the unhealthy and blatantly anti-God morality portrayed in many major motion pictures.

#### OMNI-MAX to OMNI-PRESENCE

So here's an extremely important connecting point. The whole concept of "Talking Pictures" hinges on this idea. One of our core beliefs as Christians is that God is omnipresent, everywhere at the same time. The Psalmist asks a great question in Psalm 139, "Where can I flee from your presence?" Answer: NOWHERE! God is present everywhere. Try as we might, we can not escape God's presence. If you need a refresher, check out Genesis chapter three. Remember what happened with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when they tried to flee God's presence? Like Yoda says, "Do or do not, there is no try." Don't try it, you cannot flee from the presence of God. God is everywhere.

St. Paul reminds us in the book of Acts, 17:28 that, "In Him (God, more specifically Jesus) we live and move and have our being." By the way, Paul did not make up that line himself. He is quoting first century pop culture, a poem written by a Cretan named Epimenides.

And the quote was not even meant to be about God, Yahweh. It was written to be about the Greek god Zeus, further proof that there might be something to this “Talking Pictures” idea!

The line that society has created dividing sacred and secular is simply not Biblical. But in today’s world we have movies and Christian movies. We have music and Christian music. We seem to have made a sub-genre of our faith life; yet, Jesus’ world believed that all of life was a sacred gift from God, and that since God is present in all things then all of life is sacred. And remember back again to Genesis, what did God say after each day of creation? It’s good! St. Paul reminds us in Philippians 1:5-7 that the good that was started in Creation is brought to completion in Jesus Christ. Do you act different at church than you do the rest of the week? Do you act different around your church friends? Do you bounce back and forth between a sacred and a secular life? Why do we do that? When we see God at work in the supposed “secular” world, the dividing line between secular and sacred slowly goes away.

Due to the fall of humanity way back in the beginning, in the garden of Eden, the world unfortunately is now full of sin, so we have the good and the bad together in a confusing way many times. Its times exactly like this that we need to cling to the idea of Jesus that His followers are in the world but not of the world. We still need to be involved in the world, but careful to not become consumed by it, all the while remembering that God loves the world!

If we believe God is omnipresent then we also must believe that God can use for His glory, things that were designed by human hands to *not* give Him glory, because whether people see it or not, God is still present. After all, human intentions are absolutely nothing compared to God’s intentions, and God’s intention is for all people to know Him! Remember John 3:16? For God so loved the whole world? The whole world? Wow, that’s a lot of love! The whole world theme is echoed again in 1 Timothy 2:3-4, “God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and

to come to a knowledge of the truth.” How are people going to know the “knowledge of the truth”? That’s where you get to enter center stage my friend!

In scripture God spoke through a burning bush, a donkey, a cloud and tons of very sinful people, than He can certainly speak to the world using a Hollywood movie, perhaps even a movie that your friends who don’t know Jesus would want to see!!! Jesus says in Luke 19:40 that if we remain silent the rocks will cry out. Well, God is crying out in movies all the time.

### TRANSLATOR?

Ahh, I love the irony, the Hollywood gurus have no idea that God is using them to spread His message. Surprise, surprise, God’s going to win. All that’s needed is for you to “translate” the movie into God’s Word. Interpret the eternal truths of God’s word into the language of the people, movies.

I had the privilege of preaching through an interpreter for the first time not too long ago on a mission trip to work with the persecuted “underground” church in North Africa. It was an unforgettable experience. As I was speaking, I quickly realized that I really had no idea or control of what was going on. People laughed when I didn’t think they were supposed to and they didn’t laugh when I thought they were supposed to. I would say ten words and the translator would go on for ten minutes. I would then speak for several minutes and the translator would just say three little words. As uncomfortable and ineffective as it felt at times, through it all I sure learned the importance of a good translator.

Translators are vital. Without a translator, no one would know what was said by the speaker. St. Paul calls for interpreters in 1 Corinthians chapter fourteen. Interpreters are vital to

the over all strength and health of the body of Christ. Interpretation is done for the strength and growth of the church.

Here it is my friends; God is counting on you... yes you, to be His translator!!!

“Evangelist Translators”, I know you probably never thought about it before, but whew, what a calling we have! Bible translators have been serving God all over the globe for two thousand years, and whether it’s making sense of a tribal language deep in the heart of Africa or a movie, God’s love through Jesus will be proclaimed in a way people understand. Perhaps through a movie, people will hear the love of Jesus in their “language” for the very first time.

People always ask me what my favorite part of ministry is. Well, my favorite part of ministry is seeing that “light bulb” come on, when people realize exactly what Jesus has done for them. You can see the light bulb come on just like in a cartoon; it’s the coolest thing in the world! One student I worked with a while back summed it up perfectly, “If this Jesus stuff is true, than it’s the most incredible thing ever!” Yeah, it really is. Man, I couldn’t have said it any better myself, that’s exactly it!

Make no mistake about it; Bible translation can get pretty tricky. The trick is to learn a new language and culture and apply God’s eternal Word and truths to it. How do you translate Psalm 51:7, “I will be whiter than snow” to a culture in South America in the Amazon rain forest that has never seen a single snowflake? A friend of mine was a Bible translator in such a place and he found a very white, bleached white, flower that was prominent in the place the tribe lived and told the people that Jesus would make their sins whiter than that flower. That’s not exactly what scripture says, but it’s the Spirit of what scripture is saying.

We have to be creative in Bible translation in different cultures. Jesus was. Do you think He would have said, “Come and follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” if He was

talking to businessmen, carpenters or even religious leaders? I think He knew He was talking to fishermen and He wanted to relate to their culture. And the time has come for us to understand that American teenage life is a completely different culture. It's a culture that doesn't just need its own "group", even though youth group has led many people to Jesus, but one that has its own language and needs to hear the Word of God in that language. And just maybe "Talking Pictures" is a way to accomplish that. This is your chance to speak God's Word in the language of your people! Think about it, back in the fourteen and fifteen hundreds people were burned at the stake for taking the Bible out of the original languages, and now, teenagers can do it! You're a reformer bring God's Word to His people in a way they can understand.

It isn't always easy to see God at work in this great big world of ours and it isn't always going to be easy to see God at work in a movie. Some movies will be easier than others, but rest assured God is alive and well and excited to reveal Himself to you and your friends who don't yet know Him. And get this, Jesus could be calling you, using you, to reach people that only you can reach, and maybe all you have to do is take them to the local movie mega-plex this weekend. You are such a wild and crazy evangelist/translator. By the way, that will look pretty cool on your future resumes too, "evangelist/translator". What a calling!

So if you love Jesus and like movies, keep reading, this is the perfect little book for you! And if you're not sure about who Jesus is or really a movie fan, keep reading, you just might have your minds opened to a whole new world of possibilities. Let's start "Talking Pictures"!

## QUESTIONS & SUGGESTIONS

- How many movies do you see in an average week?



- What are some of your favorite movies? What makes them your favorites?
- What do your favorite movies have in common? How are they different?
- What do your favorite movies say about you?
- Who do you tend to go to movies with? Do they know Jesus as Lord and Savior? How do you know for sure?
- What do you and your friends talk about after seeing a movie? Do you see how that conversation could become spiritual?
- What do you think of the idea of evangelist/translator? Which part would be easier or harder for you? Why?
- Do you feel a calling from God? Have you ever felt one? If you do or did, what was that calling?
- Why did Jesus teach in parables? How is “Talking Pictures” similar to Jesus teaching with parables? What is your favorite parable? Why? Look through the Gospels and try to find a parable that you have never read before. Why are parables so powerful? Do you think people always understood a parable right away? Why or why not? How might that relate to “Talking Pictures”?

## CHAPTER 3

### LIGHTS!

### THE POWER OF STORY

“Let there be light.” God

In Genesis, the Old Testament begins with light, God spoke it and light was created. The New Testament begins with The Light of the World coming to earth. Light is the start of the story and the heart of the story. The Bible is sixty six different books by a bunch of different authors, but the Bible is simply put, God's story; the story of God at work in the world and the story of God working in and through everyday, ordinary people like you and me.

Jesus, the light of the world, then makes a startling statement in Matthew 5:14, "You are the light of the world." Jesus is saying that we are called to be the lights of the world. We are part of the story. Why are we lights? Jesus continues in Matthew 5:16, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Our story is all about giving God His glory. Just like the moon reflects the light of the sun, we reflect His light. That's our story. We are the continuation of the story. Some have called the people of God today the fifth Gospel (The Bible has four gospels: Matthew Mark, Luke and John.) or the twenty-ninth chapter of Acts (the book of Acts only has twenty-eight chapters). I like both of those ideas, because the story must go on, and God's going to use you to continue His story!

As a kid I used to wonder if I would ever do anything so great that it would get added to the Bible. Then I learned that people like Martin Luther and Mother Theresa weren't even in the Bible. How could that be, we learned their stories in Sunday school, but they're not in the Bible? The Biblical cannon maybe closed, but the story of God continues in you and through you. You're crucial to the plot of God's story.

The basic and most important part of any movie is the plot, the story. Every movie contains a story. Some make more sense than others (Did anyone really understand *Dude, Where's My Car?*) but there is always some sort of story. Some stories are good and some aren't but, everyone is interested in a good story. Stories move us as they teach us and simultaneously

amuse us. The power of a good story comes in the ability we have to relate to it, we'll be taking about relating to a movie quite a bit in the upcoming chapters. I have always wondered if our fascination with gossip as a culture didn't come back to our basic need for story. The paparazzi have jobs because we want to know the story.

Some people not only want to know the story, but they want to be a part of the story. When baseball player Barry Bonds broke Hank Aaron's homerun record in 2007, the parking lot and surrounding areas were full of people who wanted to be there and be a part of history, be a part of the story. None of them had a ticket to get into the game, but that didn't matter, they still wanted to be a part of the story. I have friends that couldn't get tickets to the Superbowl, so they went to the parking lot and hung out; again, just to be part of the story.

Stories help us see truths that we would not perhaps ordinarily see. Stories also have an interesting way of shaping truth. Jesus Himself taught in stories and parable to teach eternal truths. Many of his parables start out with the phrase, "The Kingdom of God is like...". Maybe the beginning of "Talking Pictures" is as simple as that phrase, "it's like". God's love is like..., Jesus' purpose is like..., God's forgiveness is like..., and so on and so on.

People believe stories, and one of the growing trends in movies is to make movies based on a true story. What exactly "based" means is debatable, but the stories are interesting. The creators of the movie *Fargo* got caught up in a controversy because the opening of the movie said that the movie was based on a true story, but then it was revealed later that it was not based on any real story. Should filmmakers be allowed to do that? Again it's difficult to define what "based on a true story" even means. Some movies such as *Lord of War* with Nicholas Cage, do not tell you the movie is based on a true story until the very end. That's an interesting idea,

because as you watch the movie you are shocked at what's taking place on the screen, and then and the end you learn it's real... or at least "based on a true story".

Stories have been told throughout human history, whether oral, or written down or acted out, or in paintings, or on the radio, or on the television or on the movie screen, stories are vital to who we are as human beings. In speaking to groups, I always marvel at the number of heads that perk up the moment the phrase, "let me tell you a story" is uttered.

Life is a story. Everyone is the "star" of their very own story... their very own "major motion picture" Like Julia Roberts character in *Pretty Woman*, we all want a real live fairy tale story. But when our story connects to Jesus story... that's power! Jesus says in Acts 1:8 that, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you." The "comes on you" is a connecting of stories. Our power is the power of Jesus story which lives inside of us and works through us.

As Spiderman's alter ego, Peter Parker, is reminded by his wise, old, loving Uncle Ben, "With great power comes great responsibility." What is our responsibility? Look no further than the words of Jesus, after the resurrection, right before the ascension, some people call this the "Great Commission", Matthew 28:19-20 says, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." We're called to go. Go! But notice how we're not called to go alone. Jesus will be with us. ALWAYS! That's power my friends.

*The first step in "Talking Pictures" is knowing Jesus story, and how Jesus story has unfolded in your story.*

Jesus story is one of redemption. One of freedom. One of forgiveness. One of love: unconditional, everlasting, undeserved and really unexplainable love. Jesus story is alive and as the author of the book of Hebrews reminds us in Hebrews 4:12, it's sharper than any double-edged sword. Jesus story cuts to the heart of who we are and who God has dreamed us to be. St. John tells us exactly why the Bible was written in John 20:30-31, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." Jesus story is one of life: new life, a perfect life lived and life freely given.

Jesus story is a paradox, extreme opposites coming together, life out of death. We receive life thanks to Jesus brutal death on the cross. And interestingly enough, our story of life in Christ is also a paradox, simultaneous saint and sinner. We are saved, and forgiven, but not perfect, we're still going to mess up. The connecting of our stories is done by the Holy Spirit, and again, as Jesus Himself reminds us in Acts, we will receive power when the Holy Spirit connects us to Him!

This is why we start the whole process with making sure we know how our story intersects with Jesus' story. When our story connects with Jesus' story, our story becomes sacred, and one that can bridge over to the secular, real "world" stories of others, and the stories contained in movies. Well now to grossly misquote *The Matrix*, "You close the book, the story ends. You wake up in your bed and you believe whatever you want to believe. You turn the page, you stay in wonderland. And, I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes." Life is too short

to waist on unimportant things. Jesus Him self reminds us that this rabbit hole of “Salvation” is deep and narrow, but it sure is an adventure. Let’s keep going, the “story” is just the beginning!

## QUESTIONS & SUGGESTIONS

- What are some of your story’s “highlights”?
- What do you think William Shakespeare meant when he said, “All the worlds a stage and all the man and women merely players.”? Do you agree? Why or why not?
- How does Jesus story connect with your story?
- What are your favorite parts of Jesus story?
- What are some of the difficult parts for you to understand in Jesus story?
- How have you seen Jesus at work in the difficult parts of your story?
- How well do you know Jesus story as outlined in the Gospels?
- Read the Gospel of Mark. It’s the shortest of the four gospels and is very fast paced. It’s only sixteen chapters long, read one a day in about half a month. Often times in our Bible study we jump around in scripture reading a verse here and a verse there, but you will be blessed to read the story of Jesus straight through. You will experience Jesus story in a whole new way.

## CHAPTER 4

### CAMERA!

#### THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

“It is not good for man to be alone” God

We need other people, especially when it's picture time. Sure a picture by yourself is fine, but a picture with friends is so much more fun. Have you ever noticed how we let complete strangers hold our very expensive cameras because we really want all of our friends and family to be in our pictures? Relationships are worth so much more than expensive, but replaceable cameras. God greatly values relationships. Never forget that our faith life is about a relationship, not about rules or regulations. We are in a relationship with Jesus and that relationship should affect every other relationship we have.

I love to watch senior citizens, who have been married four times longer than I've been alive, walk hand in hand down the street. They have a relationship, a real relationship, they have literally grown old together. In high school, if a couple's been together for a year, that's a really long time, but that's nothing, literally nothing compared to my grandparents who have been married fifty-six years!

Way back in the Garden of Eden, you can read the story in Genesis chapter 2, right after God made Adam, the very first member of the human race, He stated that, "It is not good for the man to be alone." God is not just talking about romantic lovey-dovey relationships; He's talking about friendship, companionship, and community. We were created to be in relationships with other people.

One of the issues of high school life that I hear over and over again, and I'm guessing it's always been an issue and will continue to be an issue, is not having any friends. High school can be a time of incredible loneliness. Even though many of your high schools contain literally thousands of people, it can be very easy to get lost in the crowd and experience absolute isolation. The fact that we even think we might not have any friends shows the importance of

relationships. I would encourage those of you who know someone who feels like they have no friends, how can you befriend them?

Jesus was constantly befriending people who were being shunned by the world. There might be no better way to be like Jesus than to love those who no one else wants to love! Now if you don't think you have any friends, I encourage you to befriend someone else. Often we worry about others, but we can't control others. If we're looking for a friend, then maybe we need to turn the question around and ask, "How can you be a friend to someone else?" Most importantly pray about it! Pray God puts good, health friendships into your life. Like watching a movie, life is a lot more fun if you have good friends to experience it all with.

I think we often forget about the power of relationships and friendships, the power for good and the power for the not so good, you know "peer pressure"? I know that everyone talks about it, but everyone talks about it for a good reason; it's a reality of life, and not just high school life, but human life in general! Believe it or not, your parents and other significant "adults" also struggle with peer pressure; they just don't have the assemblies at school to address it. Peer pressure can be a tool for good as well as bad. Speaking of the bad, do you need to get rid of some of your friends? I know that sounds harsh, but it's been said that you are who you roll with. Your friends speak volumes about who you are. Everyone I have ever met who needed to make radical changes in their lives, overcome addictions, get out of dangerous habits, etc., comments on how in order to truly change, they had to get rid of some of their friends. Friends have the power for good and the power for the not-so-good. What do your friends say about you?

It's those we have a true friendship with that will be the most open to what we have to say about Jesus. We have to earn the right to be heard. This is an old cliché, but like many of the old clichés, it's an old cliché for a pretty good reason... because it's true: they don't care how



much you know until they know how much you care. Our care and kindness is much more effective in reaching people than our preaching, even a preacher will tell you that.

To often we have the mental image of an evangelist at the guy on the street corner with the bullhorn, or the guy boycotting the Marilyn Manson concert or the guy passing out flyers explaining the intricate details of Hell and how you're going to burn for all of eternity. While I guess that's one way to evangelize, using the "shock tactic", but those folks, as well meaning as they may be, have not *earned* the right to be heard. You have earned the right to be heard by your friends, because they're your friends. And if they don't want to hear you, maybe they're not really your friends.

*While the first step in "Talking Pictures" is knowing Jesus story and how it's unfolding in your story, the second step is recognizing those that Jesus has put into your story who do not yet know Him as Lord and Savior.*

Think about it, God may have placed people in your life for the sole purpose of you reaching out to them with the story of Jesus! You may be the only chance they ever have to hear the Gospel! I don't believe in coincidences. God's going to accomplish His work. Maybe it's time to focus the lens and see whom God's put in your life for a greater purpose.

## QUESTIONS & SUGGESTIONS

- Make a list of three friends who don't yet know Jesus as Lord and Savior.

- Jason Bourne said in *The Bourne Supremacy* that, “There is always a target, there is always an objective.” Why is this list of names so important?
- Would these friends on your list go to a movie with you? Why or why not?
- Would these friends on your list be open to talking about spiritual things? Why or why not?
- Do your friends know you’re a Christian? How? Do you know if all of your friends are Christians are not? Are you assuming they are or aren’t or do you really know?
- Think of some mutual friends you have who know Jesus that you could involve in the mission.
- What does Jesus Himself say about friendship and our relationship to Him in St. John’s Gospel 15:9-17? How does this statement differ from other religions, faiths and religious figures?

## CHAPTER 5

### ACTION!

#### THE POWER OF MOVIES

“Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” St. James

If a picture is worth a thousand words, what are “talking pictures” worth? At their basic form, movies are just simply pictures in action. These fast moving pictures trick the eye into thinking there is a fluid, seamless image. John’s Gospel reminds us in the first chapter that Jesus is the Word of God made Flesh. He is the Word of God in action. He doesn’t just speak the Gospel, He is the Gospel! No tricks here! God came to earth as Jesus, lived the perfect life that

we couldn't live, died the brutal death that we would never want to experience and rose from the dead by His own power. That's larger than life action. Love in action. We are called to be people of action. People of faith are called to be people of action. St. James says it best in James 2:17, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." Not "mostly dead" like the Dread Pirate Roberts in *The Princess Bride*. Faith without works in DEAD!

Movies are larger than life, yet are mostly meant to portray life. Movies are an art form that uniquely captures the imagination and stimulates the senses of sight and sound. Have you ever listened to the directors or stars commentary on a DVD? When this concept first came out there were many who thought that it would ruin the "movie magic", but I think it enhances the overall enjoyment of the movie as we learn how different scenes were shot and made and why the director made certain decisions. Every single second of a film is thought through in excruciating detail. Movie action is full of tiny, minute, and little details.

Have you ever made your own movies? I would guess that most of you reading this have posted at least one little video/movie on youtube or some other website. (If you haven't made your own movie, give it a try, you might like it, plus everyone else is doing it!) Seeing how things work behind the scenes and "creating" with the art form itself only enhance the power of movies. It's a lot of fun to create the action!

Okay, quick recap... *the first step in "Talking Pictures" is knowing Jesus story and how it's unfolding in your story, the second step is recognizing those that Jesus has put into your story who do not know Him as Lord and Savior. The third step is seeing Jesus and your story unfolding in the film with your friends.*

You can use the natural power and fascination we all have of movies to explore the power and glory of God. My hope and prayer as you get more and more into this is that you will never watch a movie, or view the world for that matter, the same way again. I hope you start “translating” movies and then move to television, magazines, the internet, school, sports, or anything else that you once thought of as “secular” and begin to see the omnipresent God at work in a sacred way. Before you know it you won’t just be “Talking Pictures”, you’ll be “Talking Everything”, and seeing God at work in ways you never imagined. And soon God will be saying to you, “Well done good and faithful evangelist/translator”!

This is the fun part. Are you ready for it? Take your friend to a movie. Any movie will do. Or let them pick the movie, that way they can’t accuse you of setting something up. Pray for guidance. Erase that line of sacred and secular and see how God’s at work. Like most things in life, seeing God at work will become easier and easier with practice. The great thing about taking a friend to a movie as evangelism is that if they don’t get it, there is going to be a whole new batch of movies that come out next week, maybe one of those will connect with them. Keep focusing on spiritual things and you will find them where you least expected.

In the rest of this book I am going to break down different ways you should be able to see God at work in any movie. The first way is to look for relatable characters. What characters can you see in yourself or maybe in others you know? The relatable characters could act as a mirror to you or your friend’s own thought and feelings. The second way is to look for relatable situations. What situations have you experienced, and how did you overcome or perhaps struggle those situations? Did you react the same way as the character? Why or why not? The final and perhaps, most important way to see God as work is to look for redemptive themes. We all need

to be “saved” from something. Jesus saves. There is perhaps no better way to point to Jesus as redeemer than through redemptive themes that show forgiveness, freedom and love.

Like an innocent Andy Dufresne crawling through a tunnel of disgusting human waste to escape from prison to freedom in *The Shawshank Redemption*, we all have to go through difficulties, but we all desire the sweet smell of freedom that Jesus bring! Jesus came that we might have life and as He says in John 10:10, He wants us to have life to the FULL! It’s time... Lights, Camera, Action!!!

## QUESTIONS & SUGGESTIONS

- What would be a great movie that is out in theaters right now, or new to DVD that would be a good one to take them too, that they would want to see, that could open up a spiritual discussion?
- Would it be more beneficial to take your friend to a Christian themed movie or any movie and find Christian themes in them? Why?
- Would your friend be more willing to have deep talk after watching a DVD in the privacy of someone’s home or a movie in a theater? Why?
- How does “Talking Pictures” relate to St. Paul’s famous sermon at the Temple to the Unknown God in Acts 17:16-34? How does Paul “twist” the popular culture items of his day into a spiritual discussion?

## CHAPTER 6

### TAKE 1

## RELATABLE CHARACTERS

In “Take” One, Two and Three, we’re going to be talking about being able to “relate” to different parts of the movie. How would you define “relate”? Think of it as finding connections or similarities between two different things. Kind of like being related to your family. You are not the exact same as your fellow family members, but there are definite similarities. Whether you like it or not, you do have things in common with those you are related to. Find those connections and you’ll be “Talking Pictures” like a professional evangelist/translator before you know it.

## WE’RE ALL CHARACTERS

Think back to some of the very first movies you ever saw. You believed you could “enter” the movie. You were Cinderella. You were Luke Skywalker or you were Princess Leah. You were Harry Potter. Do we ever really stop doing that? We always manage to find ourselves in the stories, adventures and miss-adventures of our favorite characters.

Finding a character or two we can relate to is part of the movie going experience. We enjoy the movie more because we know that could be us, or maybe we wish that would be us, or we thank God that the guy in the movie isn’t us, but either way, we can see ourselves in the skin of those movie characters.

Once we see ourselves in the movie, we can compare our own action or inaction to that of the character. Would we have chosen that path? Would we have the guts to stand up to the unfair, brutal coach? How would we handle the death of our best friend? Since God gave us free

will we have the free will to make all kinds of bad choices; however, we also have the free will to make good, God pleasing choices. That can be a powerful witness to our friends, we have chosen to do right, not because we're good people, we're as sinful if not more sinful than the next guy, but because Jesus is working in us and through us!

## BIBLE CHARACTERS ARE PEOPLE TOO

King Solomon, known as being the wisest person in history, reminds us in the book of Ecclesiastes that there is nothing new under the sun. Satan's good at what he does, but he's only got so many tricks in his bag of tricks. His power is limited, especially compared to the unlimited power of God, remember that St. John reminds us in 1 John 4:4, that "Greater is He that is in us, than he that is in the world." Temptations may change their general appearance, but they are the same basic temptation. King David being tempted by a nude bathing Bathsheba isn't any different than you being tempted by Internet pornography. Noah being tempted with alcohol isn't any different than you being tempted with drugs. Judas being tempted by greed isn't any different than you being tempted to illegally download music or movies on the Internet. While technologies change and human beings will always be dreaming up new ways to get in trouble, there is not really a new temptation under the sun.

Maybe you see a Biblical character in the skin of your favorite movie characters. That could be an open door to a spiritual talk. Your friend might not even know who Job, Moses, Abraham, Noah, Ruth, Peter, Judas, David, and the rest of the Biblical character gang are! So many of the "Sunday school" stories that you may have grown up with, may be completely

unknown and perhaps interesting and intriguing stories to your friends who don't yet know Jesus.

Don't worry about not having all the answers or perfectly knowing all of the stories. That might even be a great "excuse" to open the Bible together to research the story. The key "answer" is summed up well by St. Peter in 1 Peter 3:15, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." Jesus is the answer for our hope. The rest of the details we might have to research and look up, and that is one hundred percent perfectly fine. We've never claimed to be Biblical scholars, we just claim to love Jesus and want to know Him better and share Him with the world.

A word of warning in the idea of finding relatable Biblical characters: it's too easy to compare a movie character to Jesus. Jesus was the only perfect person ever. Jesus is true God and true man. Jesus just doesn't compare. Any comparison to Jesus falls indescribably short, because Jesus is so much more! In literature there is a concept of the "Christ figure", the character that made a sacrifice. While it may work in literature, it's not quite so simple in your calling as an evangelist/translator.

Scripture says in Hebrews 13:8 that, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." All I have to do is show you my high school year book to prove that no human being can claim that! Jesus is one of a kind. Several movies over the years have tried to show God in human form, such as the *Oh God* movies of the 70's and 80's starring an ancient looking George Burns as God, or Kevin Smith's Allanis Morsette as God in *Dogma*, or Morgan Freeman who plays God in *Bruce Almighty* and *Evan Almighty*. None of them even really show a glimmer of the power, might and authority of our God, the one true God! People may do Christ-like things,



but no human being is worthy of a comparison to Jesus. Come to think of it, that in and of itself could be a great evangelism tool!

## I SAW YOU IN THE MOVIE!

Almost everyone at one point in their life dreams of being a big-time mega movie star. While very, very few of our silver screen dreams ever come true, we can start some fun and interesting conversations when we tell our friends we saw a character that reminded us of them. Let the fun begin as they agree or let even more fun begin when they disagree with your character analysis.

My friends have been telling me for years that I remind them of Brad Pitt, and while I'll be the first to admit that there are many obvious physical similarities, I hope you are smarter than my friends, because seeing your friends and family in the movie is not about outward looks but personality, attitude, charisma, you know, the stuff on the inside. The stuff on the inside is the most important. Your mom always told you not to judge a book by its cover. The stuff on the inside is important, and the stuff on the inside can only be cleaned by the blood of Jesus!

In finding relatable characters, it's possibly most effective to show our power and limitations. We all have free will. We all have the ability to choose between right and wrong. But it's only by God's power that our limitations are eliminated. St. Paul reminds us in Philippians 4:13 that, "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength." It's not about me or you or anyone for that matter. It's about Jesus working in us and through us.

## QUESTIONS & SUGGESTIONS

- Who are the movie characters that you have always related to? Why?
- Do you relate more to the hero? Villain? Sidekick? The lovable loser? The outcast?  
Who?
- Can you think of a movie character or two who the friends that you listed previously can relate to?
- Can you think of a movie character that reminds you of Moses? Paul? Ruth? Samson? Esther? David? Any others?
- For extra fun, randomly grab a random DVD from your collection and go through the main characters and try to find someone, a Biblical character perhaps, who can relate to each one of them.
- In 1 Corinthians 15:33-34, St. Paul talks about good character? What does he say corrupts good character? What then is the opposite, what would build up good character? Through “Talking Pictures” how can we help people who are “ignorant to God”?

## CHAPTER 7

### TAKE 2

#### RELATABLE SITUATIONS

Do you know what the “sit” is in the phrase “sit com”? The “sit” is short for situation; a “sit com” is a situation comedy. The idea behind every sit com is to put a person or group of people in a specific situation. Whether it’s a bar, a coffee shop, a New York apartment or a jail. The “situation” is meant to be the environment in which all kinds of hilarity and action ensue.

In the same way, movies are all set in specific situations for specific purposes. Realizing the situation and connecting with it can open all kinds of evangelist/translator moments.

## BEEN THERE AND DONE THAT

Okay, so maybe the state of the entire world has never been in your hands, but certainly the state of your life has been in your hands. Movies are full of relatable situations. And it's fun and interesting to wonder and ponder if we would handle the situation in the same way. Would we jump on that grenade to save our friends? Would we have the guts to ask out the most popular girl in school?

The "What Would Jesus Do?" phenomenon that swept across Christendom a while ago really came out of the root question, "What would/should I do?" Most movies allow the viewer to ask that question over and over again throughout the course of a good movie. A movie's "power" might very well lie in the number of opportunities we have to ask that question during a viewing.

Jesus can relate to all of our situations. In Hebrews we are told that Jesus was tempted in every way that we are, yet without sin. No matter what situation you are in, Jesus can relate. No matter how lost your friend feels, Jesus can relate. What a great tool we have in our evangelism bag, whatever situation we see and relate to on the silver screen, Jesus can relate. Jesus has been there done that and has the scars to prove it! While it's great to ask "What would I do?", we need to focus on and rejoice in what Jesus has already done. Our faith is not about what we did or what we do, it's about what Jesus did for us on the cross.

## DISASTERS OF BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS

Once again, our friends who don't know Jesus may not know the unique and relatable situations that our favorite Biblical characters were placed in. To keep the conversation going, maybe a Biblical character can relate to that movie moment or situation.

Who was more shocked: Luke Skywalker when he found out that Darth Vader was his father, or St. Paul when he found out that he was persecuting God's people? How does Spiderman wrestling with Venom compare with Jacob wrestling with God? The situational comparisons are everywhere in scripture! Human choices led to quite a bit of unnecessary action and human suffering in scripture and in the modern day lives of those around us.

What are some ways we can take the situation in the movie and bring it back to the Bible? The Bible is the only way we know the heart of God. In the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*, the world has gone into another ice age and Jake Gyllenhaal and his father are separated, but his dad promised to come get him, no matter what happened. When things are really getting tough and Jake's friends' doubt that his father is coming, Jake just smiles and tells them, "You don't know my father!" The best way for your friends to get to know your heavenly Father is to get them into the Word of God. A relatable situation to a Biblical character can be a great way to do just that.

By the way, to finish the story, Jake's dad did show up shortly after all of his friends doubted, and just when they least expected it and most needed it. You're heavenly Father will do the exact same thing; show up when you least expect it and most need it. He is omnipresent after all, so He's there even when you don't see Him or feel Him. So keep your eyes and ears open. God is excited to reveal Himself to you and your friends who do not yet believe in Him!

## TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

There are few things more heartbreaking in youth ministry than to watch a student having to endure the loss of a parent. A few months after one young man involved in my ministry lost his mother to cancer, his friends took him to see the movie *Stepmom*. At the time, it really surprised me that his friends would take him to this movie. Read the following synopsis of this movie from movies.com... “Jackie (Susan Sarandon) and Luke (Ed Harris) are divorcing after years of marriage and two children, Anna and Ben. Their new stepmother, Isabel (Julia Roberts), wants to be involved in the children's life, but is unwilling to sacrifice anything for her work. Jackie considers this to be selfish and rude, sparking a conflict between the two women. When cancer enters the picture, everyone is forced to grow in order to settle their differences. A tearjerker in the truest sense of the word.”

Would you take your friend who just lost his mother to cancer to this movie? It was a little too soon for him, he cried through most of the movie and his friends felt so guilty for taking him to see it, but I think his friends were onto something beautiful and simple, movies can help our friends open up about things they might not normally be willing to or think they're ready to open up about. When they can relate to the situations they see on screen, they just might be open to the help Jesus desires to be in all of our situations. So many of life's circumstances and situations are out of our control and that can drive us crazy if we're not careful.

Human beings for the most part like to be in control. We're mostly control freaks, and unfortunately life cannot always be controlled. But nothing, nothing is out of Jesus control. Peace and understanding come when we put our trust in Him. We have to trust that tragedy is

God's opportunity. Bad things happen to good people, and people will give you all kinds of answers as to why; but, let's be honest, no one really knows why. I think that pretending to have an answer does more harm than good. There is power in simply stating, "I don't know, but Jesus is still in control". I don't have all the answers, but I have the truth, and the truth will set people free!

All things, all situations happen for a reason, and as St. Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome reminds us in Romans 8:28, "All things work out for good for those who love and trust in Him." It's the "love" and the "trust" that are the difficult parts, love and trust take a considerable amount of time and energy, but that's why we're "Talking Pictures" in the first place to, by God's grace, help our friends get to the point where they can love and trust Jesus.

Sometimes with having an outside perception, we can see our friend's current situation better than they can. That's why when someone has a severe addiction, interventions are recommended. The intervention's power lies in the individual's friends and families coming together and telling them they have a problem, speaking the truth in love is hard to do, but especially when you really care for someone, it has to be done. Whether your friend's situation is life threatening or eternal life threatening, movies can be doorways to great conversations.

## QUESTIONS & SUGGESTIONS

- What are a few situations that you always find yourself stuck in? How do you get out of them? Why do you keep getting stuck in them?
- Which movies contain situations that you can really relate to?

- Can you think of a movie that relates to the situation of the Israelites being slaves in Egypt? What about the situation of Job losing his entire family and everything he owned?
- Do your friends have any reoccurring situations that remind you of a movie? What and why?
- What does St. Paul say about difficult situations in Philippians 4:12-14? Why does he say “It was good of you to share in my troubles.”? What is so good about troubles? What can God teach us in our struggles?

## CHAPTER 8

### TAKE 3

#### REDEMPTIVE THEMES

FREEDOM!!! Throughout this book, I have tried very hard to not reveal any biases I have toward certain movies, but all of that is about to change. *Braveheart* is one of my all time favorite movies. I have been tempted to quote it multiple times in this book, but I wanted to save it for this chapter on “Redemptive Themes”. It fits so perfectly here. Few movie scenes hit the bottom of my soul like the yelling of “freedom” by William Wallace with his very last breath in *Braveheart*. He lived out the promise he made to his men when he first started the revolution, “They may take our lives, but they’ll never take our freedom!” While very few of us, dare I say none of us, have gone through a literal public disembowelment, we all long for freedom from whatever entraps us. But interestingly enough, freedom comes with sacrifice. Freedom isn’t free it cost Jesus His life. Freedom is absolutely priceless; God gave everything for your freedom.

The parable of the lost sheep in Luke chapter fifteen reminds us that Jesus loves each one of us as much as He loves all of us. Does that make sense? What that means is if you were the only person to ever sin, Jesus would still die, just for you. Freedom is priceless.

Redemption, freedom, forgiveness, these are some of the most common themes in movies, because they are some of the most common themes in life. Whether people believe in Jesus or not we all have a longing to be redeemed, free and forgiven. My hope and prayer is that seeing those themes played out on the silver screen will increase your passion to see them in your life and in the lives of your friends and loved ones. FREEDOM!!!

### I'VE BEEN REDEEMED

Have you seen your redemption story on the big screen? What movies contain themes of redemption and freedom that you can relate to? Do you know what your redemption story is? How has Jesus changed your life?

These are important questions. To understand redemption we need to first understand how God's law and Gospel works. And to do so we can use the simple little idea of S.O.S God's law shows our sin (S.O.S. get it?). The law reminds us that we are in complete and total need for a savior. The Bible reminds us in Romans 6:23 that, "The wages of sin is death." We cannot save ourselves, we deserve to die, we need Jesus. That leads to the Gospel. The Gospel shows our Savior. Jesus is redemption. He died so we do not have to. He conquered death by His resurrection so we can live forever in our heavenly home with Him.



Once we recognize that we are sinners and come unto knowledge of the gospel, then comes the response, we want to tell the whole world of Jesus love. Not to earn God's love, but out of thanks for all He's done for us. Redemption is contagious, because we gotta tell everyone.

Do you know what the best kind of advertisement is for a movie? TV commercial? Internet pop-up? Newspaper ad? Nope, the best advertisement is what they call "word of mouth." It's the idea of someone enjoying a movie so much they tell all of their friends to go see it. They loved the experience and want everyone to experience it. Small movies like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* or *There's Something about Mary* become mega hits due to word of mouth advertising. Believe it or not, "word of mouth" advertising is evangelism; actually, it fits perfectly into our idea of "evangelist/translator". You've been redeemed and you can't help but tell the world about what you've experienced in a way they will understand. Be careful, redemption is contagious.

Have you ever noticed that after Jesus healed someone He sometimes tells them not to tell anyone? Check out the end of the story on this miracle in Mark 7:35-37, "At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement." Did you catch the ancient Jerusalem "word of mouth" advertising going down in that story? When you've been healed by Jesus, you can't help but tell the world!

THE B-I-B-L-E, YES THAT'S THE BOOK FOR ME

Bible characters, except for Jesus of course, are far from perfect. They all need redemption of some sort. Do you have a favorite Bible character? As a kid, mine was always King David, I just loved the David and Goliath story. As I've gotten older I realized that David's life was so much more than the fight with Goliath. David was a big time sinner. All Bible characters are. Some of them, like Moses, only receive final redemption in death, but for them, and for all of us who believe, death is not the finish line but the transition into life eternal. I like it when tombstones list the "birth" date, as "Entered life on..." and then the "death" day as "Entered eternal life on...", because death is far from the end, it's just another beginning.

Whether we believe in Jesus or not, we are all going to enter an eternal life, forever and ever. The question is where are we going to spend all of eternity? Will we be in heaven with our Lord and Savior Jesus and all of the saints? Or will we be in hell where as Jesus Himself says, in Matthew 8:12, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 24:51, and 25:30, "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"? I'm not sure exactly what "gnashing" of teeth is, but I'm positively sure that I don't want to experience it! I'm pretty sure that five out of five dentist would recommend not gnashing your teeth. Heaven is the home to all of those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and that salvation is found in Him alone.

What a calling we have to share the love of Jesus so that none of our friends and family will spend their eternities in hell!!! Hell isn't pretty to talk about, some Christians have said that there is no hell, but make no mistake, it is very real. But as Believers in Jesus we know heaven is our home, and as *The Wizard of Oz* reminds us, "There's no place like home!" Let's do what we can to make sure all of our loved ones will be coming home with us. Jesus is in heaven right now preparing a place for us, He would love to be preparing a place for your friends and family too!

The American Film Institute recently made a list of the top one hundred movie quotes of all time. They declared that, “Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn.” from the movie *Gone with the Wind* was the best movie quote of all time. Ironical. Because that quote is the exact opposite of what “Talking Pictures” is all about. We care. We don’t want anyone to be “damned”. We don’t want anyone to be in Hell. If you care about people, if you care about your friends you can’t help but to tell them about Jesus and His love.

Redemption is found throughout the Bible. Whether clinging to a redemptive promise or a redemptive person, Jesus, the Bible’s full of people in need of a Savior. Maybe the movie you’re watching has a redemptive story that relates to a Bible story. Maybe there is a revenge theme in the movie; do you recall any revenge themes in the Bible? Jacob and Esau? Sampson? What does it take to twist a revenge story into a forgiveness discussion? Was Spiderman driven to find his uncle Ben’s murderer by revenge or forgiveness? No one has experienced betrayal like Jesus did from Judas. Jason Bourne was betrayed and abandoned by his country in the *Bourne* movies. After being betrayed Jesus then endured the denial of Peter who was one of His closest friends. Hasn’t Jack Sparrow done that a few times to save his own behind in *The Pirates of the Caribbean* movies? The Bible is literally cover to cover with the exact same themes that are in the biggest of Hollywood blockbusters.

## YOU’VE BEEN REDEEMED

With your friends and family who don’t know Jesus, have they really ever experienced true forgiveness? Will they be able to relate to a redemptive theme if they have not been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb? To really get down to it, if they don’t know the love of

Christ have they ever experienced true, genuine love? These are important and difficult questions.

While I believe we all know we need redemption, not everyone knows where to go to get it. The Psalms remind us that the law of God is written on our hearts. We know we need help, but do we know where to go? Where does our help come from? Where can we go for shelter from the storms of life? When looking for answers to some of these big life questions, I turn to the book of Psalms. The Psalms were written by a wide variety of people struggling through the same things you and I struggle with. The Psalmist of Psalm ninety-one has some very comforting words in verses one and two, “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’” A mighty fortress is our God. He is our shelter. He is our sanctuary. In *The Sixth Sense*, when Haley Joel Osment was “seeing dead people”, where did he go to escape? He went to the sanctuary. He felt safe in God’s house, in His sanctuary.

Survivalists have “the rule of threes”. You need three things to survive: shelter, water and food. Interestingly enough, God is our shelter as the Psalmist just told us. Jesus called himself “The Bread of life.” in John 6:35. Jesus all promises us a “water” in John 4:14 that, “will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” We need Jesus to survive.

“The rule of threes” goes on to say that the average person can survive three weeks without food, three days without water, but in the harshest conditions, extreme heat or cold, we can only survive three hours without shelter. We need our God to be our shelter, food and water, that’s not only survival but a true “redemption” from the elements of the world.

Redemption needs to be experienced. The redemptive experience is the “grand finale”, the “closing act” of talking pictures. In our conversations with our friends who don’t know Jesus, can we bring out redemptive themes in movies that they can understand and relate to?

## QUESTIONS & SUGGESTIONS

- How do you define redemption? Forgiveness? Freedom? Love? Would a Follower of Jesus and someone who doesn’t follow Him have the same definitions? Why or why not? What’s the difference?
- What movies have themes that strongly speak of redemption to you? Forgiveness? Unconditional love? Freedom?
- How has the redemption story played throughout scripture? The exodus? The exile? The Roman captivity? The life, death and resurrection of Jesus? What are the similarities and differences in these redemption stories? Do any movies come to mind as you think through them?
- Read Ephesians 1:3-10. What themes does St. Paul bring up? How does he present redemption? How does he say God will bring everything together? What does St. Paul say is God’s “pleasure and will”?

## CHAPTER 9

### KEEP IT ROLLING!

In the final chapter (so far) of the *Die Hard* saga, *Live Free or Die Hard*, Bruce Willis' most famous character, John McClain, reveals a stunning revelation. Even though he has saved the world three times before, he doesn't want to be a hero. He would much rather let someone else be the hero. But, since no one else is rising up, He's gotta do it! He doesn't have a choice. He's compelled to do what he's called to do. Is God raising you up? Is God calling you to be a hero... an evangelist/translator?

Maybe you never thought of yourself as an evangelist/translator before and maybe you took spiritual gifts test and you don't have the gift of evangelism, and you've probably never translated anything before. But you *can* take a friend to the movies. Don't focus on what you can't do, focus on what you can do, and trust that Jesus will do it through you. Philippians 4:13 sums it all up so well, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Do you know what "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength" means? Does it mean that you could become the king of England? Does it mean you could become a mermaid? Does it mean you could live without eating? NO! What it means is that you can do everything that He's called you to do! God has given you all you need to do everything He's called you to do. God never gives you more than you can handle. He pushes us and stretches us, but He has given us everything we need to do all the things He's called us to do.

So here are the two questions to "Keep It Rolling":

- What are you called to do?
- How do you know that is what you are called to do?

**KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BALL**

I have been playing a great deal of baseball in the backyard of late with my little girls. After every pitch I make, I find myself saying, “Keep your eye on the ball.” It’s an involuntary reflex. I can’t help it, it just comes out. I’ve been tempted to say “There’s no crying in baseball!” like Tom Hanks character in *A League of Their Own*, but so far I have been able to restrain myself.

My dad told me to keep my eye on the ball when we spent time playing ball in the backyard and I’m sure his dad said it to him and so on. To hit the ball, you can’t lose focus, you’ve gotta keep your eyes on it. To stay focused means eliminating distractions, tuning out unimportant things and concentrating completely on the task at hand.

In the movie *For Love of the Game*, Kevin Costner plays another baseball player, but this time he is in the twilight of his hall-of-fame career, looking for one more moment of glory. The movie is based around him throwing a perfect game while experiencing life flashbacks. The character’s strength is his focus. All he does is says, “Turn on the mechanism” and he no longer hears the crowds or any of the stadium noise, he’s just playing catch. That’s focus, simplifying a complicated task into it’s basic form. He’s not throwing a perfect game in the World Series, he’s just playing catch. We’re just talking to Jesus. We’re just working for Jesus. We’re just focused on Jesus, not allowing the distractions of the world to matter.

The author of the book of Hebrews says it like this in Hebrews 12:2, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.” We need to keep our eyes on Jesus. We are neither author nor perfecter of faith, Jesus is. “Talking Pictures” is about bringing people to Jesus and letting Him do the work. Jesus needs to be our focus. When in doubt of an answer, answer Jesus. It’s all about Jesus. St. Paul, the greatest evangelist of all time says it like this,

“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

It’s all about Jesus. Jesus’ life. Jesus’ death. Jesus’ resurrection. It’s all about Jesus.

People who encounter Jesus are changed. It’s funny how things that were once so important lose their importance once Jesus comes into our lives. Priorities get changed upside-down. St. Paul says that we become “new creations” when we get connected to Jesus. Again, in talking with folks who have overcome addictions over the years, they all have a point in their recovery where they have to lose a bunch of friends. When you meet Jesus you lose things you needed to lose all along. And by His power you never really miss those things!

For example, in John chapter four, Jesus has an encounter with a Samaritan woman. He changes her life and three things happen as a result of the encounter that I think are common in encounters with Jesus. The three verses have always stood out to me in this story are verses 28, 29, and 30, “Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’ They came out of the town and made their way toward him.”

First, she left behind her water jar. Her water jar was her whole purpose in being at the well in the first place, but once she encountered Jesus, she totally forgot about it. Our purposes and our priorities change when we encounter Jesus. Do you think she missed her watering jar? I don’t think she ever gave it another thought.

Second, after encountering Jesus, she told everyone in town to come and see what’s going on. She did not fully understand what had happened. She did not have all the answers. She was not all of a sudden a perfect human being. But she knew that something had just happened that would change her life forever. And in her excitement she went and told everyone who would listen.



Finally, others made their way to Jesus because of her testimony. The woman did not have the people rally around her. She directed them to Jesus. Her focus was on Jesus. People instantly saw the change in her and wanted to see this Jesus with their own eyes. When people see others experience Jesus, they gotta check it out.

Jesus is best. We merely point the way; we aren't the way. Jesus is the only way, as well as the truth and the life. Keep your eyes focused on Jesus.

So here are two questions to help you "Keep Your Eye on the Ball":

- What are some things you need to leave behind to focus on Jesus?
- What will enable you to focus better on Jesus?

### KEEP PRAYING

It is of utmost importance that we never forget the power of prayer. We can't save anyone, prayer can. We can't change anyone, prayer can. We can't open the human heart, prayer can. Prayer is all we have to cling to. Prayer is the path that connects to the very heart of who God is.

The funny thing about prayer is that Jesus says our heavenly Father knows what we need before we even ask. And He still wants us to come to Him in prayer. That's because it's relationship building. In any relationship communication is a key factor that determines the success or failure of a relationship. God desires a relationship with us and even though He knows our hearts desires He still longs to connect with us in prayer.

It's time for a memory verse. This verse can change you life. This verse is also one of the very shortest verses in all of scripture. This verse is so short, so sweet, so important and so vital

to who we are as Christians that I guarantee you can memorize it. Ready? Look up 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Highlight it. Underline it. Circle it. Do what you do to it to make sure you never forget it. For those of you who do not have your Bible handy, here it is, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “Pray continually.” That’s it. I told you it was short and sweet. That sums up a life of faith as well as anything. We need to be in constant communication with God. Lifting things up, praising Him, seeking Him, asking, connecting, all of it, that’s prayer.

Nehemiah, the guy after whom the Old Testament book “Nehemiah” is named, (They were so clever in how they named book in ancient times.) was a man who greatly valued prayer. Nehemiah was the man God chose to rebuild the walls in Jerusalem following the exile. While several of Nehemiah’s prayers are recorded in the book, there is one little line that has always shown me how we’re called to pray. Nehemiah 4:9 says, “We prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.” When things were tough and outsiders we’re threatening their very existence, the fate of the world was in the palm of their hands, what did they do. They “prayed” and they “posted”.

They prayed that God would protect them. They prayed that God would bless them. They prayed that God would do His God stuff. But they didn’t just stop at prayer. They also “posted”. They prayed for protection and still used the brains that God had given them and posted a guard for protection. They prayed and they posted. They expected God to work and they worked.

Have you ever prayed to do well on a test but never studied? Have you ever prayed for a friend but then forgot to be friendly? Prayer is important, but God does not want us to pray for something and then grab the remote, sit and watch TV and wait for Him to work. God wants us to use the brain and the gifts he blessed us with. The order is important, pray and post. In our praying God will give us the strength to be constantly posting.

Our friends who do not yet know Jesus will only come into knowledge of Him through praying and posting. Pray God opens their heart. Pray God changes their lives. Pray God saves them. And if you're so bold, if you really want to put yourself out there, pray God uses you to do it as His posted evangelist/translator! But be careful what you pray for, God just might answer it. Post yourself in their lives in ways you can make a difference. Be available for them. Spend quality time with them.

Pray and post. St. Ignatius of Loyola says it like this, "Pray as if everything depends on God and work as if everything depends on you." Pray and post.

As you look at "Talking Pictures", these might be the two most important questions to ask yourself:

- How can you "pray" to help your friend?
- How can you "post" to help your friend?

CUT! THAT'S A WRAP!

As they say in tinsel town, that's all folks. Are you ready to be an evangelist/translator? Are you ready for the adventure that is greater than any action/adventure movie? Are you ready to share a love that is far above that in any romantic comedy? The situation is more serious than the hardest hitting suspenseful drama.

You may not know all the mysteries of God, but He's not always looking for ability, He's looking for availability. Are you available to see God at work? It's going to be fun. Grab a friend, grab some popcorn, grab a movie and watch God work! And remember what Maximus says in *Gladiator*, "What we do in life echoes in eternity." IT'S SHOWTIME! Enjoy the show;

it's going to be a wild ride. Jesus never promised that your life would be easy or predictable, but he did promise to be with you always, even to the very end... THE END.

How are you "Talking Pictures"? Send me an e-mail I'd love to hear how God is using you as an evangelist/translator!!! Even though I've never met you and most likely never will, I'm praying for you... tons of people are praying for you. Remember, you have all you need to do all Jesus is calling you to do. Jesus is with you, till the very end of the age!