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Anything which makes it easier for us to worship spiritually should be encouraged, while anything that draws attention to itself rather than to God should be eliminated from our corporate worship services.

—Robert G. Rayburn

I believe a local church exists to do corporately what each Christian believer should be doing individually—and that is to worship God. It is to show forth the excellencies of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. It is to reflect the glories of Christ ever shining upon us through the ministries of the Holy Spirit.

—A. W. Tozer

Movies for Church Leaders: Twenty Films That Can Be Used in Ministry

Dennis D. Haack

Reflecting on the story of the exodus, the third-century theologian, Origen, concluded that Christians are free to plunder the Egyptians as long as they are careful not to set up a golden calf from the booty.[1] The basic idea is simple: Because all people are made in God's image and live in the reality created by that God, even pagan cultures can be mined for ideas or artifacts that can be subverted from their original use and pressed into the service of the gospel. Missionary Don Richardson followed Origen's advice, for example, when he identified Christ as the true Peacechild for the Sawi of New Guinea.[2] And the apostle Paul modeled cultural plundering in Athens (Acts 17), when he used the altar to the unknown god and the Stoic poets as both a window of insight into the worldview of his audience and as a point of contact to begin his discussion of the gospel with them.

Before Paul spoke at the Areopagus, Luke records that the apostle had studied the Athenian culture with some care, observing and reading so that he could understand what they believed and why. He walked around and looked carefully at their shrines, he gave them the truth (17:23), and he was acquainted enough with their literature to quote their writers (17:28). It should be noted that this was a profoundly subversive act: their unknown god was identified by Paul as the one true God, and their poet's arguments concerning Zeus were applied, instead, to the God of Scripture. In other

words, the artifacts and ideas of his audience's pagan culture and religion had been creatively (mis)applied to the truth concerning Jesus Christ. It's the subversive nature of the tactic that lends its power: two givens of their world and life-view were suddenly challenged as untrue, not via debate, but through apparent agreement, and something that was simply obvious to them was assigned a radical new meaning. Paul then used these two aspects of their culture to help relate the truth of God to them, beginning the discussion at a point in which their worldview was particularly vulnerable.

One part of modern culture which is easily "plundered" is cinema. The enormous popularity of the movies makes them a good point of contact with the unchurched. Because movies tend to reflect the cultural consensus, it is possible to use modern film as a resource to help Christians comprehend the world and life views of those who do not share our deepest conviction.

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makes them a good point of contact with the unchurched. Because movies tend to reflect the cultural consensus, it is possible to use modern film as a resource to help Christians comprehend the world and life views of those who do not share our deepest conviction. And because the movies, for better or for worse, represent the main form of storytelling in modern culture, they often touch on the *big questions* of life, which provides a beginning point for discussion in which the good news of Christ can be presented.

Films can be used in ministry, by and large, in three ways. First, sometimes carefully selected scenes can be shown which help make a point, illustrate some idea, or focus discussion. There is, for example, a remarkable scene in *Emma* in which Emma is reproved by a friend for being cruel and heartless to a woman at a picnic. I have used that scene while teaching about the tongue and accountability, and found it a powerful illustration. Second, movies can also be viewed in their entirety and then discussed with groups of believers. As we lead our people in discussion, we are modeling discernment with them, a skill that is vital to Christian discipleship. Besides, since this is the way most people usually enjoy movies, we are also modeling how they can use film discussions with non-Christian friends and with family. And third, film can be used evangelistically. My wife and I are not particularly gifted in evangelism, but we have desired to be faithful witnesses. We have found thoughtful movies to be excellent discussion starters, and many of our non-Christian acquaintances who would never dream of attending church are happy to come over on a Saturday night to watch and talk about the big questions of life and death raised in some film.

What follows is a list of twenty films which I have found useful, and which I commend as worth considering for those who would like to begin using film in ministry. The first seven are especially helpful in teaching situations with

believers,and stimulating discussion on the various themes or issues raised in the film. The discussion also provides an opportunity to demonstrate and practice the process of Christian discernment.[3] The remaining fourteen films, though useful with Christian groups, have also proven useful in generating discussion on the big questions of life in evangelistic settings.[4] Obviously, not every film listed here is appropriate for every audience, and discretion should be exercised.

1) ***A Man for All Seasons*** (1966; not rated, but probably PG; directed by Fred Zinnemann). An award-winning film on the life and martyrdom of Sir Thomas Moore, who chose to stand for what he believed regardless of the cost. A great film to see during a discussion of Dick Keyes' fine—and vitally important—book *True Heroism.*[5] Themes worth discussing include the meaning and importance of integrity, virtue, and character; courage in the face of opposition and great cost; and the meaning of true heroism vs. cultural success.

2) ***Saving Grace*** (1986; PG; directed by Robert Young). A new pope, wearied by his isolation in the Vatican, escaped to serve, incognito and sacrificially, the people of a small village under the sway of a local thug. Though set within the trappings of Catholicism, the story is a fine exploration of the meaning of servanthood and sacrificial ministry; how to deal with opposition; and how to resist sexual temptation.

3) ***Searching for Bobby Fischer*** (1993; PG; directed by Steven Zaillian). A warm and edifying film of parents who discover their young son is a chess whiz. Themes worth discussing include parental love and family relationship; the role of competitive sports in family life; and the true meaning of success and failure.

4) ***Enchanted April*** (1992; PG; directed by Mike Newell). Two women set out from rainy, chilly London to vacation at a beautiful castle in Italy. In our overly-busy age, when even vacations are pursued with worklike efficiency and frantic energy, this film is a reminder of the need for the re-creation that comes from rest and Sabbath observance.

5) ***Babette's Feast*** (1988; G; Danish with English subtitles; directed by Gabriel Axel). The daughters of an austere religious leader take in a refugee from revolutionary France, who, in giving literally all she has, uses the art of cooking to transform their lives and community. *Babette's Feast* naturally provokes discussion on the nature of sacrificial service, the ministry of hospitality, and the relationship of art (beauty) to faith (truth).

6) ***Shadowlands*** (1994; PG; directed by Richard Attenborough). Anthony Hopkins stars in this award-winning, though flawed, film about C. S. Lewis, his marriage to Joy Davidman, and her subsequent illness and death. Themes worth discussing include the meaning of love, commitment, and Christian marriage; and grief, hope, and the meaning of death.

7) ***Mr. Holland's Opus*** (1996; PG; directed by Stephen Herek). A dedicated music instructor learns the wonder of teaching and how to love his deaf son. A celebration of teaching as a calling, this parable on the importance and meaning of mentoring reminds viewers that while ministering to the world, we can overlook our own families.

8) ***Howard's End*** (1991; PG; directed by James Ivory). A superbly crafted film where relationships become complicated by ethical dilemmas and moral double standards. This movie powerfully provokes discussion on the nature of right and wrong, pride and forgiveness, business ethics, and personal morality in the context of family and marriage.

9) ***Lord of the Flies*** (1990; R; directed by Harry Hook). Based on the book by the same title, the film tells the story of a group of proper private-school boys who, stranded on

an island, quickly descend into barbarism. It's impossible to discuss this film without exploring the nature of evil, the innate goodness or sinfulness of mankind, and the fragility of civilization.

10) *Chariots of Fire* (1981; PG; directed by Hugh Hudson). The story of two Olympic Games runners, one seeking to glorify God and the other seeking meaning in winning. There are few Hollywood films which present Christianity winsomely, but this is one of them. Themes worth discussing include the meaning and significance of life in the midst of personal failure and cultural success; honoring the Sabbath; the sacred/secular dichotomy vs. Christ's lordship over all of life; and Christianity vs. humanism.

11) *Dead Man Walking* (1995; R; directed by Tim Robbins). Convicted of rape and murder, a man on death row is befriended by a nun who urges him to repent. Though not without some bias, this powerful film presents both sides of the issue of capital punishment in a way that begs for discussion and reflection. Themes worth discussing include the nature of justice; capital punishment; prison ministry; and the possibility of repentance, faith, and forgiveness.

12) *Dark Crystal* (1982; PG; written and directed by Jim Henson). A children's movie in which elfin muppet creatures merge with bad ones to form an impersonal godlike light from the Dark Crystal. A subtle but effective introduction to New Age mysticism which opens the door to discuss the lack of coherence of this popular worldview.

13) *Reality Bites* (1994; PG-13; directed by Ben Stiller). Four friends try to find their way in a postmodern and amoral world with no heroes, no confidence in truth, and no hope beyond the relationship of the moment. The title is a play on words; since their sense of reality is so fragmented, they perceive life as a series of largely meaningless

and unrelated little bites, and despite all their efforts to generate their own meaning, they find reality does, indeed, bite. An insightful and poignant introduction to the so-called Generation-X.

14) *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1990; PG-13; directed by Woody Allen). Perhaps Woody Allen's finest film in which he explores the possibility of ethics and justice in a world without God. An adulterer tries to cover his guilt by having his mistress murdered, only to discover that autonomy from God does not produce freedom, but rather meaninglessness. As Judah, an ophthalmologist who commits the crime, gains this insight, his friend, a rabbi who believes in both God and morality, slowly goes blind—a wonderful visual subtheme Allen uses to make the point even more strongly.

15) *Annie Hall* (1977; PG; directed by Woody Allen). Many evangelicals have difficulty understanding how people who do not believe in God or in ultimate significance in life keep going. This film gives one answer: they concentrate on relationships. A thoughtful film, full of insight, but which allows the Christian to say in response: Yes, relationships are important. We were made for them, and through Christ, our relationship with our Creator—the relationship which gives meaning to all other relationships—can be restored. My experience is that this film helps people reflect on what brings them meaning in life—and whether it's sufficient.

16) *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986; PG-13; directed by John Hughes). Though now a bit dated, this film was popular among high schoolers, and is, in message, an adolescent version of *Annie Hall*. Three school friends play hooky in a world where there is no clear meaning or direction, except, perhaps, to seek amusement. Non-Christian adults are often critical of the film, but then have nothing substantial to suggest that would provide true significance.

17) ***Days of Heaven*** (1978; PG), and 18) ***Badlands,*** (1974; PG). Terrance Malick, a philosophy instructor turned filmmaker, wrote and directed these two films primarily as expressions of existentialism. Malick studied under Martin Heidegger. *Days of Heaven* shows a world without meaning, purpose or significance, and *Badlands* shows a world without guilt or ethics.

19) ***Contact*** (1997; PG; directed by Robert Zemeckis). Based on a novel by Carl Sagan, this film gives all the wrong answers, but raises all the right questions. It's been a long time since Hollywood released a film for the popular audience in which the film asks so many of the big questions of life. *Contact* can easily become a point of contact (no pun intended) for discussion with those who do not share our deepest convictions. Themes worth discussing include the nature of faith; the relationship of faith to science and truth; the need for significance and transcendence; the possibility of morality; the existence of God; the wonder of the physical universe; and the meaning of death.

20) ***Phenomenon*** (1996; PG; directed by Jon Turteltaub). Though not a great film, it prompts discussion with unbelievers because it evokes the yearning for spirituality that so characterizes our postmodern culture. The fact that the film stars John Travolta, an evangelist for Scientology, is significant for both the movie and for discussion.

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Notes

1. Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1993), 30–31, 90.
2. Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (Ventura, California: Regal Books; 1974).
3. I define the process of discernment as answering a series of four simple, yet probing questions: (1) What is the message(s) of the film? (2) What's the Christian response? I.e., first, where do we agree? And where do we disagree? (3) Why do we believe the Christian position or answer? And (4) How can we speak and live out the Christian position in a way that makes sense in our pluralistic culture?
4. In leading evangelistic discussions, I use an edited version of the discernment questions: (1) What is the message(s) of the film? (2) Do you agree? And (3) Why or why not?
5. Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress; 1995.