

Thumbs Up!

Eight Biblical Principles for Making Media Choices By Jim Eichenberger

AMINISTER I KNOW works for a denomination that forbids movie-viewing. Knowing that, I was surprised when he told me about a sermon series he preached several years ago. Dressed as Indiana Jones, he led his congregation in searching for the lost Ark of the Covenant. His congregation did not miss the reference! Though it was forbidden, most of them had seen the film to which he referred.

This schizophrenia concerning movie viewing is common in Christian circles. Many will argue that a Christian should avoid popular cinema, but at the same time will watch movies indiscriminately.

However, assuming that many Christians will give a “thumbs up” to movie viewing, what biblical principles should be considered in choosing a film to view?

Truth is not always lovely.

During the past three decades, once-forbidden images have been allowed to appear on the movie screen. That freedom has often turned to license, allowing the display of gore and sexuality for the sole purpose of shocking and titillating an audience. Christians do well to remember that Paul commanded, “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Philippians 4:8).

We need to heed the entire verse. Some filmmakers have used this freedom to produce movies that inform us about the horrific consequences of war and tyranny in a way that was impossible without such liberty. *Saving Private Ryan* and *Schindler’s List*, for example, are not “lovely” movies, but they show the consequences of sin truthfully.

Holiness is preparation for battle, not retreat.

Being holy means being separate. But separation is not the goal; preparation is. An athlete separates himself from a normal routine to train for an upcoming competition and then plunges into the fray.

Peter tells us we are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.” Unlike the Jews who came to see holiness as isolation from the nations, Christians are called to holiness to “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). Holy people are not called to hide from the ideas of this world, but to “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and . . . take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Understanding is crucial to evangelism.

More than two decades ago I went to the movie

theater to see *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* with a non-Christian friend. The humanistic trust in the goodness of man and achievement of science of the TV series was obviously absent. In its place was a longing for transcendent, spiritual truth. Granted, the God of the Bible was not presented. But that didn’t stop me! The film gave my friend and me opportunity to have a deep conversation on the spiritual void felt by Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, and very real people like us. Later that week, Randy accepted Jesus as his Savior.

My strategy was not original. Speaking to unbelievers in Athens, Paul quoted the popular culture of his audience. These poems expressed the spiritual longing of the Athenians for a God in whom “we live and move and have our being” because “we are his offspring” (Acts 17:28). It may seem shocking that these were actually pagan poems extolling Zeus. But the knowledge of the spiritual hunger of his culture gained by understanding the secular media of his day allowed Paul to present the message of Christ clearly and successfully.

Maturity determines content.

At one point in my life I could have eaten my weight in cotton candy, while the thought of a spinach salad sickened me. How maturity has changed my taste in food!

Scripture teaches us that spiritual maturity also changes our ability to digest ideas. Paul chastized immature Christians who could not handle meaty theological and philosophical concepts (1 Corinthians 3:2).

The writer of Hebrews desired that believers “go on to maturity,” processing complex ideas, after having “trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:14–6:1).

Some well-meaning Christians have adopted the media rule, “If it’s not suitable for my seven-year-old, it’s not suitable for me.” Though sincere, such a standard is not always applicable. Some movies shouldn’t be viewed by anyone. And the remaining movies are not for everyone. Biblically literate believers trained to distinguish good from evil should put that training to the test by confronting difficult questions posed by our world. Cinema can provide such a training ground.

Being exposed is not the same as being infected.

Likening human beings to computers, the data-entry cliché, “Garbage In—Garbage Out” (GIGO), is used frequently when discussing Christians and movies. The implication is that exposure to false thinking will always lead to evil action.

The field of medicine gives us a better example. Limited exposure to an infection actually allows the body to build immunity! Consider Daniel, who as a

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teenager was systematically indoctrinated in the “language and the literature of the Babylonians” (Daniel 1:4). If the GIGO doctrine were true, Daniel would be thoroughly pagan! But Daniel had obviously been given a clear understanding of the true God since his youth. Jehovah was able to use the controlled exposure to “all kinds of literature and learning” to create a visionary man of God (v. 17).

Christian children should not be given carte blanche at the video store. But Christian parents who watch and discuss challenging films with suitably mature children can immunize them against alluring but deadly temptations the world offers.

Though it contains sexuality that pushes the limits of its PG-13 rating, *Crazy/Beautiful* has a powerful message for Christian teens and their parents. A sheltered, family-centered, achievement-oriented teenaged boy is attracted to the impulsive sensuality of a female classmate. The movie realistically depicts the appeal of sin and its destructive fruit. It can be a potent serum in the hands of a Christian parent.

Superficial rating systems fall short.

Some moral or religious laws are consistent with Scripture while others are not. The guiding principles for the Christian must always be the wisdom that comes from Heaven rather than what is called wisdom in this world (James 3:13-18). Nevertheless, Christians are tempted to rely heavily upon the superficial rating systems used by movies and television.

Should a Christian watch an R-rated movie? Perhaps the answer is, “It depends.” Film ratings are based on little more than tallying the number of coarse words or graphic action in a movie. They do not evaluate the message.

Changing Lanes is rated R for a few brief but intense outbursts of strong language. An observant Christian viewer will do more than count four-letter words, but rather evaluate the content of the film. He or she will find a thoughtful work about the need to “change lanes” from law-keeping to accepting grace found in Christ Jesus, whose name and image is invoked regularly throughout the movie.

Uncommon wisdom comes from unlikely sources.

A Samaritan woman with a shady reputation recognized Jesus as the Messiah and spread that word to others (John 4:28-30). Jesus praised the faith of a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:28) and of a Roman centurion as greater than that found among the Jews of his day (Matthew 8:10). Just as God “sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45), he also gives a measure of spiritual insight to those who have yet to

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M. Night Shyamalan was born in India and was reared to follow the Eastern religion of his ancestors. Nevertheless, his parents sent him to Catholic schools for the discipline found there. With this mixed religious upbringing, Shyamalan has created movies that explore deep religious themes in unique ways. *The Sixth Sense* pointed out that modern psychology fails because it refuses to recognize the spiritual component of human beings. His most recent work, *Signs*, shows us a minister who rejected his faith, only to embrace it again, learning anew that God can work all things together for the good of those who love him.

Parables sometimes trump preaching for reaching the seeker.

Jesus held “seeker services.” When talking to crowds curious about his message, Jesus “did not say anything to them without using a parable.” He also held “believer services,” explaining his parables “when he was alone with his own disciples” (Mark 4:34).

Notice the strategy here. Reveal spiritual truth in stories to seekers. When understanding grows, pull them aside and teach them more conventionally. Jesus started with 12 disciples and later sent out 72 disciples (Luke 10:1). Surely those additional 60 were once seekers in the crowd, having their spiritual interest piqued with parables.

Film has given parables of Christian truth an audience of eager seekers. Standard Publishing’s new *God Rocks!*® videos present truth in a way that both entertains and enlightens. Big Idea’s® *VeggieTales* have made the jump to the big screen with *Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie*. J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy has the early markings of becoming a film classic. Christians can use film to introduce non-Christian friends to biblical truth, with the hopes of eventually bringing them out of the crowd and into the inner circle of disciples.

This list is by no means comprehensive. Every Christian needs to make his or her media choices in light of God’s Word. Before we give a “thumbs up” to a film, let us be convinced our choices have God’s approval. ■

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Internet Resources for Christian Movie Viewers

Cinema in Focus—a social and spiritual commentary by Hal Conklin and Denny Wayman

<http://www.cinemainfocus.com/>

Cinema in Focus gives thoughtful review and analysis of current films from a biblical perspective. The site also allows the user to view movie clips and trailers and posts an occasional after-viewing discussion guide.

Christian Spotlight on the Movies from ChristianAnswers.Net

<http://www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/>

Spotlight contains movie reviews, interviews with celebrities, and a method for praying daily and specifically for media leaders.

Preview Online from Gospelcom.Net

<http://www.gospelcom.net/preview/>

This reasonably priced pay service rates and reviews movies for both entertainment value and acceptability. Subscribers have access to reviews going back nearly 10 years, allowing families to prepare for a trip to the video store. A few sample reviews of current films are available to non-subscribers.

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