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## DISCOVERING FAITH IN THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

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DISCOVERING FAITH IN THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

by

Leanna John

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in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for University Honors Scholars

Southeastern University

2019

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2019

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Jesus Christ and my family and friends.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Joseph Davis and Dr. Gordon Miller for helping me complete my thesis and encouraging me throughout the whole process. I would also like to thank my friends and family for their encouragement.

## Abstract

This thesis explores how secular entertainment can contain Christian themes and messages. Hollywood presents ideas that either agree with or contradict Christianity in the movies and shows that are produced. People need to be careful about what type of entertainment they decide to watch because they can become desensitized to graphic content. This thesis includes a selection of movies from multiple genres and the show *Supernatural*, and it describes the messages that are conveyed in them. Theology that comes from the Bible along with different Christian theologians, authors, and philosophers are provided to help people understand the truth of Jesus Christ versus the perceptions of God that Hollywood and popular culture often portray. When people are open to the Lord, He can reveal Himself and help them discern the truth. The Lord is supposed to be at the center of everything in people's lives, which includes the media, and this thesis shows how it is possible for them to focus on Him through their entertainment choices.

**KEY WORDS:** Faith in entertainment, media, desensitization, *Supernatural*, symbolism

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## Discovering Faith in the Entertainment Industry

### Introduction

Hollywood is a major producer of entertainment for the public both in America and around the world, and the majority of the content produced is not intended to point people to God. Christianity is often looked down upon in Hollywood, and vice is glorified instead. Many people do not enjoy watching Christian movies because they lack plot or have poor quality filming, but there are secular movies that contain Christian worldviews and have good quality. God can be found in secular Hollywood; people just need to look at the message being told in their entertainment to see whether it represents a Christian worldview or not. Even though secular media does not necessarily intend to include Christian themes, they will be present because God has put a sense of Himself inside people's hearts. Although Hollywood can be a stumbling block for faith, it can also be a platform used for God's kingdom.

The problem with Hollywood today is that it often produces graphic content portraying ungodly values, and the public is spending their time focusing on these types of entertainment. The content put into entertainment is very important to form people's opinions and affect their worldviews. There is a need for God to be in the center of Hollywood entertainment and for filmmakers to portray Him correctly rather than trying to shape Him into their false image. If people who work in Hollywood know the Lord as their Savior, they can produce content that is pleasing to Him while providing the public with a good plot because a movie does not have to be "Christian" in order to have Christian values in it. There are several movies and shows that do not seem to have anything to do with God, but audiences can compare theologies that are in those movies and shows with Christianity.



In this thesis, I want to explain how people can find God in any movie or show that they watch if they just ask the Lord to reveal Himself. Some forms of entertainment show a clear theology of Christ while others show a theology that has God absent from the scene, but either way, people can still note the similarities and differences in theologies and ultimately seek God in their entertainment. They can decide to center both their entertainment and their personal lives around the Lord by listening to the Lord and letting the Holy Spirit lead them in discerning what is right. There are several questions concerning my topic that I plan on answering while writing my thesis.

- What is the best way to present Christ in entertainment?
- Can God be seen in secular movies, and how would that be done?
- What are some theologies that Hollywood presents, and how do they compare and contrast with Christianity?
- What type of content is good for people to be watching?

## Literature Review

Hollywood is often at the center of attention in the American public's eye. Entertainment has received millions of dollars from people who are willing to go to the movies, promote tv shows, and buy merchandise. People involved in making these forms of entertainment have a choice of what content goes into them, but sometimes they do not choose wisely. There is graphic violence, sex, language, etc. that pervades the screens and enters into people's minds. In the middle of all of this, can God be found? Christian movies made in Hollywood are usually seen as boring or low-quality movies, so many nonreligious people tend to stay away from them. Sometimes people fail to see that God can be seen in secular movies as well if they would look closely. God is often portrayed the wrong way in Hollywood, but He can redeem the entertainment industry and return to the center of attention. In this literature review, the reader will see how faith is important in fame and discover ways to see the Lord in the middle of the hectic chaos that comes in the media.

Kirk Cameron wrote an autobiography called *Kirk Cameron: Still Growing* about his life in faith and fame. He is one of the most prominent names for Christianity in Hollywood, and he uses his fame to reach out to others to tell them about the Good News of Jesus Christ. He continues in his faith journey despite criticism from paparazzi because his faith in the Lord is greater than his love of fame.<sup>1</sup> Through the massive amounts of praise and criticism, Kirk Cameron has bowed his head toward heaven and given all the glory to God. I chose to use this book because it shows a great example for famous Christians because Cameron uses the platform to further the kingdom of God. This will be used as part of my evidence that sometimes good

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<sup>1</sup> Kirk Cameron, *Kirk Cameron: Still Growing* (Ventura: Regal Books).

can come out of fame. Two other autobiographies I will be using in this thesis are the memoirs of Chris Kyle in *American Sniper* and those of his widow, Taya Kyle, in *American Wife*. Both of these accounts contribute to the making of the movie *American Sniper*. Chris Kyle tells his story of being a Navy SEAL in the war against terrorism and how he went on to become an American legend because of his sniping skills.<sup>2</sup> Taya Kyle explained the importance of keeping the family strong as her husband was away at war, the pain she and her family felt when Chris was murdered, and the faith she had in Christ that kept her going in life.<sup>3</sup> I will use these books to show the values these people have in the movie and in real life because they are both heroes who know the meaning of sacrifice.

Not all of Hollywood is honoring to God; unfortunately, most of it is the opposite. The content that is included in many movies and television shows goes against what God wants. While God says people should “set your minds on things above, not on earthly things,”<sup>4</sup> people fill their heads with garbage and focus on that rather than on the things of the Lord. Mark Matlock writes about the dangers of filling the mind with sinful things in his article “Do Horror Movies Hurt My Faith?” He explains how entertainment influences people, so he warns readers to be careful what type of content they take in on a normal basis.<sup>5</sup> When people are not careful about their entertainment choices, they take garbage in and let garbage out of their own lives, as Dale L. Cressman, Mark Callister, Tom Robinson, and Chris Near mention in their article, “Swearing in the Cinema.”<sup>6</sup> Another article that discusses the dangers of becoming desensitized

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Kyle, *American Sniper*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers).

<sup>3</sup> Taya Kyle, *American Wife*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers).

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan). Colossians 3:2.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Matlock. "Do Horror Movies Hurt My Faith?." *Ignite Your Faith* 65, no. 2 (September 2006): 26-27.

Accessed March 22, 2018. <https://seu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=22188572&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>6</sup> Cressman, Dale L., Mark Callister, Tom Robinson, and Chris Near. “Swearing in the Cinema.” *Journal of Children and Media* 3, no. 2 (May 2009): 117-129. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 3, 2019). <https://www-tandfonline-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1080/17482790902772257>.

to graphic images is “Biblical Themes at the Movies” by Clifford Yeary.<sup>7</sup> Yeary offers a solution to watching this type of entertainment: look at them with a biblical point of view. There are some things that people should stay away from completely in entertainment, for example, pornography and extreme violence. Dr. James Dobson had the chance to sit down and talk with serial killer Ted Bundy when he was on death row about the dangers of becoming involved with pornography and desensitization.<sup>8</sup> All of these articles and the interview are going to be part of my argument on how people should be careful when looking at entertainment.

When watching secular entertainment, people can look for Christian themes and compare and contrast Christian theology with the theologies that Hollywood presents. Ed Strauss has a book called *The Superheroes Devotional* in which he discusses theology shown in different superhero stories and how the heroes reflect a Christian worldview.<sup>9</sup> Rose Pacatte’s article, “Meeting Jesus at the Movies,” talks about allowing the Lord to reveal Himself in movies that may seem to have nothing to do with Him.<sup>10</sup> Another article called “Old Story, New Script,” by Scott La Counte, talks about how superhero movies have many similarities to the story of Christ.<sup>11</sup> Even entertainment that has differences in theology can ultimately point to God if people pray and ask the Lord to reveal the differences so they can focus on what the truth is. One show that has many large contradictions in theology is the show *Supernatural*, but it also

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<sup>7</sup> Clifford Yeary. "Biblical Themes at the Movies." *Bible Today* 46, no. 1 (January 2008): 16-20. Accessed March 24, 2018. <https://seu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=31200386&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>8</sup> Violence in America Reloaded. “Ted Bundy Last Words Before Execution.” Filmed January 1989. YouTube video, 43:28. Posted August 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpF3ADZNczk>.

<sup>9</sup> Ed Strauss, *The Superheroes Devotional* (Uhrichsville: Shiloh Run Press).

<sup>10</sup> Rose Pacatte. "Meeting Jesus at the Movies." *Bible Today* 46, no. 1 (January 2008): 12-15. Accessed March 17, 2018. <https://seu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=31200385&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>11</sup> Scott La Counte. "Old Story, New Script." *Ignite Your Faith*, March 2007., 32-34, Accessed March 17, 2018. <https://seu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=24563216&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

has a few Christian themes. The article “A Tightrope Act of Faith and Doubt,” written by Teresa Malcolm, addresses this topic and compares and contrasts *Supernatural* with the themes of having faith and doubt.<sup>12</sup> Television and movies can impact people and affect how they live their lives, and the book *Family Don't End with Blood*, written by Lynn S. Zubernis, shows the positive effects *Supernatural* has had on people.<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes Hollywood tries to make entertainment about Jesus Christ, but it does so in a way that degrades Him or makes fun of people who believe in Him. These ideologies should not be included in entertainment, but many directors, actors, etc. include it in order to make money. The solution to this problem is to make entertainment that glorifies God rather than entertainment that misrepresents Him. There are several Christian movies that are praised in Hollywood for both their content and their quality. One of these movies is *The Passion of the Christ*, directed by Mel Gibson. Ronald Madden's article, “*The Passion of the Christ*: A Modern Mystery Play,” takes an in-depth look at the movie and how the directors portray Jesus and the story of His death on the cross.<sup>14</sup> Although the movie received an R-rating for graphic violence, it is a realistic representation of what the Lord suffered in order to save His creation. James Y. Trammell talks about this subject more in his article, “Who Does God Want Me to Invite to See *The Passion of the Christ*?: Marketing Movies to Evangelicals.”<sup>15</sup> More Christian movies are

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<sup>12</sup> Teresa Malcolm. "A Tightrope Act of Faith and Doubt." *National Catholic Reporter* 45, no. 26 (October 16, 2009): 21. Accessed March 15, 2018. <https://seu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=44806306&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>13</sup> Lynn S. Zubernis, *Family Don't End with Blood* (Dallas: BenBella Books).

<sup>14</sup> Ronald Madden. "The Passion of the Christ: A Modern Mystery Play." *Journal Of Religion & Health* 43, no. 3 (September 2004): 247-252. Accessed March 24, 2018. <https://seu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=14270788&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>15</sup> James Y. Trammell. "Who Does God Want Me to Invite to See *The Passion of the Christ*?: Marketing Movies to Evangelicals." *Journal Of Media & Religion* 9, no. 1 (January 2010): 19-29. Accessed March 4, 2018. <https://seu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=48207805&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

being made that correctly represent Jesus, and they can make an impact on people's lives if they continue to be included in the mainstream entertainment industry alongside the secular media.

It is possible for Christ to be the center of people's lives through the choices of entertainment that they make. Hanna Rosin talks about this subject in her article, "Can Jesus Save Hollywood?" She mentions how people involved in the movie-making process can impact others by putting in Christian content without forcing it on them while leaving out graphic images.<sup>16</sup> It is also important to have a good plot along with Christian values. There are many Christian movies made, but only a select few make it into the mainstream because they either lack a plot that most of the public would enjoy or have poor quality filming. The article "Cinema Verities," written by Marshall Allen, explains the importance of having a good plot with a Christian worldview so nothing in the movie is compromised.<sup>17</sup> Another way of witnessing in Hollywood is through entertainment reviews and websites that look at entertainment with a Christian worldview. Even reviews of popular movies and television shows make a difference in people's lives because people listen to what is trending in today's society. Every aspect of Hollywood sends a message to the public, and the message needs to be honoring to the Lord instead of taking the focus away from Him.

There are several theology books that I will be using in this thesis to show how the media either supports or contradicts the Christian doctrine. *The Humanity of God*, written by Karl Barth, explains how Jesus is both fully divine and fully human so He could be the perfect

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<sup>16</sup> Hanna Rosin. 2005. "Can Jesus Save Hollywood?." *Atlantic* 296, no. 5: 161-168. Accessed March 1, 2018. <https://seu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=18848651&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>17</sup> Marshall Allen. "Cinema Verities." *Christianity Today* 45, no. 11 (September 3, 2001): 94. Accessed March 4, 2018. <https://seu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=5061136&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

sacrifice to save people from sin.<sup>18</sup> Clifford Williams helps readers understand the importance of studying apologetics and how it affects their lives as Christians in his book, *The Life of the Mind*.<sup>19</sup> In Wayne Cordeiro's book, *The Divine Mentor*, the author talks about how people can learn to hear God's voice and know His presence is with them throughout their lives.<sup>20</sup> Learning to discern God's voice is important because it can help Christians navigate through culture, entertainment, and the messages that are being presented.

Understanding the theology of Christianity helps people discern God's voice and His will for His people, and *Gracious Christianity*, written by Douglas Jacobsen and Rodney J. Sawatsky, outlines God's gift of grace through His Son Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup> R.C. Sproul talks about the different theologies of famous philosophers throughout history and how ideas shape people's worldviews and ways of thinking in his book, *The Consequences of Ideas*.<sup>22</sup> C.S. Lewis wrote the book *Mere Christianity*, which was his argument about why Jesus Christ is the best and only way to salvation. He argues theological points to show why Jesus is real and active in the world both now and throughout history.<sup>23</sup> *Intellectuals Don't Need God & Other Modern Myths*, written by Alister E. McGrath, is a book about apologetics, and the author explains why Christianity makes sense.<sup>24</sup> A similar apologetics book is Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek's book, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*. The authors defend the faith and answer tough questions about the Lord.<sup>25</sup> *Creation, Christ, and Culture. Edinburgh*, written by Richard W.A. McKinney, is a

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<sup>18</sup> Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press).

<sup>19</sup> Clifford Williams, *The Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic).

<sup>20</sup> Wayne Cordeiro, *The Divine Mentor* (Bloomington: Bethany House Publishers).

<sup>21</sup> Douglas Jacobsen and Rodney J. Sawatsky, *Gracious Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic).

<sup>22</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas* (Wheaton: Crossway).

<sup>23</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan).

<sup>24</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God & Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House).

<sup>25</sup> Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway).

collection of theological ideas based on the famous Protestant theologian, T.F. Torrence.<sup>26</sup> I will be using these books as part of my evidence section by comparing and contrasting Christian theology with the theology that Hollywood presents through the media.

*The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and the *Chronicles of Narnia* series all have something in common: they all contain symbolism that can point to the gospel message of Christ. David Rozema mentions in his article, “*The Lord of the Rings*: Tolkien, Jackson, and ‘The Core of the Original,’” how Tolkien’s idea was to write a good story without intentionally including allegory and how his book series translated into the movies made by Peter Jackson.<sup>27</sup> There are several symbolic themes shown in the fantasy stories created by J.R.R. Tolkien, and Sheridan Gilley writes about what those themes are and how the fantasy genre can relate to Christianity in the article, “Christianity & Fantasy in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.”<sup>28</sup>

Leonie Caldecott talks about the positive side of *Harry Potter* and how J.K. Rowling includes Christian themes throughout the series in the article, “A Wizard’s Mission: Christian Themes in *Harry Potter*.”<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, there are also negative aspects to *Harry Potter*, which Jacqui Komschlies points out in the article “The Perils of *Harry Potter*.” The author

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<sup>26</sup> Richard W.A. McKinney, *Creation, Christ, and Culture* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark Ltd).

<sup>27</sup> Rozema, David. “*The Lord of the Rings*: Tolkien, Jackson, and ‘The Core of the Original.’” *Christian Scholars Review* (January 2008): 427-445. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 21, 2019). <https://web-b-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=c52f9e43-61e1-43ca-9712-743730459c0c%40sessionmgr102>

<sup>28</sup> Gilley, Sheridan. “Christianity & Fantasy in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.” *The Modern Churchman* 25, no. 1 (January 1982): 44-52. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 10, 2019). <https://web-a-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=d2a3285a-ec11-424b-85f2-bb01d72829ab%40sdc-v-sessmgr06>

<sup>29</sup> Caldecott, Leonie. “A Wizard’s Mission: Christian Themes in *Harry Potter*.” *The Christian Century* 125, no. 1 (January 2008): 24-27. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 25, 2019). <https://web-b-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=5d80f8ac-ad00-44b6-871f-e20a88e6dbb5%40pdc-v-sessmgr02>.



shows the dangers of presenting witchcraft in entertainment as something good.<sup>30</sup> Markus Altena Davidsen talks about the phenomenon of religions coming from fictional worlds that people apply to real life in the article “Fiction-based Religion: Conceptualising a New Category Against History-based Religion and Fandom.”<sup>31</sup> In Steve Vineburg’s article, “Talk to the Animals,” the author explains how the Christian values written in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series by C.S. Lewis made it into the movie *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and it presents the Gospel to a secular world.<sup>32</sup> Another article that talks about how the original source material was used in the movie and how both Christian and secular audiences can enjoy it is “The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,” written by Tim McKenzie.<sup>33</sup> The symbolism contained in each of these movies provides a message that can point people to the Lord.

Because this thesis is about Christian themes included in secular entertainment, I will be using several quotes from different movies and shows including *Gladiator*, the *Avengers*, *American Sniper*, *Supernatural*, and *Star Wars*. I will be using these quotes as part of my evidence to show how different aspects of the media support Christianity or support the view of God presented by Hollywood and popular culture. When entertainment contrasts the truth, it is important to take a look at what the Word of God says so people do not get confused and put

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<sup>30</sup> Komschlies, Jacqui. “The Perils of Harry Potter.” *Christianity Today* (October 2011): 113. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 25, 2019). <https://web-a-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=eb0abcc2-3835-457b-acba-8ed701d7830c%40sessionmgr4006>.

<sup>31</sup> Davidsen, Markus Altena. “Fiction-based Religion: Conceptualising a New Category Against History-based Religion and Fandom.” *Culture and Religion* 14, no. 4: 378-391. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 2, 2019). <https://web-a-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=18e8c1fb-f33a-4206-a9f1-feeb2dbe1820%40sessionmgr4006>

<sup>32</sup> Vineberg, Steve. “Talk to the Animals.” *The Christian Century* 123, no. 1 (January 2006): 48-49. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 27, 2019). <https://web-b-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=bd5713e3-ce5d-4910-9379-a106cae6d469%40sessionmgr120>.

<sup>33</sup> McKenzie, Tim. “The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.” *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 14, no. 1 (February 2006): 25-26. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 27, 2019). <https://web-b-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=551ee7b4-9648-400c-937a-47dc16242d92%40pdc-v-sessmgr03>

their faith in relative truth rather than absolute truth. I will be using Zondervan's *The Holy Bible New International Version* to quote verses from both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>34</sup> The other Bible I will be using is Sean McDowell's *Apologetics Study Bible For Students* because it involves an in-depth study of the passages and relates the biblical concepts to today's society.<sup>35</sup> There are many books that bridge the gap between biblical times to today. One of those books is called *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World*, written by Robert N. Bellah, Diogenes Allen, George A. Lindbeck, James B. Miller, Sandra M. Schneiders, and Rowan D. Williams, and I will be using it as part of my evidence to show how secular movies can have Christian ideas that connect to the Bible.<sup>36</sup> Erasmus wrote a book on leadership called *The Education of a Christian Prince*, and its principles have been applied over centuries because he explains how a Christian who is in a leadership position should act in an ethical way.<sup>37</sup> This book will also be included in my evidence to show how media's values do not always match up with ethical decisions. Os Guinness's article "What is a Calling?" explains how everyone has a primary and secondary calling in life, and the primary calling is to ultimately give glory to God.<sup>38</sup> I will be using this article to compare and contrast Christianity with the media's theology.

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<sup>34</sup> *The Holy Bible New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan).

<sup>35</sup> Sean McDowell, *Apologetics Study Bible For Students*, Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers.

<sup>36</sup> Robert N. Bellah, George A. Lindbeck, Diogenes Allen, Sandra M. Schneiders, Rowan D. Williams, *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World*, San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers.

<sup>37</sup> Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>38</sup> Guinness, Os. "What is a Calling?" Cru Press (accessed January 29, 2019).

[https://www.cru.org/content/dam/cru/legacy/2012/02/What\\_is\\_a\\_Calling.pdf](https://www.cru.org/content/dam/cru/legacy/2012/02/What_is_a_Calling.pdf).

### Christian Themes in Secular Media

“What we do in life echoes in eternity.”<sup>39</sup> These words are from the character Maximus Decimus Meridius, played by Russell Crowe, in the famous movie *Gladiator*. Although this movie has representations of ancient Roman philosophy, *Gladiator* also contains several Christian themes. This movie focuses heavily on justice, freedom, and responsibility, and these are also important aspects of being followers of Christ. In general, people like movies to have a good ending. Justice is served to the villain, and everything works out well. This theme is seen throughout many secular movies, including *Gladiator*, and justice is one of God’s characteristics. In the movie, Maximus gets the justice he is fighting for by defeating the villain, Commodus, in a fierce battle. In real life, people often try to separate the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament as two different deities because they do not like the idea of God being just. They would rather find Him as a loving God only, but God’s love and justice cannot be separated; otherwise, He would be incomplete and imperfect. God shows justice because “He cannot diminish the importance of His holiness by simply dismissing our offenses against it. Justice must be served. Either our sin debt is paid for (through faith in Christ’s sacrifice for us) or else we must pay the debt in hell.”<sup>40</sup> In *Gladiator*, Maximus gets justice and finds freedom in the afterlife with his family. While there is no such thing as Elysium, there is the promise of heaven to those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Freedom is the second virtue seen in the movie because Maximus is not only fighting for his own freedom; he is fighting sacrificially to free Rome from an evil ruler. The ultimate source of freedom is the Lord because “God’s freedom is not merely unlimited possibility or formal majesty and omnipotence, that is to say empty, naked sovereignty. Nor is this true of the God-

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<sup>39</sup> *Gladiator*. Directed by Ridley Scott. Universal City, CA: DreamWorks, 2000.

<sup>40</sup> Sean McDowell, *Apologetics Study Bible For Students*, Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 874.

given freedom of man. If we so misinterpret human freedom, it irreconcilably clashes with divine freedom and becomes the false freedom of sin, reducing man to a prisoner.”<sup>41</sup> It is important to find true freedom in Christ because “the more we get to know God and His Word, the freer we will be. We’ll have a new and ever-growing confidence, and where our lives normally would stop or stall out, we’ll be able to go forward.”<sup>42</sup> Once people discover freedom in the Lord, they can find their purpose and take on a noble responsibility. Responsibility plays a large role in the movie because Maximus is a general who serves Rome and feels responsibility to protect the empire he loves. Christians have a responsibility to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”<sup>43</sup> Although *Gladiator* is a secular movie, it reveals truths seen in Christianity. Secular media often contains Christian themes, sometimes unintentionally, that can point people to God.

### Faith in the Genres

Within different genres of movies, there are theological truths that are evident. In action movies, good versus evil is often portrayed where the good prevails over the evil. The Marvel franchise is a series of superhero movies based on the comics created by Stan Lee. In *The Avengers*, all of the heroes are brought together to defeat the evil Asgardian god, Loki, and prevent him from taking over the world. Loki manages to cause tension between the heroes so their focus is fighting against each other rather than fighting him, but when the heroes are motivated to team up, they are able to use their powers to defeat Loki before he has a chance to conquer the world. The definition of an avenger is “a person who takes revenge for a wrong

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<sup>41</sup> Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 71.

<sup>42</sup> Wayne Cordeiro, *The Divine Mentor*, 135-136.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew 22:37-38 (NIV).

done. In the Bible this was deadly business.”<sup>44</sup> People took it upon themselves to avenge their loved ones who had been wronged, but Jesus commanded people to leave vengeance in His hands. He commanded people “to let go of personal offenses. But He wasn’t throwing out the entire justice system- particularly for serious crimes.”<sup>45</sup> There is a time to fight for justice, and the Avengers fight a just battle to protect the world because they believe humans are worth saving.

The Avengers truly became a team in the middle of the movie when they received a harsh wake-up call. This can happen many times in Christianity because “at some point during our lives we may experience an epiphany, when a light goes on inside us and we come to an awareness of some truth that transcends our being, changing us and helping us grow spiritually as we travel the human and Christian journey.”<sup>46</sup> God can use suffering to bring His people closer to Him, and Christians can take comfort because “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”<sup>47</sup> The heroes suffered a loss, and because their eyes were opened metaphorically, they fought to prevent others from dealing with unnecessary suffering under the unethical rule of Loki. When Loki commands people to kneel to him, one man stands up and refuses. Before Loki has the chance to kill him, Captain America steps in and brings the Avengers along, causing Loki to surrender. The Avengers can be compared to the parable of the Good Samaritan because they value human life and dignity. In Jesus’ parable, He explains how “the Good Samaritan treated someone who, on an earthly basis, did not have to be taken into account- who was a thing, a battered piece of flesh- as a person. By treating a man who had been reduced to a thing as a

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<sup>44</sup> Ed Strauss, *The Superheroes Devotional* (Uhrichsville: Shiloh Run Press), 56.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>46</sup> Rose Pacatte, "Meeting Jesus at the Movies," 13.

<sup>47</sup> Romans 8:28 (NIV).

person, he restored him to personhood. Why did he do this? Because he could see the harm done, the horror of the reduction of a person- one made to receive God- to a thing.”<sup>48</sup> The superheroes recognize the inherent value people have because they are willing to protect and save them from evil.

Oftentimes in superhero movies like *The Avengers*, there will be a Christ-like figure who comes and saves the day. Audiences enjoy these types of characters because they “remind us of Jesus’ mission and his triumph. It draws new followers to his truth. And like the citizens of Metropolis, we’re reminded that our friend is still living among us.”<sup>49</sup> Marvel’s *Avengers* has several characters that exhibit Christ-like traits and save the world from evil. Captain America is one such character, and he makes a strong point in the movie when he sees Thor and Loki and says to his colleague, “There’s only one God, ma’am. And I’m pretty sure he doesn’t dress like that.”<sup>50</sup> This point is extremely powerful because many people look up to characters portrayed in movies, and it can help people watching the movie to become interested in knowing who this “one God” is. Captain America represents the “old-fashioned” morals that many people in the United States had back in World War II. He is known as “an old-fashioned idealist with a wholesome Boy Scout moral outlook [who] often appears out of step with modern society.”<sup>51</sup> America was united as “one nation under God,” but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, America has become divided because people try to decide their own morals instead of knowing the absolute morals that come from the Lord. People will sometimes base their morals on the role models they choose in movies they watch, but they need to be careful about what their role models teach and

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<sup>48</sup> Robert N. Bellah, George A. Lindbeck, Diogenes Allen, Sandra M. Schneiders, Rowan D. Williams, *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World*, 29.

<sup>49</sup> Scott La Counte, "Old Story, New Script," 34.

<sup>50</sup> *The Avengers*. Directed by Joss Whedon. Burbank, CA: Marvel Studios, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Ed Strauss, *The Superheroes Devotional*, 25.

make sure they are not worshipping a god that they have built based on their own imagination. Sometimes Hollywood will try to “refashion God in their own image. We want a pliable God who does our will, so we reenvision God in ways that fit our tastes. In the process, God’s glory is often diminished and God’s character distorted.”<sup>52</sup> Morality needs to be based solely on the Lord; otherwise, ethics are thrown out because everyone has his or her own ideas of right and wrong since there is no basis for morality. Jesus Christ is the true hero that people should be looking up to because He made a way to salvation through His blood and rose again to defeat death, and one day He will completely destroy the enemy.

Comedies can help people forget about their problems for a while and look at life in a humorous way. They will often have a character who constantly messes situations up, but in the end that character will find his or her worth or fulfill a goal. However, many modern comedies poke fun at Christian virtues. In the movie *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, the main character accomplishes his goal, although it is not a noble goal: to skip school, have the best day ever, and avoid getting caught. The virtue of telling the truth is not present in this movie, as Ferris convinces everyone he is sick and should stay home from school. One of God’s commandments is, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor,”<sup>53</sup> in other words, do not lie. This comedy decides to go against that commandment and present lying as something good and fun. Making any sin look good is dangerous because people “are much more easily and frequently led into evil by what is good than by what is evil, for we feel utterly and perfectly justified in our cause.”<sup>54</sup> What this movie does not show is that in the end, sin will be discovered and justly punished.

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<sup>52</sup> Douglas Jacobsen and Rodney J. Sawatsky, *Gracious Christianity*, 31.

<sup>53</sup> Exodus 20:16 (NIV).

<sup>54</sup> Robert N. Bellah, George A. Lindbeck, Diogenes Allen, Sandra M. Schneiders, Rowan D. Williams, *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World*, 29.

Another negative aspect in this movie is that education is not valued, and adults are viewed in a negative light. Throughout history, education and authority have been two systems that are considered honorable. Erasmus speaks on their importance in his book, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, because he believes “instruction must be implanted...and it must be worthy of a true prince, and unambiguous...The model for government is to be taken especially from God himself, and from Christ who is both God and man, whose teachings will also be a principal source for instruction.”<sup>55</sup> In today’s culture and entertainment, education and authority are often at the receiving end of jokes. One redeeming factor in the movie is that Ferris’ best friend learns to stand up for himself and take responsibility for his own actions. He learns to overcome his fear and live life to the fullest. People can live a prosperous life by repenting of their sins and turning to the Lord because “whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”<sup>56</sup> If people lie, they often continue the lie and live in fear of getting caught rather than confessing their sin and living a joyful life. Most modern comedies, including *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, do not teach lessons that are glorifying to God, but rather the characters often seek to fulfill their sinful desires and discredit Christian values through the use of derogatory humor.

Romance movies emphasize the importance of relationships, although Hollywood often tends to pervert love in entertainment and accept culture’s views on marriage rather than God’s view. *The Longest Ride* is a movie about the parallels between a World War II-era couple trying to juggle their love and dreams, and a modern-day couple trying to make things work because the man is a rodeo-loving country boy while the girl wants to move to the city to pursue her dreams. It displays positive virtues such as the value of life, love, and purpose. The modern-day

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<sup>55</sup> Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 46.

<sup>56</sup> Proverbs 28:13 (NIV).



couple rescues an elderly man from a car wreck and finds love letters he wrote to his wife, telling the story of their life together. The stories are shown in flashbacks, and the viewer sees how these couples' lives intersect with each other. In the 1940's, a young man falls in love with a beautiful girl, and they decide to get married. The girl's dream was to have a big family, but the man obtained an injury in the war that left him unable to give her children. Through thick and thin, the couple stayed together and started a new dream of having true love together for the rest of their lives. The modern-day couple makes things work too because they realize that without love, their dreams are not fulfilling. The young couple stays together and fulfills their dreams in different ways than they were expecting.

*The Longest Ride* shows the beauty of love and the fact that people have a purpose in life. Everyone has meaning, and the movie portrays that idea well because it shows the lead woman taking time to listen to the life story of the elderly man and discovering his dreams along with her own dreams. People are created with intelligence, creativity, and meaning because “the human mind is made in the image of the Great Mind- God. In other words, our minds can apprehend truth and can reason about reality because they were built by the Architect of truth, reality, and reason itself.”<sup>57</sup> Being made in the image of God is essential to Christianity because it means that people are made to be complex, rational beings by an infinite God. Without this fact, life becomes meaningless, and people are left without purpose. In the movie, everyone finds fulfillment by living out their dreams and knowing their purpose is to love each other above themselves. A Christian's purpose is “to believe in the name of [God's] Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.”<sup>58</sup> This movie reflects the overall Christian message that life is meaningful, and purpose is found through love.

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<sup>57</sup> Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, 130.

<sup>58</sup> 1 John 3:23 (NIV).

The downside to *The Longest Ride* is that it promotes sex before marriage, while God says it is something sacred reserved for marriage. Before the fall, God created a man to be “united to his wife, and they become one flesh.”<sup>59</sup> In the Genesis creation account when Adam and Eve were in perfect union, they worked together and complimented each other, and they walked with God in the Garden of Eden. After the fall, “the first human beings were expelled from this perfect state on account of their sin. Redemption, however, leads men back to this sound condition...Sin perverts the good creation. Grace restores it again.”<sup>60</sup> Sin corrupts the ideals of marriage, and romance movies tend to portray characters giving in to lust before marriage as being normal. Although *The Longest Ride* goes along with this portrayal, it also moves from a deeper level of lust to love. The characters in the movie all follow their hearts and endure hardships together to fulfill their purposes and pursue love against all odds. God’s love is a stark contrast to Hollywood’s idea of love because God’s love is deep, unending, and unconditional, while Hollywood often diminishes love to a worldly desire that needs to be fulfilled.

Even the horror genre shows what life is like without God. Evil runs rampant in the world, and the heroes are often left without hope of salvation. Without God, life is meaningless, and villains can kill without consequence because “he must exist for ethics to be meaningful...[Kant] anticipates Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s maxim, ‘If there is no God, all things are permissible.’”<sup>61</sup> Horror movies often gravitate toward this view and show darkness as the victor. Mark Matlock says in his article, “Do Horror Movies Hurt My Faith,” people need to be careful about watching horror movies because they can “begin to feel spiritual darkness. It’s one thing

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<sup>59</sup> Genesis 2:24 (NIV).

<sup>60</sup> Richard W.A. McKinney, *Creation, Christ, and Culture*, 121.

<sup>61</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas*, 131.

to get creeped out with friends for fun. But ‘entertainment’ that leads your spirit into darkness, depression or anger is dangerous.”<sup>62</sup> When watching certain types of entertainment, Christians need to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and discern what He wants them to watch. In horror movies, people do have morals because they know the difference between right and wrong, but the villain will always choose to do wrong because his or her morals are warped and compromised. C.S. Lewis states his belief in his book, *Mere Christianity*, “Human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in.”<sup>63</sup> Everyone has a sense of right and wrong because of the moral compass given to them by God, but He gives them free will to choose whether to follow the right path or not. God always desires for people to follow Him, and He often speaks to them through the Holy Spirit and their conscience because it “is an impartial judge in the courtroom of the mind. It speaks to us irrespective of our will...Human beings are unique among God’s creation in that we are *moral* creatures.”<sup>64</sup> God created people with a moral compass with Himself as their guide, but not everyone follows Him.

The horror genre shows what happens when a corrupted heart chooses to continue in sin and reject God rather than live for Him. The belief that God is not real and present gives a person permission to do anything since there is no such thing as right or wrong. The Lord gives people a restrictive layer of the law in order to let them know what not to do. He implements government and laws “to restrict the freedom of some people (such as the thief) because in the

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<sup>62</sup> Mark Matlock, "Do Horror Movies Hurt My Faith?," 26.

<sup>63</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Kirk Cameron, *Kirk Cameron: Still Growing*, 207.

state of nature evil is present. In a state of nature without civil government, the ‘law of the people,’ where might makes right, prevails. To protect humans from other humans, government is necessary. As Augustine maintains, government is not so much a necessary evil as a necessity because of evil.”<sup>65</sup> Horror movies have negative consequences both on screen and in real life. Graphic content causes desensitization, and the lack of morals shown can prey on the mind and cause people to stumble and turn morality into a gray area rather than separating right and wrong according to the Lord. People need to be “discerning when choosing entertainment [because] we are affected by the things, people, and ideas with which we surround ourselves...Any entertainment that moves us in a bad direction is entertainment that God would have us reject.”<sup>66</sup> Desensitization is dangerous because it eats away so slowly at a person’s psyche that people will often have a difficult time noticing the change in themselves.

Many films based off of true stories portray a character who contains virtues such as courage, heroism, and humility. One such film is *American Sniper*, the story of the late Chris Kyle, one of the deadliest snipers in the United States Armed Forces. A Navy SEAL accredited with 160 confirmed kills, Kyle is remembered as a hero and a legend who stood for faith, family, and the USA. Kyle tells his story in his autobiography, *American Sniper*, which was made into a major motion picture. He states, “I had a job to do as a SEAL. I killed the enemy- an enemy I saw day in and day out plotting to kill my fellow Americans...There are a lot of people who deserve credit, and if I don’t write the story, they may be overlooked. I don’t like the idea of that at all. My boys deserve to be praised more than I do...SEALS are silent warriors, and I’m a SEAL down to my soul.”<sup>67</sup> Chris Kyle’s genuine humility in real life transferred onto the big

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<sup>65</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas*, 101.

<sup>66</sup> Sean McDowell, *Apologetics Study Bible For Students*, 357.

<sup>67</sup> Chris Kyle, *American Sniper*, 4-5.

screen when Clint Eastwood produced *American Sniper*, and Kyle's wife Taya writes about how her husband reflected the virtue in her story, *American Wife*. She explains that "the beauty of *American Sniper* is that it is raw. Chris was upfront about his flaws. And it reflects his viewpoint on the war, one that wasn't polished or buffed, let alone made 'politically correct.' I think that was an important reason people were able to relate to it."<sup>68</sup> Even when he was hailed as a hero, Kyle was still willing to admit his shortcomings, stay humble, and give the glory to God.

There is a lot of violence in *American Sniper* because it shows the brutality and horrors of war, but it reminds people "that confronting evil requires sacrifice. There is an evil so great that only those who are willing to lay down their lives for their brothers and sisters have any hope of overcoming it and even their efforts are like a single bobbing raft around a sinking Titanic."<sup>69</sup> People like Chris Kyle are willing to put themselves in harm's way in order to protect the nation they love, and war movies that depict reality help the general public realize the importance of self-sacrifice. "I was just protecting my guys. They were trying to kill our soldiers, and I'm willing to meet my Creator and answer for every shot that I took. The thing that haunts me are all the guys that I couldn't save."<sup>70</sup> Chris' wife Taya also displays self-sacrifice in the movie and in real life because she has to sacrifice her own needs and quality time with her husband so he could fight in the war, and she showed perseverance by continuing in the faith and continuing the work that Chris started before he died. When it felt like everything was falling apart, Taya recalls, "I felt like God was telling me, 'I got this.' *I know you feel as if you can't do this, but I*

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<sup>68</sup> Taya Kyle, *American Wife*, 118.

<sup>69</sup> Clifford Yeary, "Biblical Themes at the Movies," 18.

<sup>70</sup> *American Sniper*, directed by Clint Eastwood, 2014.

can. *And I will.*”<sup>71</sup> Sacrificing something can be extremely difficult, but God comforts people and feels their pain because He gave the ultimate sacrifice of His Son.

Self-sacrifice is prevalent in true-to-life films because audiences look up to people who display this virtue as heroes. This virtue has been instilled in humans when God made them in His image because it shows an incredible act of love. Jesus even commands people to love each other because “greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”<sup>72</sup> Jesus Christ was willing to sacrifice Himself and humble Himself to save people from sin because “being in very nature God, [Jesus] did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death- even death on a cross!”<sup>73</sup> Freedom comes at a price, and Jesus paid the debt that no one could pay except the perfect Son of God so people could be free from sin and death. The importance of sacrifice can be seen throughout history, in today’s society, and in entertainment because people need a Savior, whether they realize it or not.

Clifford Williams states in his book, *The Life of the Mind*, that “it is a common assumption of secular thinking that religious truths are in a compartment all their own. Belief in God is thought to have little to do with everyday life or with science, literature, or psychology. Christians, however, think of their Christian beliefs as being connected to everything they do and think, at least in their best moments.”<sup>74</sup> This idea holds true in the entertainment industry because even secular media that contains graphic content can show different aspects of the Christian worldview or what life would be like without God. Oftentimes, movies will reveal

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<sup>71</sup> Taya Kyle, *American Wife*, 230.

<sup>72</sup> John 15:13 (NIV).

<sup>73</sup> Philippians 2:6-8 (NIV).

<sup>74</sup> Clifford Williams, *The Life of the Mind*, 50.

humanity's need for a Savior and for everything to turn out good in the end. However, movies and the characters in them should never take the place of a relationship with the Lord because they simply reflect people's ideas of truth and morality, while God is the ultimate source of truth and morality. Looking for Christian themes in any genre of secular movies can encourage discussion about the Lord and how it is necessary for Him to be the most integral part of people's lives.

### Violence and Vice

Is it a sin to watch graphic content? Can anything good come out of it? Is it better for movies that try to portray realistic events with a Christian worldview to exclude some parts of reality for audiences? One of the best-selling movies that has been criticized for being too graphic is Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*. It shows a realistic version of how Jesus Christ suffered and was crucified to save the world from sin. "As we walk this *Via Crucis* alongside Jesus, we realize that on some level it must have been like this. We observers from the 21<sup>st</sup> century sense that the feelings this film produces in us- horror, sorrow, and grief- must not be unlike those of observers of these events as they unfolded."<sup>75</sup> Although it is not considered a family-friendly movie, *Passion of the Christ* shows people how much the Lord loves them to be willing to die in such a horrific fashion.

The realism in the movie gives a small glimpse into the heart of Christ because He died for the sins of the world and took people's pain upon Himself. "Passion's marketing suggested that the graphic torture scenes were critical to the movie. It argued that the R-rated scenes were necessary for the film to remain faithful to the Bible...The R-rating was framed less as a sign that the movie contains content that would offend religious sensitivities and more as a testament

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<sup>75</sup> Ronald Madden. "The *Passion of the Christ*: A Modern Mystery Play." 248.

to the film's perceived accuracy and authenticity."<sup>76</sup> The graphic violence in *Passion of the Christ* served a purpose to bring the true story of Jesus' death and resurrection to life for people today. The movie has helped many people come to the Lord and strengthen their faith in Him because it helps them understand who Christ is and see the extent of His love and desire to save His people. This is important because "both religion and media play key roles in how we make sense of the world. Simply put, religious faith addresses questions of meaning and purpose, while media are the means through which we approach those questions."<sup>77</sup> God desires for everyone to know Him as their Savior, and Jesus makes it clear in John 3:16-17 when He says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."<sup>78</sup> Violence is never uplifting in media, but it can serve a purpose in movies that are meant to instill in people a sense of awe toward a particular historical event, such as Jesus' death in *Passion of the Christ*, the honor of soldiers fighting in wars, etc.

While violence has its place in certain movies, there are many moments in entertainment where it would have been better to keep violence out of the picture. Slasher films and movies that glorify violence as a good thing can cause fear, pain, and desensitization in real life. God does not desire for anyone to live in fear, but to cast their minds to "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."<sup>79</sup> If anything goes against this list, people

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<sup>76</sup> James Y. Trammel. "Who Does God Want Me to Invite to See *The Passion of the Christ*? Marketing Movies to Evangelicals." 25.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>78</sup> John 3:16-17 (NIV).

<sup>79</sup> Philippians 4:8 (NIV).



should not be dwelling on it, and that includes violence that shows disturbing imagery. By choosing to focus on violence in entertainment, people are focusing on worldly things rather than looking to the Lord and the future hope of heaven where violence will no longer exist because there will be no need for it in the presence of the perfect peace of God.

Sex in entertainment is often shown in a variety of ways that distort the marriage covenant, and today's culture praises how sex is portrayed. Pornographic material is dangerous because of the psychological effects and desensitization. There are many examples throughout history of how pornography affects people, whether it is a small effect or a major one. Ted Bundy was a serial killer who was exposed to hard-core pornography coupled with violence. For his last interview before he was condemned to die, Dr. James Dobson from Focus on the Family talked with him and heard him speak out against culture's and media's use of violence and oversexualization. Dr. Dobson noted to someone interviewing him about his time with Ted Bundy that people "don't have to be psychopathic to go through that desensitization process...what you see influences what you do. And only in pornography are we afraid to make that linkage. And yet that linkage is very, very clear."<sup>80</sup> When sexual intercourse is portrayed in entertainment, it often objectifies people as things meant for pleasure and degrades their value of how they were created in the image of God. Sex shown outside of a marriage setting and pornographic material can be detrimental because it dehumanizes people and takes something holy and turns it into something scornful.

Foul language and offensive content are another problem that has appeared in entertainment more often as the MPAA ratings allow more slack on this issue. The Bible may not address certain words that are considered swearing in today's society, but God does

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<sup>80</sup> Violence in America Reloaded. "Ted Bundy Last Words Before Execution." Filmed January 1989. YouTube video, 43:28. Posted August 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpF3ADZNczk>.

command people to “not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”<sup>81</sup> If people put garbage into their minds, it will eventually come out of their mouths. Just like violence and sexual content permeating media can have a negative, desensitizing effect on people seeing it on a regular basis, foul language heard in the media can cause people to become numb to it or use it themselves. Children are especially prone to using swear words because “for this young, impressionable audience, the media serve an important socializing function...and researchers report parental concern that children will adopt coarse language as a result of media exposure.”<sup>82</sup> When foul language, the Lord’s name used in vain, innuendos, etc. are used in entertainment, people watching and hearing that put themselves in danger of having a higher propensity to using that type of language in their everyday lives.

### *Supernatural* Theology

*Supernatural* is a television show produced by the CBS and Warner Brothers Network (CW) that has stirred up controversy in Christianity because of its contradictions to Christianity and portrayal of God. Its central plot is about two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, who travel around America to fight supernatural creatures and save the world. No matter how dire the situation is, the brothers always find a way to win by sticking together and persisting to the end. The plot overall is interesting and appears to contain good values, but when theology is involved, *Supernatural* misses the mark by a long shot.

One of the biggest theological differences from Christianity is that *Supernatural* portrays God, also known as “Chuck,” as a lazy, weak father who does not care about his creation. The show portrays God as having characteristics of Satan in real life; for example, he messes up

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<sup>81</sup> Ephesians 4:29 (NIV).

<sup>82</sup> Dale L. Cressman, Mark Callister, Tom Robinson, and Chris Near, “Swearing in the Cinema,” 118.

plenty of times and is too prideful to admit when he is wrong. In a confrontation with Lucifer, Chuck reluctantly gives him a fake apology, “I am sorry that you feel that I betrayed you, that I acted without cause. I’m sorry that you can’t see you gave me no choice. I’m good.”<sup>83</sup> He is portrayed as someone who simply goes with the flow of events when things do not turn out the way he expected rather than being omniscient. Chuck’s ignorance is shown in Season eleven when he tells one of his angels, “I didn’t see the whole evil turn thing coming...Whose attention were you trying to get?”<sup>84</sup> He pays little attention to anyone he deems unworthy of his time, but those who used to believe in him try to reason with him, saying humans are worthy of his love. “They are your greatest creation because they’re better than you are. Sure, they’re weak, and they cheat, and steal, and destroy, and disappoint, but they also give, and create, and they sing, and dance, and love, and above all, they never give up. But you do.”<sup>85</sup> Entertainment often portrays God as absent from the world and less than humanity, and *Supernatural* is no exception to this viewpoint.

In reality, God is not an absent Father who pays no attention to people. He loves His creation, cares for them, and gives them meaning. He did not need to create humans with free will, but He wanted to out of His unfailing love because “it is not as though God stands in need of another as His partner, and in particular of man, in order to be truly God...In His life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit He would in truth be no lonesome, no egotistical God even without man, yes, even without the whole created universe.”<sup>86</sup> A god created in man’s image is an idol because the true God is greater than His creation. His will is the one that is ultimately followed over man’s will because “the fact that God speaks, gives, orders, comes absolutely first- that man

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<sup>83</sup> *Supernatural*. Directed by Robert Singer and Philip Sgriccia. Vancouver: CW Network. 2005-present.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 50.

hears, receives, obeys, can and must only follow this first act.”<sup>87</sup> People are not greater than the Lord because only He is perfect, and all of humanity is sinful and deserves punishment. Yet God loves His people so much that He offered His only Son as the way to salvation from Satan and eternal punishment in hell.

Lucifer is a villain in *Supernatural* because he got kicked out of heaven and wants to destroy the world, but his reasoning for doing so goes against Christian theology and makes him sound like he is simply wanting justice for the wrong done to him by God. In Season five’s episode “The End,” Dean Winchester encounters Lucifer possessing his brother, and Lucifer wants Dean to sympathize with him when he tells his story, “You know why God cast me down? Because I loved him more than anything. And then God created you, the little hairless apes. And then he asked all of us to bow down before you, to love you more than him. And I said, ‘Father, I can’t.’ I said, ‘These human beings are flawed, murderous.’ And for that, God had Michael cast me into hell. Now tell me, does the punishment fit the crime, especially when I was right?”<sup>88</sup> This story that Lucifer creates is a twisted idea of what actually happened, but *Supernatural* eventually adds another problem that makes Lucifer evil that is more theologically correct: he wanted to be God.

The true reason the devil was cast out of heaven is because he was prideful and wanted to be God rather than bowing down to the true God. He rejected and blasphemed God to His face and was therefore punished. God says that He “detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.”<sup>89</sup> People have to be careful not to fall into the sin of pride and setting themselves up as their own gods because they fall prey to the devil’s trap. While

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<sup>87</sup> Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 48.

<sup>88</sup> *Supernatural*. 2005-present.

<sup>89</sup> Proverbs 16:5 (NIV).

*Supernatural* says humans were sinful before Lucifer came to the earth, the Bible states the devil came and tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God, allowing sin to enter into their hearts. He made them doubt God's command by twisting His words and asking Eve, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"<sup>90</sup> The devil cleverly tries to make people fall away from the Lord because "the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; [Jesus has] come that they may have life, and have it to the full."<sup>91</sup> Satan hates the Lord and loves everything evil, and he hates it when people accept Christ as their Savior and live for the Lord because he knows he has lost. In the battle between good and evil in *Supernatural*, it is hard to know who is going to come out victorious. In reality, God wins because evil cannot match the power of God. God knows the outcome, and Satan does too; the devil will be cast into hell and destroyed, and there will be no more evil.

Another negative thing *Supernatural* contains is demons and things pertaining to the occult. The heroes often use occult symbols such as the pentagram and hex bags in order to defeat the evil supernatural beings they are fighting. It makes no sense to use evil to defeat evil because when Jesus was being accused of having a demon for healing someone, He told the people, "Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?"<sup>92</sup> Not only are the demons in *Supernatural* evil, but many of the angels are just as bad, sometimes worse than the demons. They lie and manipulate people in order to get their way, and they torture and kill anyone who gets in their way. The only real "good guys" in the show are the people who fight for free will and the ones willing to sacrifice themselves in order to defeat destiny. The

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<sup>90</sup> Genesis 3:1 (NIV).

<sup>91</sup> John 10:10 (NIV).

<sup>92</sup> Luke 11:17-18 (NIV).

characters go to great lengths to avoid their fate, even to the point of selling their souls to demons. Once the deal is made, that is a fate that cannot be avoided, as the Winchesters find out first-hand because “season three had ended with Dean sent to hell- the consequence of a Faustian bargain to save Sam’s life.”<sup>93</sup> When a person does not have Jesus Christ as their Savior, they are headed down a dangerous road that ultimately leads to hell. People who constantly refuse the Lord and blaspheme His name will be given “over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.”<sup>94</sup> Without the Holy Spirit’s protection, people take a huge risk in handing their life over to the devil and foregoing eternal life with God.

Death is minimalized in *Supernatural* because the main characters die several times and are simply brought back to life through different means, none of which are because of Christ. It gives the impression that anyone can have control over life and death, when that power belongs only to the Lord. Although there is still an emotional element in the show when the brothers wonder if their friends and family have died for the last time, the effect of death and suffering is reduced significantly. Sometimes it hurts to think of death as a permanent thing, but those who believe in Jesus as their Savior can remember that “suffering is not pointless but leads to glory. Those who share in the sufferings of Christ may, through the resurrection of Christ, know what awaits them at the end of history.”<sup>95</sup> Jesus Christ is the only “way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>96</sup> *Supernatural* portrays the opposite theology in which there are many ways to heaven while only a couple ways to hell. The only ways a person goes to hell is if they sell their soul to a demon or if they choose to live a bad life; everyone else goes to heaven, no matter what they believe.

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<sup>93</sup> Teresa Malcolm, "A Tightrope Act of Faith and Doubt," 21.

<sup>94</sup> Psalm 81:12 (NIV).

<sup>95</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God & Other Modern Myths*, 105.

<sup>96</sup> John 14:6 (NIV).

In the show, family is emphasized as the most important thing in life, even more important than following God. Season five's climactic finale starts with Chuck telling the Winchesters' story, "Up against good, evil, angels, devils, destiny, and God himself, they made their own choice. They chose family. And, well...isn't that kind of the whole point?"<sup>97</sup> Although family is an extremely important part of life, it does not come before God. In his article, "What is a Calling," Os Guinness states, "Our primary calling as followers of Christ is by him, to him, and for him. First and foremost we are called to Someone (God), not to something...or to somewhere...Our secondary calling, considering who God is as sovereign, is that everyone, everywhere, and in everything should think, speak, live, and act entirely for him. We can therefore properly say as a matter of secondary calling that we are called to homemaking or to law or to the practice of art history. But these and other things are always the secondary, never the primary calling."<sup>98</sup> When God is placed first in people's lives, then family can be emphasized as the most important thing because people become part of the family of God as His children.

Amid the controversy displayed in *Supernatural*, there are also positive values and messages. The importance of family being a bond that is never broken is one of the main themes of the show that bleeds into every episode of every season. The central idea of *Supernatural* is summarized when Dean says, "Family don't end in blood, but it doesn't start their either. Family cares about you, not what you can do for them. Family's there through the good, bad, all of it. They got your back even when it hurts. That's family."<sup>99</sup> The brothers' love for each other overcomes all forces that come up against them. While they fight to save the world, they

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<sup>97</sup> *Supernatural*. 2005-present.

<sup>98</sup> Os Guinness, "What is a Calling?" Cru Press (2010). 1-2. Accessed January 29, 2019.  
[https://www.cru.org/content/dam/cru/legacy/2012/02/What\\_is\\_a\\_Calling.pdf](https://www.cru.org/content/dam/cru/legacy/2012/02/What_is_a_Calling.pdf).

<sup>99</sup> *Supernatural*. 2005-present.

ultimately fight for each other because family is all they have; they are there for each other through everything. After one of the brothers' toughest challenges, Sam tells Dean, "You save my life over and over... You sacrifice everything for me; don't you think I'd do the same for you? You're my big brother. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you."<sup>100</sup> Sometimes the Winchesters need to remind each other that they love each other above everything when external forces strain their relationship. Willing to sacrifice himself so he would not risk letting his brother down, Sam is saved by Dean's love when he tells Sam, "Don't you dare think that there is anything, past or present, that I would put in front of you."<sup>101</sup> Just like Sam and Dean never give up on each other, God never gives up on His children and loves them unconditionally.

God calls His disciples to love each other with a brotherly and unconditional love for each other because they belong to His family. He commands them to "love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."<sup>102</sup> When someone accepts Christ into their heart, they are welcomed into the family of God, and their actions should reflect the love that Christ gave to them. Christians love others and serve the Lord as a response of thanksgiving to Him because "he first loved us... And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister."<sup>103</sup> Because God loved His people and created them in His image, people have the capability to love God and others with the same *agape* love the Lord extends to everyone. Christians should love others and care about their spiritual well-being so others can be part of God's family instead of trapped in their sin.

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<sup>100</sup> *Supernatural*. 2005-present.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>102</sup> John 13:34-35 (NIV).

<sup>103</sup> I John 4:19, 21 (NIV).



Another message that *Supernatural* conveys is that good intentions do not always produce the best outcome. In season four, Sam sets out to save the world from the impending Apocalypse using the powers given to him by drinking demon blood. He places his bets on a rogue demon and refuses to listen to his brother who believes what he is doing is wrong. Because Sam believes he is saving the world, he ends up being tricked by the demon, giving in to his anger and lust of power, and unleashing the Apocalypse on the earth. Castiel also has the best intentions in season six after he helped the Winchesters stop the Apocalypse because they “ripped up the ending, and the rules, and destiny, leaving nothing but freedom and choice, which is all well and good, except...what if I’ve made the wrong choice?”<sup>104</sup> He realizes that with the freedom he is experiencing from diverting destiny, he can save heaven and earth from a new threat by himself. He sets out to save everyone, but he goes behind his friends’ back and tries to play God in order to do so. In the end, he ends up killing more people and angels than he saved and bringing even worse problems into the world.

Without Jesus, even the best intentions can be corrupted. In I Corinthians 13:1-3, Paul talks about the importance of doing everything with love. “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”<sup>105</sup> Before he became Paul, the man formerly known as Saul was a Jew intent on killing Christians in the name of God. He thought he was doing the Lord’s work until Jesus confronted him on the road to

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<sup>104</sup> *Supernatural*. 2005-present.

<sup>105</sup> I Corinthians 13:1-3 (NIV).

Damascus.<sup>106</sup> King Saul in the Old Testament was rebuked by the prophet Samuel when he did not obey the Lord's instructions. When God told Saul to wipe out the Amalekites, both humans and animals, Saul told Samuel that he "completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took the sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal."<sup>107</sup> Although Saul claimed his intentions were to offer a sacrifice to the Lord, the truth is that his intent was always greed. Therefore, God rejected him since "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams...Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king."<sup>108</sup> If a person's intentions go against the will of God, then no matter how good they may be, they will not produce the best results.

Even though the characters are often involved in occult practices, surprisingly the heroes warn against getting involved with it. If a character tries to make a deal with a demon or has already done so, that character is rebuked because they traded their life and soul for something worthless, even if the deal was made out of love for another. It is always worthless because they will get what they want for a short amount of time and spend an eternity in hell. Dean tells a woman who sold her soul, "If you would've just come to us sooner and asked for help, we probably could've...saved you."<sup>109</sup> Once the deal is done, people have to pay the price; there is no hope for salvation, even for the main characters. The idea that people can end up in a place of eternal punishment if they do not accept Christ as their Savior is an unpopular topic in today's culture, but it is necessary to address it instead of continuing in ignorance and disbelief. Since

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<sup>106</sup> Acts 9:3-6 (NIV).

<sup>107</sup> I Samuel 15:20-21 (NIV).

<sup>108</sup> I Samuel 15:22-23 (NIV).

<sup>109</sup> *Supernatural*. 2005-present.

“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”<sup>110</sup> everyone deserves death. No one can get out of sin on their own because people are powerless against evil; without God, people become enslaved by sin because they give their lives over to it. God did not leave His people without hope of freedom because “the power of sin can be broken through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which liberates us from the stranglehold of sin.”<sup>111</sup> From the beginning of time, God had a plan to save humanity from sin and the death they deserve for their disobedience. He paid the ultimate sacrifice of love and justice and gives people grace. When people make Christ the Lord of their lives, they find freedom from the sin that had them bound.

At the heart of Supernatural is a fight between good and evil, and the heroes have a moral obligation to save the world because they believe the world is worth saving, even when it may cost their own lives. Like the superheroes in *The Avengers*, the Winchesters and their friends listen to their conscience to do what is right. The Winchesters believe that if they “don’t...save everyone, then no one will, and we all die.”<sup>112</sup> When they are fighting to save the world by themselves, it becomes “a crushing weight to have on your shoulders. To feel like six billion lives depend on you.”<sup>113</sup> People often believe that they have to do things on their own, but Christians know they are not alone because God is by their side and fighting for them. Jesus comes to His people’s aid and “in an inconceivable manner esteems them highly just as they are, takes them into His heart and sets Himself in their place. He perceives that the superior will of God, to which He wholly subordinates Himself, requires that He sacrifice Himself for the human race, and seeks His honor in doing this.”<sup>114</sup> Jesus Christ receives glory for His humility and His

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<sup>110</sup> Romans 3:23 (NIV).

<sup>111</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Intellectuals Don’t Need God & Other Modern Myths*, 136.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 51.

willingness to do the will of the Father at the cost of His own life. Christians have hope because a perfect sacrifice was made on their behalf; they are not left to be ensnared by their own sins when they accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

The actors of *Supernatural* and their fanbase have a unique relationship with each other, and they often work together to make a difference in people's lives. For example, the famous non-profit business known as Random Acts "had its humble beginnings in 2009 when actor Misha Collins asked his Twitter followers to join forces with him and find ways to fund-raise and do some good in the world...Random Acts supporters have gone on to perform incredible acts of kindness in their own communities, crafting blankets for homeless children, creating sustainable gardens, utilizing Random Acts funding to purchase new water purifiers for neighbors recovering from surgeries, and distributing care packages for the homeless."<sup>115</sup> The actors themselves are not Christians, but they still have a desire in their hearts to help people. God gives people a sense of Him, who is the ultimate source of good, so people often want to do what they believe to be good. James 1:27 says, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."<sup>116</sup> Seeing, doing, and receiving acts of kindness can give people a general revelation about the Lord, and God will sometimes work through general revelation to bring people to a place where they can receive the special revelation of Jesus Christ.

*Supernatural* has literally saved people's lives because they relate to the characters and promise to keep going instead of giving up on life. Jared Padalecki, who plays the character Sam in the show, created a suicide awareness campaign called "Always Keep Fighting." He made AKF because he "stressed that 'there is no shame in needing support' and said that he hoped the

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<sup>115</sup> Lynn S. Zubernis, *Family Don't End with Blood*, 94-95.

<sup>116</sup> James 1:27 (NIV).

campaign would help people be vocal about their own struggles or in their support of someone who might need it.”<sup>117</sup> Other campaigns that have been created by the actors include “You Are Not Alone,” “Love Yourself First,” and “I Am Enough” to help people realize that they are loved, and they have a family looking out for them. While many of the messages *Supernatural* conveys are negative, there is still redemption in the heart of the show and the people who are involved in it.

### Symbolism

An important aspect of movies and entertainment is a writer’s use of symbolism in a story. Audiences can also notice symbolism that writers might not have meant to put in, but God can reveal to people through their own personal convictions. J.R.R. Tolkien is the author of the *Lord of the Rings* series, and he wanted to leave symbolism and allegories out of his books because “Tolkien felt strongly that the artistic and spiritual effectiveness of stories, especially what he calls ‘fairy stories,’ lies in the *showing* of truth- *portraying* it through plot and character- rather than in the mere *telling* of it. ‘That is why,’ he says, ‘I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion,’ to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.’”<sup>118</sup> Without adding words that directly showed symbolism for Christianity, Tolkien is able to paint a story that everyone, Christian or not, could enjoy while Christian themes are present in the overarching story and the moral choices of each character. Tolkien’s Christian values are present in his books, and audiences can find different metaphors in them and the movies made based on these books that point to the Lord.

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<sup>117</sup> Lynn S. Zubernis, *Family Don’t End with Blood*, 247.

<sup>118</sup> David Rozema, “The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien, Jackson, and ‘The Core of the Original,’” 431.

“Fantasy is a rational activity, in which man refashions by his reason the world which the divine reason has made for him.”<sup>119</sup> Tolkien’s Middle-earth reflects the rationality and the creativity the Lord has given people, and it contains symbolism that points to the real world and its need for a Savior. The characters in the story fight the dark forces of Sauron’s armies, and they also fight the temptation of becoming obsessed with power and quitting the mission. “The loss of vision, claims Tolkien, has its causes in ‘possessiveness’ or ‘appropriation’ and the desire for power. Possessiveness is more than ownership; it means owning something that its owner cannot bear to give up, so that it destroys his freedom by possessing him.”<sup>120</sup> Each character has to stand strong and focus on their will to do what is right by destroying the ring and defeating the threat that hovers over Middle-earth. Several of the characters, including “Frodo, Gandalf and Aragorn embody different aspects of Christ’s redemptive power, Frodo in inner strife and suffering, Gandalf by resurrection from the dead, Aragorn by his delivery of the unquiet dead and by his healing dominion over the living.”<sup>121</sup> Although Tolkien did not originally intend to include religious references in the *Lord of the Rings* stories, audiences who read the books and watch the movies are still able to find different symbols and metaphors that point to Christ.

Like *Supernatural*, the book and movie series *Harry Potter*, written by J.K. Rowling, contains several dark themes that many people are cautious about when reading and watching them. The main plot includes witchcraft and magic with a wizard who uses spells to defeat evil. There are multiple times in the Bible where God warns against witchcraft and the use of magic. It is listed among terrible acts of sin in Deuteronomy 18, which says, “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery,

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<sup>119</sup> Sheridan Gilley, “Christianity & Fantasy in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*,” 48.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or cast spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead.”<sup>122</sup> The Lord hates for people to be participating in occult practices, so it can be dangerous to portray it in entertainment as something enjoyable and exciting because “witchcraft in real life can and does lead to death...Our world is exploding with interest in real witchcraft.”<sup>123</sup> When people become interested in something, they have to be careful not to become obsessed and consumed because it can lead down a dark road to idolatry where God is put in the background of life instead of in the center. Interest in Harry Potter has led to obsession in some cases because “some Harry Potter readers have convinced themselves that Harry’s world is real. Rowling has said she gets letters all the time, desperate letters addressed to Hogwarts, begging to be allowed to attend Harry’s school.”<sup>124</sup> Living in a fantasy world where witchcraft is encouraged can cause people to stray from the path the Lord wants to lead them on to be sanctified through His righteousness.

There are many Christians that argue that the *Harry Potter* series actually contains a good amount of symbolism that points to the gospel story of Christ. The main character, Harry Potter, is often viewed as a Christ-like character, and although he is a wizard working with magic, he is still a good hero because “he doesn’t pursue dark magic; he isn’t contemptuous of authority figures, even if he feels misunderstood by or is impatient with them; he is not consumed with the lust for power, far less with the ultimate goal of that path- rendering oneself immortal without reference to God.”<sup>125</sup> Like Jesus, Harry sacrifices himself to save the people he loves, and he comes back from the dead to destroy the villain. Harry almost gives in to temptation to have unlimited power with the deathly hallows instead of destroying the horcruxes keeping the evil

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<sup>122</sup> Deuteronomy 18:10-11 (NIV).

<sup>123</sup> Jacqui Komschlies, “The Perils of Harry Potter,” 113.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>125</sup> Leonie Caldecott, “A Wizard’s Mission: Christian Themes in Harry Potter,” 25.

wizard Voldemort alive, but he ultimately resists temptation when he “makes a crucial decision to forego seeking these objects of power until he has dealt with the horcruxes.”<sup>126</sup> Jesus was tempted by the devil in the desert, but He came through it without any sin<sup>127</sup>, refusing to give up His humanity and still being willing to save the world through His sacrificial death. Many of the characters in *Harry Potter* are representative of biblical characters, and many of the themes in the movies convey messages similar to the biblical narrative.

*Star Wars* is a franchise that has spanned over decades because of its popularity. It is so famous, in fact, that some people believe in the Force shown in the movies, and they created a religious following out of it. This is a good example of how “it is easy to demonstrate that hyper-real religions often involve belief in entities that are lifted out of the fictional context and ascribed metaphysical reality.”<sup>128</sup> God is all-powerful and omnipresent like the Force portrayed in *Star Wars*, but the biggest difference between God and the Force is the fact that God is a personal God who wants a relationship with His creation, while the Force is more of a Buddhist idea that is simply an impersonal powerful force in the universe. The Force searches for balance between good and evil in the universe, but in reality, good wins and defeats the enemy entirely. The only reason evil even exists in the world is because it will ultimately serve a greater purpose that God has for His people; as soon as its purpose is accomplished, God will completely destroy Satan and his followers.

In order to achieve balance in the universe, there are a select few known as Jedi who tune their minds to meditate on the Force to hear “the will of the Force. When you learn to quiet your

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<sup>126</sup> Leonie Caldecott, “A Wizard’s Mission: Christian Themes in Harry Potter,” 26.

<sup>127</sup> Matthew 4:1-11 (NIV).

<sup>128</sup> Markus Altena Davidsen, “Fiction-based Religion: Conceptualising a New Category Against History-based Religion and Fandom,” 381.



mind, you'll hear them speaking to you."<sup>129</sup> Anyone could allow the Force to flow through them, but they have to focus in order to receive a greater amount of power from the Force. In the same way, the Holy Spirit is available to all who believe in Jesus Christ. God wants His followers to meditate on His Word so they can gain wisdom from the Father and learn of His love for them. He commands the Israelites in biblical times to "keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."<sup>130</sup> He promises the same results to people throughout history and today if they listen to Him and obey His commandments. When God's people truly focus on the Lord and desire to do His will and have Him as the center of their lives, the density of the Holy Spirit's presence is increased in their lives.

The Jedi in *Star Wars* can tap into the Force anytime they want because the Force is constantly there with them. As a reminder, Jedi members will tell each other, "The Force will be with you. Always,"<sup>131</sup> and that gives them strength to keep fighting. Jesus reminds His disciples that He is always with them by promising them, "And surely I am with you, to the very end of the age."<sup>132</sup> God was in the beginning before anything was created, He sent His Son to live among His people and die for the sins of the world, and Christ rose again and promised His Holy Spirit would live inside the hearts of those who believe that He is the Lord of their lives. Using the Force makes for an interesting story in the fictional world, but it pales in comparison to the story of God's love for His people and God's justice on the enemy.

*The Chronicles of Narnia*, written by C.S. Lewis, are books that contain many symbols and metaphors pertaining to Christianity because Lewis was a Christian and reflected his views

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<sup>129</sup> *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*. Directed by George Lucas. Lucasfilm. 1999.

<sup>130</sup> Joshua 1:8 (NIV).

<sup>131</sup> *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*. Directed by George Lucas. Lucasfilm. 1977.

<sup>132</sup> Matthew 28:20 (NIV).

in his works. Unlike J.R.R. Tolkien, Lewis meant to add symbolism into the books to make the Gospel come alive for children reading his book series. The symbolism in the books made its way onto the big screen when the first movie, *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, came to theaters in 2005. While not explicitly labeled as a Christian movie, the Gospel message is obvious throughout the entire film, and it stays true to the source material. It was beneficial to market this movie to a wide range of audiences because “Jesus sells. Or better, perhaps: Christians buy...What better, then, than a story that can be targeted simultaneously at mainstream and Christian markets, a story with Christian allegorical meaning for those in the know, and a rollicking good plot for those who aren’t?”<sup>133</sup> For people who have never read the Bible, watching *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is a good way to get them interested in doing so because they echo C.S. Lewis’s intent to get the Gospel message across in a fun way that the whole family can enjoy. “The director, Andrew Adamson, checked religious symbolism with Douglas Gresham, C.S. Lewis’s stepson, to ensure that *The Chronicles of Narnia* didn’t portray anything ‘theologically incorrect.’”<sup>134</sup> The movie keeps the symbolism of Christianity while providing a good story where children and adults alike will fall in love with the characters and cheer on the Pevensie children as they fight alongside the great lion Aslan to free Narnia from the evil witch’s curse.

Aslan represents Jesus, who is called “the Lion of the tribe of Judah,”<sup>135</sup> saving the world from sin because the movie “climaxes with Aslan’s crucifixion (he barter his own life for that of one of the children- a Judas whose need of redemption stands for humankind’s) and his resurrection. Far from attempting to minimize the Christian iconography, the filmmakers dive

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<sup>133</sup> Tim McKenzie, “The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,” 25.

<sup>134</sup> Hanna Rosin, “Can Jesus Save Hollywood?,” 162.

<sup>135</sup> Revelation 5:5 (NIV)

into it, embracing the ideas and framing the images that make the story so elementally powerful.”<sup>136</sup> Aslan is the good, almighty king who watches over Narnia and works miracles, and he is glorified and shows himself worthy of the Narnians’ praise. In the *Chronicles of Narnia* movie, Hollywood portrays Jesus accurately through their portrayal of Aslan because the movie does not diverge from C.S. Lewis’ Christian theology. Lewis made Aslan as a great and loving king who is the ultimate good. Aslan is contrasted with the White Witch who tries to take over the throne of Narnia and represents Satan. She is allowed to reign for only a short time until Aslan and his army defeat the forces of evil. In the end times, “Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth,”<sup>137</sup> but the Lord’s people do not need to fear because He will gather His armies and throw Satan “into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”<sup>138</sup> In the *Chronicles of Narnia*, the Pevensie children (the protagonists), choose to serve Aslan, and in the end they receive crowns from him to live as kings and queens of Narnia. No matter what the devil does to try and win, Christians know the end result and that they “will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”<sup>139</sup> People who choose to live their lives set apart in holiness for the Lord have an eternal hope that one day, they will see their King face to face and live in heaven with Him forever.

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<sup>136</sup> Steve Vineburg, “Talk to the Animals,” 48.

<sup>137</sup> Revelation 20:7-8 (NIV).

<sup>138</sup> Revelation 20:10 (NIV).

<sup>139</sup> James 1:12 (NIV).

## Conclusion

In every area of life, people should be asking the question, “how does this line up with the Word of God?” Secular movies can have both positive and negative messages, and Christians should compare and contrast the worldviews that are being presented in entertainment with Christian theology. Entertainment is a major way in which people communicate with each other in today’s culture. Christians today can engage culture and talk with others through the media. If they choose to ignore this avenue altogether, there may be some people who will receive a skewed version of Christ and never know the truth. “In a seemingly post-Christian era, there is an urgent need to articulate the basic themes of the Christian mystery in ways that are fresh and original, yet faithful to the truth of the gospel.”<sup>140</sup> Romans 12:2 says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is- his good, pleasing and perfect will.”<sup>141</sup> Christians are called to go into the world and make disciples without being of the world and participating in sin. When watching different movies and shows, Christians can have fun while keeping Christ at the center of their lives and realizing how the messages presented in the media affect people’s worldviews.

Limitations in the study include the fact that this thesis used several movies and shows, but it was not able to cover a large spectrum of entertainment. There are many other movies that have Christian themes which were not included in here. Another limit is the fact that many of the themes in movies can be subjective, and each person can get a different message from the same movie. Plus, people view entertainment through the worldview that they already have; they are not looking to find a new worldview when they watch a movie, but rather they are

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<sup>140</sup> Leonie Caldecott, “A Wizard’s Mission: Christian Themes in Harry Potter,” 24.

<sup>141</sup> Romans 12:2 (NIV).

looking for an entertaining story. Christians can find messages that either go with or against the Word of God, but other people would have a harder time finding them if they do not understand or have never heard what the Bible says.

Entertainment comes in many forms, and this thesis was able to explore a couple of those avenues. For future studies, faith in entertainment can be included in things such as art, literature, music, video games, social media, etc. Future studies could also include interviews from Christians who work in Hollywood and more about people who play a part in making movie magic come to life. Audiences play an important part in the sales and production of different entertainment genres, so more studies could show how everyone can make a difference in what Hollywood produces. The effects that media have on people and how they interact with certain types of entertainment can also be studied through more psychological tests, and it can be coupled with how believing in religion affects them psychologically. Another area that can be studied further is finding the balance between keeping a good story and including a Christian message because “a frequent problem for Christian screenwriters is being more focused on sharing an evangelistic message than on following the structural principles of good storytelling...The result is stories that are more Christian cliché than compelling.”<sup>142</sup> When filmmakers can get a truthful message across to audiences while satisfying them with a good story, it makes uplifting entertainment that can be glorifying to God and enjoyable for people.

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<sup>142</sup> Marshall Allen, “Cinema Verities,” 95.

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