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SINNING AT THE MOVIES

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Is it biblically acceptable for Christians to watch movies? Should Christians watch R-rated movies? Are we sinning or opening ourselves to sin if we expose ourselves to dramatic visual images of sex and violence? These issues have caused heated debate in the church for years. It also doesn't help that some abominable iniquities, once merely hinted at in the movies, are now often shown with impunity in contemporary films. So where should we draw the line?

Some Christian adults draw it very short. They avoid most movies and certainly never watch R-rated movies because they depict too much sin and are tempting to the flesh. Other Christian adults draw the line very long. They watch many movies, even R-rated ones, without examining how these films might affect them. I would draw the line somewhere in between. As adult Christians, we can, and indeed should, watch films, including *some* R-rated movies, for two reasons: (1) because the Bible presents sins in R-rated detail in order to lead us to redemption, and (2) because we should be keen observers of our culture in order to interact redemptively with it.

The Bible Is R-Rated. The Bible explicitly describes many acts of sex, violence, and profanity throughout its pages that rival any harsh "realistic" movie such as *Braveheart*, *Gladiator*, *Saving Private Ryan*, or *Black Hawk Down*. Blasphemy (Isa. 36:13–20), vulgar language (Gal. 5:12), orgies (Exod. 32:3–6), cannibalism (2 Kings 6:28), disemboweling (Judg. 3:21–22), and just about every other depraved act known to humankind is described in the Holy Scriptures, at times in lurid detail.

This isn't just in nonfiction accounts of history. Jesus Himself used movielike metaphors to depict the seriousness of the kingdom of God in His parables: *Hannibal*-like bodily dismemberment (Matt. 24:45–51); *Godfather*-style drowning (Matt. 18:6); and human dissection reminiscent of *Seven* (Matt. 18:7–9); Revelation is a virtual feast of demonic brutality and gore used as prophetic symbols. Parental discretion is advised.

Scholars of the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* point out several key passages in the Song of Solomon that most translators, out of a biased modesty, have rendered less than true to the Hebrew text's explicit sexual descriptions.¹ Granted, this is married love Solomon is erotically describing, but erotic description it still is. This author also

“shoots a film” about illicit sexuality. When he wrote Proverbs 7, Solomon was not merely giving a fictional warning of the wages of sexual sin; he was also using a dramatic image of adulterous seduction in order to draw the reader vicariously into the temptation in order to understand the seriousness of the consequences. Solomon sets up the scenario with vividly racy images. He portrays the sexiness of the harlot and expresses the man’s heart being drawn to her. We hear the intimate whisperings of seduction in his ears. We can almost touch the beautiful exotic linens covering the bed, smell the perfume and spices, and listen to the tempting appeal that there are no consequences. We feel the man give way and give in, following the harlot to her lair. This imagery is lucid enough to make any reader’s head spin with fantasy. Solomon then gives us the gut-wrenching plot twist: “Suddenly he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter...until an arrow pierces through his liver...so he does not know that it will cost him his life” (Prov. 7:22–23, NASB). Solomon makes us *feel* the corruption so we can *experience* the seriousness of the consequences. Through explicit vicarious seduction and destruction, we are scared straight. “Under 17 not admitted unless accompanied by an adult.”

Exhortation, Not Exploitation. Of course, the Bible’s depiction of evils does not justify *all* depiction of evil in movies. The examples above are not intended to justify violence or pornographic sexuality, but they should challenge us to develop a more biblical understanding of violence and sexuality in the movies (indeed, in the arts). The key to understanding whether sin is employed for immoral exploitation or moral exhortation in cinematic drama is in its context and consequences.

Context. In the Bible, sin is always portrayed as sin and not as “alternate lifestyles” or justifiable pleasure. The intent of portraying evil is not to inspire imitation but to turn people away from it. The empathetic presentation of adulterous seduction detailed above was written to ward off temptation by artistically experiencing the shallow nature and ultimate end of illegitimate desire. It describes the appeal of evil and also its end. If a movie makes heroes out of criminals (*Bandits, Oceans Eleven, The Score*) or depicts morality as oppressive and immorality as liberating (*Quills, Chocolat*), then maybe it is exploitative or immoral in intent and context. If it shows that criminals are villains and immorality is not the best way to live (*Liar, Liar; Lord of the Rings; Shallow Hal; Rock Star*), then its intent is moral exhortation. If a movie’s intent is to incite teen sexuality as the essence of adulthood (*American Pie, Road Trip*) or fulfill bloodlust by showing ever more clever ways of murdering people (*Scream, Friday the 13th*), then it is exploitative. If a movie deals honestly with sexuality and mortality in the context of growing up (*A Walk to Remember, Life as a House, Riding in Cars with Boys*), then it may be exhortative.

Consequences. Closely connected with context are the consequences of evil acts. If the portrayal of sin does not have consequences attached to it, then it will invariably encourage that sin. In the Bible, personal vengeance leads to the wrath of God (Rom.

12:17–13:5). The critically acclaimed *In the Bedroom*, however, inspires lawlessness by showing its protagonists as average Americans who have been wronged by the justice system and then get away with taking the law into their own hands. On the other hand, *Training Day*, a more graphic film about police corruption, inspires moral character by showing the self-destruction of vigilantism. The corrupt cop dies by the unrighteous sword he lived by, and the good cop maintains moral ideals even through suffering and injustice.

When Christians quote Philippians 4:8's exhortation to think on whatever is "true, honorable, and pure" as a rationale for avoiding exposure to sins such as these encountered in art, they neglect the full biblical context. Exposing lies is part of dwelling on the truth (Acts 5:1–11); revealing cowardice is part of dwelling on the honorable (Deut. 1:26–30); and uncovering corruption is a part of dwelling on the pure (Matt. 21:12–13).

Interactive Redemption with Culture. Having laid out what I think are some ways of determining exploitation vs. exhortation in a movie, I now need to make the qualification that not all exploitative aspects of a culture should be completely avoided either. Christians should be keenly aware of their culture's failings in order to offer an alternative. Some exposure is necessary. You cannot present an effective solution if you are not acquainted with the problem. Christians are often notorious for condemning and boycotting that with which they are not familiar.

In Acts 17, the Apostle Paul models the kind of redemptive interaction with culture that I am suggesting. When he addressed the pagans of his day, he did so within the arena of contemporary ideas and communication: the Areopagus. In some ways, television, music, and the movies are the Areopagus of our own day. Many people, wittingly or unwittingly, are influenced in their worldview by the news media and entertainment. Like Paul, we had best be informed about the media of communication in our culture—good *and* bad.

As a student under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), Paul was not only aware of Greek culture and philosophy, but he also studied it extensively. He took time to analyze their religious altars (Acts 17:23); he made himself familiar with their deities so he could compare and contrast them with the true God (v. 24). He then quoted, with a certain sense of agreement, several Greek poets including Homer or Plato, Epimenides, Aratus, and Cleanthes (v. 28).² Of course, what he really did was to deconstruct those poets in such a way as to illustrate that they reflected a twisted, suppressed glimpse of God's original truth.³

Paul's exposure to these pagan poets and their culture was within the context of a stringent holy righteousness, even before he was a Christian (Phil. 3:4–6). He evidently did not consider it a compromise to be familiar and to interact redemptively with culture, agreeing and disagreeing where appropriate. He neither avoided culture nor embraced it.

Even though I maintain that Christians are morally allowed and even biblically obligated to watch movies (including some R-rated ones), I do not believe the issues are

as black and white as both extreme positions would prefer. Mature decisions require mutual accountability (Gal. 2:11-14) and practice in having our senses trained to discern good and evil (Heb. 5:14). It also demands sensitivity to the "weaker brother" who may stumble because of our freedom in maturity (1 Cor. 8). That, however, is another whole column. —*Brian Godawa*

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NOTES

- 1 "Sex," *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 777–78.
- 2 Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*, ed. Robert Booth (Atlanta: American Vision, 1996), 258.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 260–61. When Paul quoted Aratus that we are "God's offspring," he certainly did not mean it in the same pantheistic sense that Aratus meant. Instead, Paul acknowledged the shadow of the truth that God "made from one every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26, NASB). God is the father of all humankind in the sense that He is our creator, and we are created in His image.