

Introduction

Three weeks ago, I went to a pastors' screening for *End of the Spear*. After seeing the film, I wanted to write about two issues which concerned me. I wrote about the first issue—the use of a gay activist to play the role of a missionary—and the article generated an avalanche of discussion as well as a lot of follow-up work (this first article can be found [here](#)). The second article I wanted to write was this one—explaining why I am grieved that the Gospel message was truncated in a movie that was supposed to be about five men who exalted it and gave their lives for it. I regret that I have been delayed in getting this published. Contrary to what some readers may want to believe, this bashful presentation of the Gospel was a far more serious error on the part of the production company than their casting choices.

Before I confront some of its weaknesses, I would like to mention some of the movie's strengths. Other viewers may or may not share my opinions. I understand that my responses are subjective, filtered through my previous knowledge and disposition. But I do not think I can be alone in admitting that *End of the Spear* challenged me to sacrifice more for the sake of the Gospel. As a comfortable American, I was convicted about my shallow commitment and deficient fervency. As a father, I was particularly touched by the scene where Stevie Saint runs down the runway shouting, "I love you" as his daddy takes off that last time. The willingness of these men to forsake all to do what God wanted them to do was challenging. I was inspired to see the way those missionaries faced death. These were the good things! I regret that the good things accomplished were overshadowed by a grievous fault—the omission of the best thing. The story of five men who gave their all for the cause of the Gospel was depicted *sans* Gospel!

1. What is the Gospel?

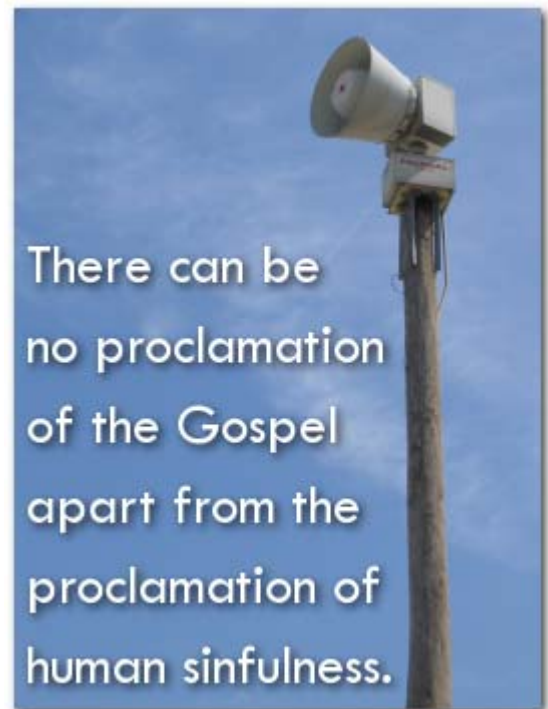
Opinions differ from review to review about whether and to what extent the "Gospel" was presented in Every Tribe Entertainment's version of the martyrs' story. So I must clarify, according to the Bible's definition of terms, what exactly the Gospel *is*. The Gospel is the core of the Christian faith; it is what distinguishes genuine Christianity from every other religion in the world. Christianity is not essentially a moral philosophy, not a system of self-improvement, nor a mechanism for social betterment. Christianity focuses upon the Gospel, and the Gospel is a piece of news.

That is the whole point of the word "Gospel." It literally means "good news." Because it is *news*, it is about *historical events*, events which actually occurred in space and time. If these events are not presented, the Gospel is not presented. Real events make up the good news—the Gospel. What are these events?

The Apostle Paul says in I Corinthians 15:1-4,

"Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."

In this passage, Paul mentions the **two events** that are the heart of the Gospel: **Jesus died. Jesus rose again.** These events are specific—*so specific* that Paul can list evidence for their occurrence. His readers could know that Jesus died because of the circumstances connected with His burial. They could know that Jesus arose because of the testimony of hundreds of witnesses. Without these events, the



Gospel would not exist. Without these events, the Gospel *does not* exist.

The Gospel, however, includes more than simply the events. The Gospel includes a right interpretation of the events. Jesus did not merely “die,” He died “for our sins.” This phrase explains what the event means, and why it happened. The Gospel teaches that Jesus became a substitute for sinners, carried their sins in His body on the cross, was made to be sin for them, was charged with their guilt and endured God’s wrath in their place. If the wrong significance is attributed to the events, then the Gospel is not just undermined, but denied. The Gospel is about specific, crucial events (the death and resurrection of Jesus). Rightly interpreted, the Gospel is about penal substitution, the imputation of our guilt to Christ so that He could pay for our sins on the cross. Rightly interpreted, the Gospel is also about the power Christ has to resurrect the dead and to secure eternal life for those who trust in Him.

This means that there can be **no proclamation of the Gospel apart from the proclamation of human sinfulness**. Unless people are told that they stand condemned before a holy God, then the good news is not really *good* because the bad news is not really *bad*. Unless Christ is presented as the sinner’s substitute, the Gospel has not been presented. Absolutely essential to the Gospel is the teaching that Jesus satisfied the demands of God’s holiness upon the cross of Calvary by dying in the sinner’s place. Also essential to the Gospel is the declaration that Jesus has risen from the dead and offers salvation as a free gift.

This truth that Jesus offers salvation is the remaining component of the Gospel. Because salvation is provided entirely by the cross-work of Christ, it has to be applied entirely as a gift. The Gospel answers the question, “What must I do to be saved?” The answer is and always has been, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” When sinners repent of their rebellion and trust Jesus to save them, then God credits to them the righteousness of Christ and pronounces them righteous. **God justifies sinners through faith alone.**

Without human sin and condemnation, there is no Gospel. Without the death and resurrection of Jesus, there is no Gospel. Without the substitutionary atonement, there is no Gospel. Without justification through faith alone, there is no Gospel. These are not merely peripheral truths. They are rather the irreducible minimum that must be grasped in order for the Gospel to be proclaimed and received.

Moreover, without the Gospel, there is no Christianity. Whatever religion fails to present the three truths outlined above is not Christianity. It is a different religion. In fact, it belongs to an entirely different class of religions. Social reform is not the Gospel. Self-amendment is not the Gospel. Moral improvement is not the Gospel. Those things may and usually do result when people receive the Gospel, but they are no substitute for it. **No Gospel, no Christianity.** It’s just as simple as that.

2. What did the movie include about the missionaries, the Gospel, and the Christian faith?

The missionaries were not portrayed as the godly, evangelical missionaries that they were. Some defenders of the movie would protest that it was not intended as a vehicle for the Gospel in the first place. I would contend that you cannot separate the Gospel from the lives of these men and be telling the same story. The Gospel was their passion. It was their ultimate motivation for living in Ecuador at all. Introducing the Gospel that saved them to other sinners was the crux of their mission—as evidenced in their journals. How can it be, then, that the movie-version missionaries engage in no spiritual activity prior to their slaying? The producers are careful to show them as real people—showing one missionary couple dancing together in their house, showing the group laughing together and planning—but never showing a Bible once in the movie. Prayer is mentioned once or twice; but the missionaries themselves never pray, never read their Bibles, never mention Jesus, nor converse about God. No church services are shown or implied. There is no mention of their daily devotions, nor of the spiritual journals that we know these men were careful to keep. Twice, the word “missionary” is used, but other than that, viewers could honestly mistake these “missionaries” for anthropologists or Peace Corps workers rather than authentic Christian missionaries.

Jim Elliot was portrayed dishonorably as a reckless buffoon. He gets screen time on three main occasions (which is, sadly, more screen time than McCully, Fleming, and Youderian receive, combined). The first scene shows him clowning around during a gathering of the missionary families. He exults in

having learned to say “Where’s the john?” in the native tongue. He behaves like a monkey until called down by one of the ladies. In another scene, flying with Nate over the Waodani settlement, Jim hoots and hollers incessantly, excepting only the moments his stomach gets queasy. The third scene that includes Jim recognizably is when the Waodani venture onto Palm Beach. He runs toward them, already shirtless and shedding his pants, so that he ends up standing before them in his boxers, exclaiming, “We’re just like you!” I do not doubt that Elliot said or did some of these things, but, stripped of their proper context, the treatment of him as a self-absorbed, frivolous boy seems both deliberate and disturbing. On my desk last week sat a book three inches thick: *The Journals of Jim Elliot*. He was a godly young man with a genuine passion for souls. The movie’s caricatured rendition of Jim was misleading at best, reprehensible at worst. It is one thing to show a man’s personality, but it is another to obliterate any indication of his sober commitment to the Gospel, which was, by numerous *other* accounts, the preeminent passion of this man’s brief life.

The supposed Gospel message in the film was not a uniquely evangelical Gospel.

The combined content of the spiritual message was

- Some people are ready for heaven and some are not.
- The missionaries are followers of God.
- This God is the friend of the missionaries.
- God has left his message in carvings (taken to mean revelation).
- This God sent His Son who was speared but didn’t spear back so the people spearing Him would one day live well (“living well” is equated with “no more revenge killing”).
- The idea of prayer was mentioned over a CB conversation twice.
- It is predicted (by his unbelieving fellow-tribesmen) that Kimo will soon start building a house for God.
- The following of God’s path causes people to live differently.

This belief set could be describing a contextualized Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy, Mormonism, or Jehovah’s Witnesses. What a travesty—a **wasted opportunity to proclaim the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, not by works**. When believers have control of the content of the film, the Gospel should be presented in all of its fullness. This film could have easily been a promotion of pacifism or non-violent response to persecution. So, you cannot, under any circumstances say that this movie has the Gospel in it. To do so is to betray your own ignorance of the true message.

Conversion to Christianity was not given as a reason that the tribe changed their ways.

Out of allegiance to the Gospel, the movie should have portrayed the reasons for the change in the tribal tension—rather than permitting people to draw their own vague conclusions. It is well-documented that the reason the tribe changed their ways was due to the power of the Gospel in their lives. *Christianity Today* published an interview wherein they stated, “Now some anthropologists, such as [James S.] Boster, who is a professor at the University of Connecticut, say Christianity was pivotal in ending the tribal violence. ‘I believe that conversion to Christianity was instrumental in saving the Waodani,’ Boster told CT. He says the five missionaries’ refusal to fight back, despite their guns, and the forgiveness shown by the missionaries’ close kin showed the Waodani the power of Christianity.”¹ According to estimates, 80% of the Waodani have heard the Gospel and between 25-40% have converted. Steve Saint estimates that 430 of the 2000 Waodani have been baptized.² The Gospel made a definite impact upon the Waodani people. So, why not share the reason for the change?

So, in a movie that shares the story of what has been happening among the Waodani over the last five decades, why not share the missionaries’ Gospel-driven motives? Rusty Benson of AgapePress writes, “The authentic and passionate Christ-centered motive of the missionaries is lacking, rendering an incomplete portrayal. In contrast, [Elisabeth] Elliot’s book [*Through the Gates of Splendor*] clearly documents the Gospel zeal that drove the mission endeavor.”³

The truth of the story is that the missionaries’ preeminent purpose in going to the Waodani was to spread the Gospel. Todd Wood, a frequent author here on SI, wrote about the convictions of these five men. He summed it up well:

Quote:

Nate Saint shared,

"God Himself laid down the law when He built the universe. He knew when He made it what the price was going to be. God didn't hold back His only Son, but gave Him up to pay the price for our failure and sin."

Roger Youderian testified,

"The happiest day of my life was the day I accepted Jesus Christ as my Saviour for the remission of my sins, duly repented for, and with God's help I hope and pray for the faith and strength to glorify our Father through my daily living as a witness and follower of Christ. Searching the Scriptures is my greatest source of hope and inspiration, having yet to learn the full power of prayer. I used to say, 'This is a great world.' With this new faith, this feeling has increased a thousandfold and I fairly ache within from happiness and rejoicing in sharing God's manifold blessing which He gives to this world with Infinite mercy and grace."

Ed McCully declared,

"I stood by the bed of a eighteen-year-old Indian boy in the eastern jungle. I watched him vomit blood and in a few minutes I watched him die. In that hour, as I stood looking at his lifeless form lying on bamboo sticks on the dirt floor of the hut, I was to realize more fully what Paul meant in I Thessalonians 5. 'Ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.' I will not forget the screaming-chanting wail of these heathen folk as they beat their breasts and mourned for two days and nights. It was a pathetic picture of 'no hope.' Tonight I pray a peculiar prayer . . . that God will spare the lives of these Indians until He enables us to bring them the message of hope, of eternal life, of salvation in their own language."

Pete Fleming once wrote,

"I am longing now to reach the Aucas if God gives me the honor of proclaiming the Name among them . . . I would gladly give my life for that tribe if only to see an assembly of those proud, clever, smart people gathering around a table to honor the Son—gladly, gladly, gladly! What more could be given to life?"

Jim Elliot prayed,

"Father, make of me a crisis man. Bring those I contact to decision. Let me not be a milepost on a single road; make me a fork, that men must turn one way or another on facing Christ in me."

What is this story without the Gospel, in its purity and clarity? When you remove the central message from a story, you have lost the story.

3. Was ETE trying to make a Gospel-proclaiming film?

This is perhaps the most difficult question to find an answer to. Many churches would say that they were led to believe this would be a movie about the Gospel. I heard from a pastor named Kenny who pastors in La Mirada, CA. He said, "I also saw a test screening of this movie back in the fall.... That Every Tribe has taken such a strong marketing campaign toward the local church really makes me feel uncomfortable. I have (no exaggeration here) received a dozen calls from a distribution rep and receive emails inviting me to sign up to rent out a theater almost every day this past month. It just doesn't square."⁴

Thousands of packets were sent to churches; and the message churches received was to use this as a tool for evangelism. A website was even set up to help churches use this for outreach.⁵ Anger and frustration results when believers actually view the film and begin to feel like the latest victims in a game of bait-and-switch.

The seeker-sensitive approach to the Gospel is not in keeping with the Gospel itself, nor with the legacy of the men who died for it. Even if there were less measurable results of the Gospel's impact among the Waodani, the evidence is abundant that the Gospel defined the lives of the missionaries. If their story is to be told, the Gospel cannot be muted or extracted from it. If the Gospel is muted, it simply is not the same story. In a recent conference call with Mart Green, who took responsibility for the script, and Jim

Hanon, the director, I asked why the Gospel was left out. Green replied, "The Gospel is explicit in the film. Good movies don't tell, they show." I guess it all comes down to what you mean by "show." You can show some *results* of the Gospel message, but, in a story so profoundly and inextricably rooted in the Gospel, the Gospel *itself* must be told. The blood atonement is nowhere in the movie. It is not alluded to, illustrated, explained, implied, or even hinted at.

On the other hand, it was obvious to anyone who might inspect closely, that ETE was careful to avoid "evangelism" talk that might not be seeker-savvy. It is difficult even to find the word "Christian" on their website. They were even careful with their terminology amongst believers. In an email sent out to Christians the week before the release, you can see where the emphasis lies.

Quote:

We're calling for an army of prayer warriors who will join us to fast and pray through the 7 days leading up to the release of End of the Spear in theaters next Friday. Can you set aside an hour a day, one of the seven days, or join with us to fast and pray all 7 days?

Beginning Monday, January 16th through January 22nd:

- 1) Pray God would be honored through the widespread telling of the story.*
- 2) Pray millions of people will be impacted and inspired to begin an adventure that will take them out of their comfort zone to live out the words of the Bible in the world around them.*
- 3) Pray End of the Spear will capture the interest of national media and press.*
- 4) Pray End of the Spear will be #1 in the Box Office on Opening Weekend.*
- 5) Pray the success in USA theaters will spread to theaters in nations around the world.*
- 6) Pray the Church will use the film to make contact with youth, families, and their community.*

This was clearly an earnest letter with good intentions. But it is also indicative. Notice: Christians were never asked to pray that the Gospel would be proclaimed clearly or that people might be pointed to the Christ for whom these martyrs died—the same Christ who died and rose again for our sins, according to the Gospel. Instead of risking necks and pocketbooks for the Gospel's sake, we pray for the effectiveness of a diluted version. We pray, not that God's truth would be glorified and powerful, but that theater-owners and unbelieving viewers might be open-minded enough to "take an adventure" into our way of thinking.

ETE has been careful to handle the criticism by clarifying that they were telling the story from the perspective of the Waodani. While I think that may have been a poor decision (since the audience is American), the sadder part is what that statement actually says about the Waodani's understanding of the Gospel. If this movie truly depicts the perspective of the Waodani, they do not understand crucial events and elements of Gospel and remain lost in their sins. From all that I have read, many of the members of the tribe are true believers, but why do the Waodani in their version of the story leave out the entire theology of the cross?

I submit that Jim Elliot himself would have struggled with ETE's approach in *End of the Spear* and would have voted for a straight-forward Gospel. After studying James 1-3, Jim Elliot wrote the following about the trend of compromise in American Christianity:

Quote:

Ah, tolerant generation, who pays the prophets and fondles them who are sent unto you—woe. How much better had it been for you and for them if only they had found death at your hands! Cursed be your Judas embrace. Damned be your friendliness—it speaks not well for you; it lays shattering condemnation on your prophets. Ah, generation that hears, but feels not, listens but aches not, harks, but knows not pain nor the pleasurable healing balm thereof. Tell me, does all fire extinguish save in hell? Damned be this cool tepidity. Have we not fire to hate? Does no flame seize our prophets? Show me one burning heart. Let me see a single worldling afire with true passion, one heavenling consumed with his God's eternal burning. In them I would find excuse for you, my cheating, shamming, joyless generation. Well has your own poet said, you live and die 'ox-like, limp and leaden-eyed.'⁶

4. Why is the handling of the Gospel an important issue?

Some may say, "Hey, it's just a movie. Relax. So you didn't like how the Gospel was portrayed. Invest your own millions. Make your own movie." Well, it is not just the movie. The movie is a shining example (an embarrassing exposure) of what is happening to the Gospel throughout evangelicalism. This portrayal was not a mistake. This portrayal was intentional.

After attending the screening, I was disturbed to the point that I wanted to talk to the movie representative who was there. The rep was introduced as a former Youth For Christ worker. I talked with him and expressed my disappointment with the lack of the Gospel message in the film. He told me that the Gospel was everywhere in the movie. I disagreed. And then I heard him say it. The statement that really lit my rockets: "That's what's wrong with the church. They've been preaching and people aren't listening. It's time to tell the story. We want to gather people around the fire and begin a conversation."

I know where I have heard that before. This was not just a movie, this is postmodern evangelicalism. I believe that we need to get back to the basics in evangelicalism when we talk about the Gospel. When we say "Gospel," we must know what we're talking about.

When we talk about the content of the Gospel, we must get the message right. When people say something is the Gospel when it is not, they corrupt the purity of its message. I was surprised and troubled over the last three weeks when several leaders in Christian ministry told me that the Gospel was clear in the movie. Someone who claims that has communicated that he has no idea what the Gospel really is.

Focus on the Family's review, for instance, betrays a lack of understanding of the crucial events and elements that comprise the Gospel of Christ:

Quote:

"Yet maybe no message stands out as much as redemption. The Gospel is clearly presented, stated not in Christianese—or even English—but via the beautiful and unique terminology of the Waodani. That accomplishes two things. It helps allay criticism from skeptics who believe Jesus and movies should be mutually exclusive; and it demonstrates the complete relevance of God's universally applicable Good News. As Saint says, 'It's free from a lot of the churchiness and expressions we use. They aren't as sophisticated, so it comes across as more palatable.'"⁷

The reviewer uses a theological term in an uninformed manner. Theologically, redemption refers to the divine act of buying back or purchasing from sin through the shed blood of Christ. Only through Christ is true redemption found. Ephesians 1:7 says, "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." Gospel redemption is not only unclear in the movie, it's not even there.

When we talk about the message of the Gospel, we must communicate it thoroughly. When people rely on image rather than word to convey the Gospel, they risk the miscommunication of its message. Romans 10:13-14 says, "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?"

The Gospel was communicated *via* words in the first place for a reason. It must be proclaimed in plain speech so that people understand it. ETE believes that lost people will just "get it." They will not. Just because society is becoming more pagan, doesn't mean we try to be more subtle with the Gospel message. In fact, a correct understanding of the depravity of man will convince any believer that we must proclaim the message in clear speech. I received an email from a lady in Ohio who went and saw the movie. She said,

Quote:

"There was a lady sitting behind me in the theatre and she seemed to be confused about the plot. It was obvious from what she was saying that she didn't know the story and didn't understand missions. She said things like 'Why do they want to see that tribe so badly? Are they crazy?' and 'I just don't understand.'⁸

Not just individuals, but people *en masse* do not "get it." The New York Times did not "get it", but they don't get much nowadays (view article [here](#)).⁹

Many have said that the Gospel is displayed in the movie through the changed lives of the Waodani even though the message isn't preached. Despite sacrificial investments, best intentions, and sincerest hopes, we cannot shape the culture merely through "showing" the results of the Gospel. You can depict the spearing of five men, but you cannot reveal what brought them death-ready to Palm Beach without using words. You can depict the cessation of tribal vendettas, but you cannot effect change in your audience without proclaiming the "why." If Christians are going to influence the culture at all, it will be only as we proclaim the message of the Gospel in its purity. Only then could lost sinners possibly understand the truth, bow the knee, and hope in the only Christ Who can save them. To show the results of the message without explaining the message leaves the viewer confused, and perhaps worst of all, dedicated to live a life of good works independent of the saving work of Christ.

Just to show that image alone is not enough, I give you one example. Many readers have emailed to blame me for condemning Chad Allen to hell. One burdened emailer was sure that now his eternal destiny had been sealed forever, condemned by my previous article. I truly hope that Chad Allen experiences the saving power of Jesus Christ. But it is clear that he does not understand the Gospel according to the Bible, even though he starred in the movie. He said,

Quote:

"The message of the film is that there is a power in forgiveness.... You can call it the power of love, if that is your understanding. You can call it the power of God, if that is your understanding. But I believe there is a power we can make use of that can transform and make miracles..."¹⁰

Unbelievers may trust Christ and be saved from hell only when the Gospel is clearly articulated to them, not when it is mildly alluded to. As believers, we must simply proclaim the message with clear words. While using clear words refers to the content of the message, preaching refers to the action of sharing those words.

When we talk about the spreading of the Gospel, we must be fervent about the preaching of it. When people minimize the effectiveness of preaching, they are undermining God's primary ordained means of communicating His good news. To preach simply means to proclaim. I heard the movie representative disparage preaching. This same attitude was communicated in many interviews with the production company. I could not help but think that these guys would have been really uncomfortable around Peter. Here's a clip from his sermon in Acts 5.

Quote:

"The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out."

Peter wouldn't have had too many invitations from evangelicals to come and fill their pulpits. The postmodern evangelicals will say that when we preach, we offend. Well, the Gospel has always had that

effect on some people (see Paul). Just because the message is an offence does not mean we should shy away from proclaiming it. In a review about the documentary which preceded *End of the Spear*, *Christianity Today* did an interview with Mart Green. Mart was asked about his approach to communicating the Gospel: "Beyond the Gates isn't real in your face with Jesus and the Gospel. Was that intentional?" Mart's answer: "Very intentional. The world doesn't want to hear that kind of stuff, but I think when you tell the story just as it happened, it works. We didn't tell the Waodoni not to say things. We didn't tell them what to say. We just said, 'Tell the story.'"¹¹ In other words, we acknowledge that people do not want to hear the Gospel, but we are reasonably certain they will understand a story about the havoc and blessings it wreaked—that should do the trick just as well. (Anybody see a danger yet?)

The danger with messing with the delivery of the message is that people end up having misplaced trust. Paul said in I Corinthians 2:4, "And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." Paul made a direct correlation between how he delivered the message and how people viewed God's role in life change. Believers must communicate the message in the demonstration of the Spirit and power or we will create a crowd of people who look to men, and not God, for their direction. From God's perspective, he is well-pleased when we just trust him to use the "foolishness of preaching" to save them that believe (I Corinthians 1:21).

When we talk about the life-changing power of the Gospel, we must rely upon God to do the work. When we focus on the recipient of the message instead of God, we become man-centered instead of God-centered. Paul said, "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." Paul's faith stood in the actual power of God displayed through the Gospel. Much of the evangelical emphasis on evangelism through the years has been focused, not on the power of God through the Word, but on the power of the messenger. Popularized by leading evangelicals, relational evangelism has become little more than the psychology of a sales presentation. We have moved from slick door-to-door presentations to elaborate relational evangelism plans. Make no mistake, it's a shift in style, not focus. It's just as man-centered as before. There is no power in the Gospel, it's in the relationship. When's the last time you sat in a local church evangelism training program where they spent two or three lessons just talking about God's role in the conversion process? God's power to change lives?

We also see a man-centered shift when we move away from propositional truth to emotion. After all, if all of our efforts are focused on people making a decision, let's make it as easy as possible. So, we make the lights right, the music soft, and the images captivating, betraying our trust in the work of man to bring about a result. This seems to be the underlying philosophy behind ETE. The director, Jim Hanon, expressed his views in an interview with Greg Wright of *Hollywood Jesus*.

Quote:

Wright: *As a pastor, I understand that it's the work of the Holy Spirit that makes things possible for God which, for man, are impossible. Yet the movie—even the documentary—never preaches, so the theology behind the story is never really presented.*

Hanon: *A movie should never preach. The medium is at its best when it raises a question of universal interest and explores the question with both its darker and lighter sides. In the end, either something resonates as emotionally true, or it doesn't, and I really believe the truth can be trusted. I like the quote from Henry Kaiser, "When your work speaks for itself, don't interrupt."*

But is the theology of the story never presented? In a motion picture, what characters say doesn't necessarily make you believe them. The audience only knows the truth about a character from the choices the character makes while under extreme pressure. The old idiom "actions speak louder than words" is at work in the structure of every film, including this one. I think the audience is smart. I think the audience can perceive the theology behind the story—and what's more, they can experience it emotionally rather than just intellectually. For many, this will cause them to rethink what they hold to be true; for others, this will affirm what they already know to be true.

Wright: *Yes, you're right. The theology is presented through the story, rather than articulated verbally. So how do you hope the dynamic of story and faith play out in connection with skeptical audiences (many of which will include Christians, too)?*

Hanon: *I think the Christian audience wants to have a deeply satisfying motion picture experience, same as everyone else, and some of the most frequent moviegoers are Christians because we are open to the wonder of things.*

This story is unbelievable, and it is true. What that meant for me as a filmmaker was to help the audience connect emotionally to the characters and story, and see how much they could feel the reality of this journey.

Is the story hopelessly optimistic, as you described it? Or is the truth it explores real; and even though the mind can't fully grasp it, does the heart still wonder at it? Does it raise a question we all think about in the midnight of our soul?"¹²

According to Hanon, if your emotions resonate that something is true, you can trust it. His position is that *emotions confirm truth*, not the other way around. This is dangerous. It's why *Brokeback Mountain* is a very dangerous movie. If you can sit in the theatre and feel gay love and it resonates emotionally, it must be true.

However, it is evident that some evangelicals have been dying to get these types of movies accepted on the big screen. In fact, this is the new method that they've been waiting for. You can see the anticipation in quotes from a few emails I have received:

Quote:

"My son has already seen the movie and believes it is a great tool in witnessing and sharing his faith. He said he was excited to see so much money spent on a movie about something that mattered. He said this movie 'rocks' compared with lots of low budget 'Christian' movies that lack the expertise and funds."

Quote:

"To criticize is only going to blunt (pardon the pun) what could be a great tool in the Christian community. With *Lord of the Rings*, *Narnia* and *The Spear*, we finally have some movies with substance, value and Gospel truths imbedded. Lets build on what we have and not find fault where there is none. Don't let something about a great movie spoil it for everyone else."

And I guess I really messed up God's plan with this family—

Quote:

"We were able to see God's love being spread, and we heard the Gospel message being given. We were planning (with a clear conscience and clean heart) to take our two teenagers to see it. Now, thanks to you, all the good that we saw, and all the witnessing were planning to do using this movie to invite our unsaved friends has been marred."

Perhaps some of the most damaging effects of this worldview is that we have rendered God powerless. We have shifted from trusting Him, to trusting methods.

Sadly, evangelicalism has sloppily handled the Gospel for decades and now we're reaping the whirlwind. We are coming to an age where we are going to have to fight for the Gospel even within evangelicalism. So, let's get back to getting the message right, communicating it with words, preaching it to every creature, and trusting God to do the work.

5. Should Christians be making Christian, Gospel-preaching films for the theatre?

Some have chided expectant believers for looking to a movie to bring about true conversion. Well, God is the one who does the converting, but I'm not so quick to say that a movie can't proclaim the message. I believe films can aid in proclaiming the Gospel. On the other hand, A.W. Tozer would disagree with me and he has some good thoughts to back it up. I'd be the first to admit that these arguments are new to me and I am still processing much of what he says.

Christians have been making films for decades, but most have not been made for the big screen. The Jesus Film Project claims to have shown the film to over six billion people with over two hundred million professions of faith since 1979. I have been to the inner jungles of Africa where we showed simple children's films that illustrated the Gospel clearly. After the movie, someone got up and preached the Gospel and hundreds came to Christ. However, the trend seems to be that whenever a Christian production company endeavors to gain acceptance into theaters with a film that proclaims the Gospel, the message risks being compromised in the process. If Hanon is right, we must either water down the message or lose the effectiveness of the medium. In other words, the most Christian theater is bad theater, and the only good theater must be deliberately non-Christian. If those are truly the stakes, and Christian drama and the Christian message are so mutually exclusive, then Christians ought to opt out of the industry entirely. As Steve Saint so aptly stated, "The theater is not a good venue for doing that (sermonizing)." ¹³

However, if Christians are going to engage the medium, Christian film-makers should never shy away from the Gospel message, but rather increase in boldness with the Gospel. Unfortunately, it seems that we're more sensitive about being "preachy" than the unsaved world. I believe a secular movie company would have done a better job in portraying the story of these five missionaries. Ted Turner produced *Gods and Generals*. Turner put more into his movie about the Christian faith than ETE did into theirs about five missionaries who died for the sake of the Gospel. Focus on the Family's reviewed the content of the film. What was the spiritual content of Ted Turner's movie?

Quote:

"Quite a bit, with the majority of it positive. Men read scripture aloud. They quote it. And they pray. The three leaders are God-fearing and deeply religious. For instance, before heading off to war, Gen. Jackson and his wife, Anna, read aloud II Corinthians 5 ("For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens"). Then they pray together for peace. Jane Beale, a Fredericksburg socialite, quotes a portion of Psalm 23 as her sons head off to battle. In his sermon, a southern minister reads Psalm 27. On the first day of the Battle of Manassas (Bull Run), Jackson eloquently and sweetly prays for his wife, whose birthday happens to fall on the same day. He tells the Lord he is ready to come home (die) should he fall during the fight, while expressing concern that his army may be forced to fight on the Sabbath. Asked by another officer why he is so peaceful in battle even when the bullets fly so closely, Jackson responds that God has fixed the time for his death."¹⁴

A group of Lutherans funded *Luther*, a story about the life of the Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther. It opened in four hundred theatres and later, MGM put it out on video and DVD. Here are statements that they opted to include in the script:

Quote:

"Salvation could exist outside the Church, but not outside Christ."

"When the Devil throws your sin in your face and says you deserve death in hell, say this, 'I admit know I deserve death in Hell. What of it? For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God. Where He is, there I shall be also.'"

"We obsess over relics, indulgences, pilgrimages to holy places, yet all the time there is Christ...in every corner, in every hour of the day. He isn't found in the bones of saints, but here in your love for each other, in His sacraments and in God's Holy Word. If we live the Word by faith and love in service to one another, we need fear no man's judgment."

"Unless I am convinced by Scripture and by plain reason and not by popes and councils who have so often contradicted themselves, my conscience is captive to the Word of God. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. I cannot and I will not recant."

"The Gospel cannot be denied for the word of man."

"To renounce these books would be unthinkable for that would be to renounce accepted Christian truth."

When interviewed about the theological content of the movie, the producers said they were adamant about maintaining theological integrity. They didn't want Luther made out to be a social revolutionary or a champion of free speech. The producer, Dennis Clauss, said several major Hollywood studios approached him to buy the film, but wanted them to cut out the theological elements and focus more on the story. We felt strongly that Luther's relationship with God was his driving force. You simply couldn't remove that." So, one can produce a film that proclaims the Gospel and does not compromise the story to the point that it's a shadow of what it once was.

In Closing

I would be the first to admit that Gospel proclamation in this day and age is difficult. Temptations on every side make us want to temper the message or quit preaching it altogether. God knew we would feel this way; and Paul, under divine inspiration, reminded us of this glorious charge that we have been given. He exhorts us to not grow weary or lose heart in the ministry of declaring the Gospel faithfully. II Corinthians 2: 1-5 says,

Quote:

"Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

I find my heart refreshed when I read this passage. A discouraged Methodist preacher wrote to the great Scottish preacher, Alexander Whyte, to ask his counsel. Should he leave the ministry? "Never think of giving up preaching!" Whyte wrote to him. "The angels around the throne envy you your great work!"¹⁵ When we say "Gospel," let us keep in mind the great work to which we have been called.

This article was sent to ETE prior to publication.

¹<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/001/30.38.html>

²<http://www.sacbee.com/24hour/religi...-11789063c.html>

³<http://headlines.agapepress.org/archive/1/182006c.asp>

⁴ Kenny pastors at Grace Evangelical Free Church. He blogs at <http://braincud.blogspot.com/>

⁵<http://www.willowcreek.com/wcanews/...p?id=WN08142005>

⁶<http://www.sharperiron.org/showthread.php?t=2286>

⁷<http://www.pluggedinonline.com/movi...es/a0002501.cfm>

⁸ Used by permission.

⁹<http://movies2.nytimes.com/2006/01/...ies/20spea.html>

¹⁰http://www.chadallenonline.com/press/out_mag06.htm

¹¹ *Christianity Today*, Mark Moring 4/26/05

¹² Greg Wright, *Hollywood Jesus*, December 25th

¹³<http://www.christianpost.com/articl...ationwide/1.htm>

¹⁴<http://www.pluggedinonline.com/movi...es/a0000127.cfm>

¹⁵Walvoord and Zuck. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Victor Books: 1989), II Cor. 4:1.