

# Evangelical Audiences and “Hollywood” Film: Promoting *Fireproof* (2008)

JAMES RUSSELL

**Abstract.** By any criteria, Evangelical Christians constitute a significant segment of the American population, but they have always been a difficult audience for the American film industry to target, because many Evangelicals view themselves as ideologically opposed to Hollywood – a fraught relationship often referred to as the “Culture Wars.” This essay uses the recent hit *Fireproof* (2008) to examine the complex relationship between Hollywood, Evangelical audiences and independent Christian film producers.

In its brief review of the Christian melodrama *Fireproof* (Alex Kendrick, 2008), the trade newspaper *Variety* noted that “the faithful may flock to megaplexes to generate modestly impressive B.O. [box office], but *Fireproof* will likely find its true calling as an instructional tool for moderators of faith-based marriage-counseling programs.”<sup>1</sup> *Variety* summed up the broader tenor of other mainstream reviews (most of which were highly critical of the film) by suggesting that *Fireproof* was somehow ill-suited to cinema release, that it was not, in some essential way, a Hollywood film. The film was produced for a negligible budget of \$500,000 on the absolute margins of the industry by an independent company based in Georgia, called Sherwood Pictures, and it targeted an audience of believers that Hollywood has, historically, been unable to coherently exploit – Evangelical Christians. Despite expectations, *Fireproof* surprised industry analysts by generating extremely healthy box office returns.<sup>2</sup> The film opened on just over eight hundred

Senior lecturer in Film Studies at De Montfort University, Leicester. Email: jrussell@dmu.ac.uk.

<sup>1</sup> Joe Leydon, review of *Fireproof*, *Variety*, 26 Sept. 2008, obtained from <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117938520>.

<sup>2</sup> Josh Friedman, “Group Ticket Sales Could Ignite *Fireproof*,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 Sept. 2008, obtained from <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/entertainmentnewsbuzz/2008/09/sure-fireproof.html>; see also Frank Scheck, “Inspirational Drama Scores a Surprise Hit,” *Hollywood Reporter*, 30 Sept. 2008, obtained from [http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/film/reviews/article\\_display.jsp?&rid=11737](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/film/reviews/article_display.jsp?&rid=11737).

screens across the country, generated \$6.8 million on its opening weekend, and went on to take a total domestic theatrical gross of \$33.5 million.<sup>3</sup> While these were not blockbuster revenues, they were remarkable grosses for an apparently independent Christian film.

The success of *Fireproof* raises larger questions about the relationship between Hollywood and Christian film consumers, and this essay uses the film's unexpected commercial performance as an opportunity to explore the broader conditions of production, promotion and reception which define the market for Evangelical movies. Although self-professed "Evangelicals" do consume films and other media, most of these products are produced by an independent sector that Henry Jenkins has described as "an alternative sphere of popular culture reflecting conservative tastes and ideologies."<sup>4</sup> At first glance, *Fireproof* seems to be a quintessential independent Evangelical release, but in fact the film was the product of a complex arrangement established between Sherwood Pictures and the larger machinery of Hollywood.

This essay begins by looking at the history of Evangelicalism and cinema. It then focusses on Sherwood Pictures, and concludes by seeking to make sense of the funding arrangements surrounding their films. As we shall see, Sherwood Pictures have marketed their films as something other than Hollywood releases, as something different, in order to assuage the deeply held moral concerns of the massive but intransigent Evangelical audience. The personnel at Sherwood Pictures were clearly motivated by their own spiritual beliefs, but their distributor, Provident Films, owned by Sony Pictures International, was motivated by a desire to generate revenues. In this essay, I will address the somewhat paradoxical question that emerges from the relationship between Sherwood, Sony and modern Evangelical consumers – how can a Hollywood studio promote films to an audience that rejects it on moral grounds?

## I. EVANGELICAL AUDIENCES, EVANGELICAL FILMS

In 2007, almost 75 percent of US census respondents described themselves as Christian, but how many of these would describe themselves as Evangelical, and what distinguishes an Evangelical Protestant from a

<sup>3</sup> Figures obtained from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=fireproof.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Jenkins, "The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7, 1 (2004), 33–43.

mainline believer?<sup>5</sup> In 2006, 15 percent of respondents to a Gallup survey identified themselves as “Evangelicals” or “Fundamentalists,” while a further 47 percent described themselves as “Bible Believing,” (a form of self-description often used by conservatives who profess to believe in strict adherence to the moral and social guidance they feel is provided by the Bible). Alternatively, a 2004 survey carried out by the Pew Forum found that just over one-quarter of Americans considered themselves Evangelical Protestants.<sup>6</sup> Although belief in a Christian God may be the norm across almost all sectors of the American population, a sizeable proportion of believers clearly subscribe to the conservative tenets of Evangelicalism. These include the belief that one must be “born again,” through personal crisis; that one must follow the dictates of the Bible with relative strictness; that the “second coming” of Christ *will* occur; that one has a divinely inspired duty to spread the word of Christian salvation; and, crucially, that all aspects of public and private life present an opportunity to honour God.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, Evangelicalism may be defined by a set of shared beliefs, but it is also a relatively diverse spiritual culture made up of believers of different kinds, who act upon their beliefs in different ways. Some self-professed Evangelicals tend towards fundamentalist interpretations of Biblical scripture and have sought a degree of cultural isolation, seeing themselves as separate from, if not actively opposed to, mainstream media culture. The most extreme of them view Hollywood as an epicentre of atheistic, liberal and irreligious values (a critique usually known as the “Culture Wars”). Alternatively, other Evangelical groups have sought to engage with American culture at large, and the media in particular, in order to spread the message of salvation and to engage in various forms of social activism.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the major Evangelical organizations have had to speak for a complex cross-section of Christians which includes both fundamentalists likely to object to secular culture, particularly movies, and those of a more moderate temperament. It has been very difficult for Hollywood to effectively exploit the

<sup>5</sup> US Census Bureau, “Table 74. Religious Composition of U.S. Population,” 2009 Statistical Abstract, obtained online from <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/population/religion.html>.

<sup>6</sup> John C. Green, “The American Religious Landscape and Political Attitudes: A Baseline for 2004,” document obtained via download from [pewforum.org/publications/surveys/green-full.pdf](http://pewforum.org/publications/surveys/green-full.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> A far more comprehensive account of the Evangelical worldview can be found in Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Christian Smith and Michael Emerson, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 39.

potentially enormous Evangelical market because a vocal proportion claim to object to the movies on moral grounds, and most of the major Evangelical institutions capitulate to such claims. However, this relationship was not always so fraught.

For the first sixty years of Hollywood's history, Christianity was assumed to be a default viewing position for the vast majority of American film viewers, and church groups had been heavily involved in the production and, particularly, regulation of cinema since the beginnings of the silent period. Films including overt Christian content made up some of Hollywood's biggest hits well into the late 1960s – from the temperance films of the 1890s, via Cecil B. DeMille's epics of the ancient world and morality films of the 1930s, through to the postwar trend for widescreen Biblical spectacles. These films addressed a presumed audience of believers in a fairly unproblematic fashion, combining entertainment and enlightenment in the same breath, and the major Hollywood studios devoted considerable energy to targeting Christians with carefully designed marketing campaigns.<sup>9</sup> However, the commercial failure of the high-profile epics *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (George Stevens, 1965) and *The Bible: In the Beginning* (John Huston, 1966), in concert with a dramatic decline in regular audience attendance, encouraged the major studios to shift a substantial proportion of their production capital away from large-scale movies targeting Christians of all ages, to smaller movies targeting more avid viewers in their teens and twenties.<sup>10</sup> The resulting “New Hollywood” has been championed by critics as brief and remarkable flowering of serious, artistically valuable filmmaking at the centre of American film production.<sup>11</sup> However, the period from 1967 to 1977 was also a moment when Hollywood became quite obviously disconnected from mainstream conservative audiences. More explicit, challenging and transgressive films such as *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) and *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) frequently alienated older and devout viewers even as they appealed to a younger, more tolerant and more politically progressive generation.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Sheldon Hall, “Selling Religion: How to Market a Biblical Epic,” *Film History*, 14 (2002), 173–79.

<sup>10</sup> James Russell, “Debts, Disasters and Mega-musicals: The Decline of the Studio System,” in Linda Ruth Williams and Michael Hammond, eds., *Contemporary American Cinema: US Cinema Since 1960* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 51.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'n' Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Kramer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower, 2005), 47–58.

The emergence of the New Hollywood can be understood as one small part of a much larger political convulsion visible at almost all levels of American life in the late 1960s. However, while some baby boomers immersed themselves in the emerging counterculture, traditional conservatives of all ages and religious stripes often responded to the invigoration of radical politics by shifting to the right, resulting in a more obviously divided political and spiritual culture.<sup>13</sup> The born-again Evangelical movement began to achieve real cultural prominence at this time, slowly coming to dominate Christian thought in the US over the ensuing decades. Throughout the 1970s, Hollywood made some effort to continue addressing mainline believers, and films such as *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and *Oh God!* (Carl Reiner, 1977) could be understood as attempt to ‘deal with’ religious matters in some form. For the most part, however, the major Hollywood distributors adopted a ‘hands-off’ approach to Christian subjects that continues to define their output today, and as a result, the relationship between media producers and Christians, especially Christians who would define themselves as Evangelicals, became increasingly fraught.

The independent Evangelical film production sector was just beginning to emerge in the 1970s. Billy Graham’s World Wide Pictures had been founded in the 1950s, but the firm enjoyed its biggest hit, John F. Collier’s *The Hiding Place*, in 1975, several years after the unlikely success of another major Christian release, *The Cross and the Switchblade*, directed by World Wide alumnus Don Murray in 1970. By Hollywood’s standards, these Evangelical releases of the 1970s generated minuscule profits, but they reached fairly large audiences through “non-traditional” distribution and exhibition networks. Most viewers saw *The Cross and the Switchblade* at regular school, at Sunday school, at a prayer group, or, most commonly, in church itself, which has functioned as a key exhibition site for Christian film ever since.<sup>14</sup>

The Evangelical movement continued to gain both political and social currency in the 1980s and 1990s, with the establishment of lobbying organizations such as the Moral Majority and Focus on the Family. These groups became part of a larger debate about the spiritual worth of the American media in the early 1990s, when the “Culture Wars” critique of Hollywood gained considerable momentum. The terms was first systematically documented by James Davison Hunter in his 1991 book *Culture Wars*, and most famously applied to Hollywood in Michael Medved’s 1992

<sup>13</sup> Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: Guildford, 1995), 109–204.

<sup>14</sup> Hendershot, 180.

bestseller *Hollywood vs America*.<sup>15</sup> According to Medved, “Tens of millions of Americans see the entertainment industry as an all-powerful enemy, an alien force that assaults our most cherished values and corrupts our children.”<sup>16</sup> Although Medved’s claims were phrased in histrionic terms, (and, like all Culture Wars commentators, he summarized a complex political position in blunt terms), the opinion-poll data that he cited did nevertheless suggest that the bare bones of this arguments were correct – a sizeable sector of ordinary American citizens held more conservative attitudes than those expressed in the mainstream media and in the movies.<sup>17</sup> The Culture Wars critique of American media has been loosely endorsed by most Evangelical commentators since the 1990s, and a distrust for Hollywood and its products continues to inform the ways in which many Evangelicals view the media today. Furthermore, Hollywood has generally attempted to pacify such groups by avoiding overt, and potentially offensive, references to religion in its products, particularly since the release of Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1987, which seemed to dramatically exacerbate Evangelical dissatisfaction with the movie industry.<sup>18</sup> Arguably, the lack of obvious religious content in Hollywood films has often only served to confirm the Evangelical assumption that Hollywood is an essentially irreligious institution, and to bolster the power of independent production networks.

Independent Evangelical movies of the sort produced by World Wide continued to circulate amongst believers throughout the 1980s, but the market only really boomed in the mid-1990s, when a series of companies emerged producing low-budget films for consumption in church, but also on video, DVD and via specialist cable TV channels. Peter Lalonde has established himself as a key producer in this sector by specializing in apocalyptic thrillers, including a series of adaptations based on the bestselling Left Behind novels.<sup>19</sup> Lalonde’s company, Cloud Ten Productions, makes and distributes a range of other Christian movies, some of which feature minor Hollywood stars, such as *Saving God* (Duane Crichton, 2008), which starred Ving Rhames as a tough, inner-city preacher. Alternatively, Big Idea Productions found success with *VeggieTales*, a series of children’s animations

<sup>15</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 3.

<sup>17</sup> For a similar survey of opinions and movie content see Stephen Powers, David J. Rothman and Stanley Rothman, *Hollywood’s America: Social and Political Themes in Motion Pictures* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> See Charles Lyons, *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 146–83.

<sup>19</sup> Hendershot, 189.

initially distributed through Christian bookstores, and subsequently translated into a pair of movies (*Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie* in 2002, and *The Pirates Who Don't Do Anything* in 2008, both directed by Mike Nawrocki). In 1999, through four-wall booking of regional cinemas and church screenings, the apocalyptic thriller *The Omega Code*, made by the Trinity Broadcasting Network, with “stars” Michael York and Casper Van Dien, made \$12 million on theatrical release (more than twice its ambitious budget).<sup>20</sup>

The expansion of the Evangelical film production sector can be understood as part of a more general boom in Christian media production documented by Heather Hendershot in her outstanding study *Shaking the World for Jesus*. Today, Focus on the Family and other groups oversee a “vast industry of books, films, videos and magazines [which] seem to promise Evangelicals that they can consume without being tainted by worldliness,” distributed via specialist Christian bookstores, mail order, the Internet, and directly through churches.<sup>21</sup> In recent years, these Christian CDs and DVDs are increasingly being stocked in mainstream stores such as Wal-Mart and K-Mart, while some mainstream multiplexes will now show Christian movies.

However, the Evangelical Christian media market has been fiercely independent, and the Hollywood studios have, until very recently, been unable to overcome Evangelical objections to its products. Indeed, the major Hollywood distributors have had very little impetus to do so – Christian movies may make some money for their producers, but they have not generated returns of the kind enjoyed by the most modest Hollywood releases. Hollywood seemed to happy to leave the Evangelical market alone, because its potentially massive size did not seem to translate into massive revenues, and because any association with Hollywood seemed to actively deter a sizeable proportion of Evangelical viewers. However, this situation changed in 2004, when the awesome success of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* seemed to undercut almost all of the industry’s assumptions about the commercial viability of Christian film.

By any standards, *The Passion of the Christ* was an esoteric vanity project, a subtitled passion play, funded entirely out of the pocket of a maverick, conservative star. Despite relatively poor reviews and widespread claims that the film was anti-Semitic, *The Passion of the Christ* still generated \$370 million in domestic grosses, and a further \$241 million overseas, rendering it the third highest-grossing domestic release of 2004.<sup>22</sup> Much of its success can

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 2&c18.

<sup>22</sup> Figures obtained from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=passionofthechrist.htm>.



be attributed to Mel Gibson's distinctive marketing campaign, which bypassed traditional methods of promotion and reached out directly to Evangelical viewers.<sup>23</sup> Gibson, a conservative Catholic, visited many Protestant Evangelical churches and spoke at length about his faith, and about the transformative spiritual moments in his own life. He presented himself as a former sinner turned devout believer, in language which neatly circumvented his status as a Hollywood insider for potentially distrustful conservative Christians, and his production company, Icon, encouraged viewers to attend cinemas en masse, and to treat the act of viewing the film as part of a shared, faith-affirming experience.<sup>24</sup>

Surveys of the film's audience suggest strongly that Evangelical audiences were effectively mobilized as a result (attending en masse alongside other Christian groups including inner-city Catholics and mainline believers).<sup>25</sup> The film's astonishing success engendered a new interest in producing Christian film amongst the major Hollywood distributors, but it also presented them with a problem. Gibson's promotional campaign had depended on efforts to distance his film from mainstream Hollywood production. He was able to tell Evangelical audiences that Fox had passed on the film, that mainstream critics were seeking to pillory him, and by extension the word of Christ, and he was able to present himself as an outsider, an independent.<sup>26</sup> In effect, Gibson established a clear discursive distance between his film and the larger Hollywood system. Journalist Peter J. Boyer accompanied Gibson on many of the promotional visits he made to Evangelical churches and wrote, "at each he was received with an enthusiasm that seemed to reach beyond the movie itself, to a deeply felt disaffection from the secular world; now an icon of that world was on their side."<sup>27</sup>

Following the success of *The Passion of the Christ*, several major studios have tentatively sought to target the same audience, but each has had to deal with the problem of addressing a viewing demographic that, at least at a collective level, rejects its products. Some films have flopped despite being heavily promoted on the Evangelical circuit, such as Universal's *Evan Almighty* (Tom Shadyac, 2007), while other companies have been more successful. As I have

<sup>23</sup> For full details of Gibson's marketing efforts see James Russell, *The Historical Epic and Contemporary Hollywood: From Dances with Wolves to Gladiator* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 190. <sup>24</sup> Philip J. Boyer, "The Jesus War," *New Yorker*, 15 Sept. 2003, 58–71.

<sup>25</sup> Robert H. Woods, Michael C. Jindra and Jason D. Baker, "The Audience Responds to *The Passion of the Christ*," in S. Brent Plate, ed., *Re-viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004), 151–62.

<sup>26</sup> Deborah Caldwell, "Selling Passion," in Jon Meacham et al., *Perspectives on The Passion of the Christ* (New York: Miramax, 2004), 216. <sup>27</sup> Boyer 68.



shown elsewhere, *The Chronicles of Narnia* films were carefully packaged for Evangelicals by the independent Walden Media working in association with the Walt Disney Company.<sup>28</sup> Walden used similar tactics to those employed by Gibson, and sought to engage Evangelicals at a grassroots level. Again, their independence from Hollywood was stressed, even if that independence was somewhat illusory.

These two currents in Evangelical film production come together in the case of Sherwood Pictures. On the one hand, Sherwood ostensibly appears to be an independent company operating at a grassroots level far beyond the fringe of regular film production, targeting a minority audience of devout believers. On the other hand, Sherwood Pictures embodies the careful new approach taken by major Hollywood studios to deal with Christian subjects and audiences.

## II. SHERWOOD PICTURES

Sherwood Pictures is part of Sherwood Baptist Church, a “mega-church” based in the small city of Albany, Georgia. It is housed in a facility which can comfortably accommodate over three thousand members of the congregation, and the church has established commercial outlets, media production resources, accommodation and a major sports centre.<sup>29</sup> The church became involved with filmmaking (and music publishing) when it moved to its current site in 2001. Alex Kendrick, an associate pastor and a key mover in Sherwood Pictures, justified their work by saying, “For us most of what is coming out of Hollywood does not reflect our faith and values, and so this is one way to throw our hat in the ring.”<sup>30</sup> Promotional material for their first film, *Flywheel* (Alex Kendrick, 2002), told a similar story:

After sadly reading that movies are now considered more influential in our culture than religion, our staff at Sherwood Baptist Church prayerfully asked the Lord in 2002 to help us produce a full-length Christian movie. We know churches don’t usually make movies, but God gave us a media team with the vision and a pastor with the courage to think outside the box, believing God could use it.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> James Russell, “Narnia as a Site of National Struggle: Marketing, Christianity and National Purpose in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*,” *Cinema Journal*, 48, 4 (Fall, 2009), 59–76.

<sup>29</sup> See Sherwood’s website, <http://www.sherwoodbaptist.net/templates/cussherwoodbc/details.asp?id=33770&PID=326931>.

<sup>30</sup> Alex Kendrick and Michael Catt, interviewed in Julie Bloom, “It’s a Healthy Marriage of Faith and Filmmaking,” *New York Times*, 6 Oct. 2008, obtained from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/06/movies/06fire.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Kendrick, letter to exhibitors, included in the *Flywheel* promotional pack, *Sherwood Production Files CD-ROM*.

Alternatively, production material on the DVD of *Fireproof* describes the filmmaking project as a response to a “challenge” laid down by the pastoral team to the congregation in 2002. In all of the promotional discourse surrounding their films, no one at Sherwood has talked in terms of business strategy, and at no point have Sherwood’s production personnel mentioned wanting to enter the established and potentially lucrative Christian film market. Rather, they have consistently deployed a form of Culture Wars rhetoric which situates their films first and foremost as an oppositional alternative to mainstream Hollywood releases, often produced at the behest of a higher power. In this way, Sherwood have carefully “branded” their films for the Evangelical market.

For example, Sherwood’s films do seem to have relied consistently on charity and grassroots support, and have been made almost entirely by nonprofessionals. The first Sherwood release, *Flywheel*, was written and directed by brothers Alex and Stephen Kendrick (pastors at the church and keen amateur filmmakers) and produced by volunteers for \$20,000.<sup>32</sup> The film told an overtly Christian story, about a corrupt used-car salesman who finds God. *Flywheel* debuted at a local theatre, and proved a modest success, finding its way onto the larger exhibition circuit for Christian film.<sup>33</sup> Sherwood’s second film, sports drama *Facing the Giants*, was produced in a similar fashion, but proved a more substantial hit. The film reportedly cost \$100,000, and it was picked up for distribution by the Samuel Goldwyn company and by Provident Films, a distribution operation with links to Sony. The affiliation with Provident Films was a crucial turning point in the status, if not operation, of Sherwood Pictures which will be discussed in more detail below. For now, it should be noted that the distribution deal allowed *Facing the Giants* to reach a significantly larger audience than *Flywheel*, and the film generated \$10 million in theatrical revenues as a result.<sup>34</sup>

In *Facing the Giants*, a failing high-school football team find success when they commit themselves to play for God rather than for glory. Thus the film’s narrative provided a neat illustration of the Evangelical production ethos that has informed Sherwood’s approach to filmmaking. At a central moment in the film, the coach, played by writer/director Alex Kendrick, presents his team with a new philosophy:

Life’s not about us. We’re not here just to get glory, make money and die. The Bible says that God put us here for him. To honor Him ... I think that football is just one

<sup>32</sup> Figures obtained from <http://www.flywheelthemovie.com/production.php>.

<sup>33</sup> For details see Stephen Kendrick, letter to exhibitors.

<sup>34</sup> Figures obtained from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=facingthegiants.htm>.

of the tools that we use to honor God. If you live your faith out on the football field, then God cares about football, because he cares about you ... but its not just on the football field. We’ve got to honor him in our relationships, in our respect for authority, in the classroom, and when you’re at home alone, surfing the Internet.

The speech neatly encapsulates a key Evangelical principle, but it also provides the viewer with a way of understanding the movie, which was, the speech seems to covertly suggest, inspired by a similar desire to “honor God.” Certainly, such diligent faithfulness is very much in evidence in the various production memoranda and other resources which Sherwood Pictures have made available on CD-ROM (at a cost of thirty dollars). The resource is ostensibly designed to help other aspiring Christian filmmakers to draft legal documents and administer a film’s production, but it also illustrates the extent to which prayer has apparently informed the production of Sherwood’s releases.

For example, before production began on *Facing the Giants*, the church circulated a “prayer strategy” amongst its parishioners, asking for their prayers:

- 1) That the script/story is inspired and anointed by God, and includes power, humor, encouragement, conviction, and inspiration.
- 2) That all casting would be directed by God to include the right people for the right reasons.
- 3) That the time frame for production would be protected and efficient.
- 4) That the crew would be prepared, prayed up, protected, and positive.<sup>35</sup>

In similar fashion, potential extras were asked to complete a form listing their availability and contact details, but which also included the questions, “Tell us about your spiritual Journey? When and How did you become a Christian?” and “Is there anything morally in your life currently (drugs, pornography, alcohol, sexual immorality, gambling (lottery), gossip, etc) that would hinder your representing Christ well on screen?”<sup>36</sup> These questions clearly conflate the commercial logic of filmmaking with the requirements of a larger spiritual worldview.

*Facing the Giants* received few reviews in the mainstream press – *Variety* said, “Technically polished but dramatically tepid, it might score in the niche market for Christian-themed entertainment.”<sup>37</sup> However, the film was extremely well received by Christian commentators working for Focus on

<sup>35</sup> Anon., “Facing the Giants Prayer Strategy,” included in the *Sherwood Production Files CD-ROM*.

<sup>36</sup> Anon., “Facing the Giants, Sherwood Pictures Casting Call,” included in the *Sherwood Production Files CD-ROM*. <sup>37</sup> Leydon, review of *Facing the Giants*, unpaginated.

the Family, the Dove Foundation and the website Christian Answers, where one reviewer gushed, “this movie was fantastic; it is a ‘must-see’ for everyone. It had me hooked from the previews. I knew this was a Christian movie, written and produced by a church group, but I had not expected that even the previews would honor the Lord!”<sup>38</sup> The film’s \$10.1 million theatrical gross was clearly a product of Evangelical support, rather than broader cultural acceptance. Indeed, *Variety*’s reviewer noted that “by preaching to the converted so heavy-handedly, the filmmakers fumble an opportunity to reach beyond their target demo of devout churchgoers.”<sup>39</sup>

In commercial terms, *Flywheel* and *Facing the Giants* were very minor films, but as we have seen Sherwood’s next movie managed to achieve a different order of success. Like Sherwood’s previous releases, *Fireproof* had been produced by volunteers in and around Albany for an ambitious, but still modest, budget of \$500,000. The Kendrick brothers wrote and directed, and this time they featured a minor star in the lead. Kirk Cameron, a Christian actor most famous for appearing in the sitcom *Growing Pains* and the *Left Behind* movies, played Caleb Holt, a fireman experiencing marital difficulties, who eventually finds God and saves his marriage by following a devotional Christian marriage guide called *The Love Dare*. Yet again, the film was apparently produced in an atmosphere of faithful diligence, and the production resources indicate that Sherwood employed similar prayer strategies and devotional exercises to those used during the making of *Facing the Giants*. However, the film managed to reach a substantially larger audience than any of Sherwood’s previous releases.

*Fireproof* opened on just over eight hundred screens in October 2008, and did receive reviews in the mainstream press. Many were negative, but the trade journal *Variety* gave it passable review and the *Hollywood Reporter* noted, “While hardly sophisticated in its approach and certainly not polished in its technical elements, the film does get its heartfelt message across with undeniable sincerity.”<sup>40</sup> The *New York Times* was even quite complementary in its observation that “*Fireproof* may not be the most profound movie ever made, but it does have its commendable elements, including that rarest of creatures on the big (or small) screen: characters with a strong, conservative Christian faith who don’t sound crazy.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Melisa Pollock, Review of *Facing the Giants*, *Christian Spotlight on the Movies*, 29 Sept. 2006, obtained from <http://christiananswers.net/spotlight/movies/2006/facingthegiants2006.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Leydon, review of *Facing the Giants*.

<sup>40</sup> Scheck, “Inspirational Drama Scores a Surprise Hit,” unpaginated.

<sup>41</sup> Neil Genzlinger, review of *Fireproof*, *New York Times*, 27 Sept. 2008, obtained from <http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/09/27/movies/27proof.html>.

These reviews are the exception rather than the norm – the majority of serious critics dismissed the film, and it was subject to merciless mockery on the satirical website *The Onion*.<sup>42</sup> However, the handful of positive reviews in the mainstream American press indicated at a larger potential appeal than Sherwood’s previous films, and, as one might expect, the film received glowing reviews in the Christian media.

In spite of this widespread, but not total, critical derision, *Fireproof*’s box office gross of \$33.4 million made it one of the most successful independent releases of the year.<sup>43</sup> Director Alex Kendrick assigned the success of the film to the Christian spirit that infused its creation, telling the *New York Times*, “We’re not trained and smart enough to make successful movies and write bestselling books. The only way this could have happened is if, after we prayed, God really answered those prayers.”<sup>44</sup> Although a \$33 million gross is not equivalent to the sort of revenues generated by a major Hollywood blockbuster, and the film arguably did not connect with the mainline Christian audience in the manner of *The Passion of the Christ*, *Fireproof* nevertheless did reach a sizeable segment of the Evangelical audience.

These audiences were presented with a fairly straightforward story of spiritual epiphany. Like Sherwood’s other films, *Fireproof* focussed on the fairly pedestrian travails of small-town, working-class southerners, usually, but not exclusively, whites. Kirk Cameron’s Caleb begins the film as a fairly unlikeable character, who appears by turns petulant, selfish, insensitive and misogynistic. Understandably, his marriage is on the verge of divorce, but by carrying out a series of devotional exercises, the character achieves something similar to the football team in *Facing the Giants* – by being a better husband, he also, somehow, honours God. The ultimate reconciliation with his wife is presented as one part of a larger reconciliation with his faith, and almost everyone in the film seems to have experienced marital difficulties which have been solved in a similar fashion. In telling the story of Caleb’s transformation, the narrative does play out a loosely allegorical Culture Wars critique of modern media. It is probably no accident that Kirk Cameron, the only “professional” actor who appears, plays the only character who has abandoned God, and is most obviously in need of saving. He is also closely associated with the corrupt and corrupting power of the media. Specifically, he struggles with a rather opaquely presented obsession with online

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, the feature “Commentary Tracks of the Damned,” <http://www.avclub.com/articles/commentary-tracks-of-the-damned-fireproof,23845.htm>.

<sup>43</sup> Figures obtained from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=fireproof.htm>.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Kendrick, quoted in Bloom, “It’s a Healthy Marriage of Faith and Filmmaking,” unpaginated.

pornography, which he “cures” by destroying his computer – an act which seems to give physical form to the claim that modern media are corrupting.

The catalyst for Caleb’s moral transformation is the devotional marriage guide *The Love Dare*, which, in the film, seems imbued with a divine power to spread the message of Christianity, and to reignite loving marriages. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the release of *Fireproof* was accompanied by a barrage of cross-promotional material, some of which made a similar promise. Conventional products such as a novelization and a soundtrack were released, but the vast majority of secondary material produced by Sherwood and their associates was therapeutic Evangelical media. It is possible to buy the marriage guide *The Love Dare*, and many did, making it a number one *New York Times* best seller. Sherwood also released a *Fireproof* “couple kit” (retailing at thirty dollars), and a devotional study guide written by head pastor and executive producer Michael Catt (whose daughter plays Cameron’s wife in the movie) called *Fireproof Your Life*. Each of these products suggested that *Fireproof* was imbued with a genuine spiritual power, that it might work on viewers’ relationships in similar fashion to that featured in the narrative. Thus *Variety*’s observation that the film would “likely ... find its true calling as an instructional tool for moderators of faith-based marriage-counseling programs” was particularly perceptive.<sup>45</sup>

Such “therapeutic” uses of the film were considered a key selling point by Sherwood Pictures. The Kendrick brothers have spoken at length about wanting to change American culture at large via their films, and they obviously adhere to a socially engaged strain of Evangelicalism. Ultimately, however, the film does not seem designed to speak to those outside the confines of the Evangelical community. Instead *Fireproof* arguably offered a faith-affirming experience which spoke to the massive audience of Evangelicals in a relatively exclusive fashion. As we have seen, almost all of the promotional material surrounding *Fireproof* (and Sherwood’s other films) emphasizes Culture Wars rhetoric, and the presence of divine inspiration, if not intervention, over and above commercial considerations. The therapeutic marketing material arguably performs a similar function (as, indeed, does the film’s narrative). Again and again, viewers who seek information about Sherwood’s pictures are told that these are sincere expressions of faith, produced independently and imbued, to a greater or lesser extent, with the Christian spirit.

The promotional efforts surrounding *Fireproof* (and Sherwood’s earlier releases) should best be understood as a calculated discursive strategy, which

<sup>45</sup> Leydon, review of *Facing the Giants*, unpaginated.

worked to render the film acceptable, palatable and meaningful to its core audience of Evangelicals, rather than functioning as truly effective spiritual outreach. Sherwood needed to speak to a diverse range of groups within the Evangelical community, and they did this by carefully branding their films as innately Evangelical in inspiration and intent, and by positioning themselves as independent producers, working in opposition to Hollywood. To this end, Sherwood consistently described the success of *Fireproof*, and all their films, as part of a David-and-Goliath story, in which plucky Christian underdogs circumvent the profane institutions of Hollywood, with a great deal of help from God. This narrative became central to marketing efforts because, for many Evangelicals, independence from Hollywood can be considered a sign of spiritual integrity. However, Sherwood’s independent status is not as clear-cut as promotional efforts would suggest.

### III. SHERWOOD, PROVIDENT AND SONY

In their review of *Facing the Giants*, Focus on the Family’s commentators emphasized that “the \$100,000 undertaking was supported by private donations from Sherwood members.”<sup>46</sup> Speaking at the San Antonio Independent Christian Film Festival in 2006, Stephen Kendrick claimed that “Sony tried to purchase the movie from us and we said no, ’cause we don’t want to compromise the message and take anything out.”<sup>47</sup> However, at another talk given at San Antonio, Kendrick presented a more nuanced account of Sherwood’s relationship with Sony. He noted that Provident Films had paid for the entire theatrical release (on over four hundred screens), and went on,

Sony, we found out, owns Provident, and Provident label group, who is run by Christians, they were told by Sony, “Get into Christian movies.” And the guys at Provident said, “We don’t know how to do that,” and while they’re telling them that, this little movie made by our church lands on the desk.<sup>48</sup>

Kendrick’s initial unwillingness to discuss Sony’s role in the funding process clearly speaks to the vaguely shared Evangelical distrust of the major studios (his claim that they had not taken Sony’s money was met with an audible cheer). When he does acknowledge Sony’s involvement, he carefully situates

<sup>46</sup> Tom Neven and Stephen Isaac, review of *Facing the Giants*, *Plugged In Reviews*, 27 Sept. 2008, obtained from <http://www.pluggedinonline.com/movies/movies/a0002896.cfm>.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Kendrick, speech available via [http://www.tangle.com/view\\_video.php?viewkey=61164d26c5do883db5c8](http://www.tangle.com/view_video.php?viewkey=61164d26c5do883db5c8).

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Kendrick, speech available via [http://www.tangle.com/view\\_video.php?viewkey=8ceb8c6455a03bb1ae89](http://www.tangle.com/view_video.php?viewkey=8ceb8c6455a03bb1ae89).



Provident at one remove from the parent company, and describes their relationship as, itself, an act of divine providence. In making these claims, Kendrick neatly summarized the operating practices of Provident Films, who provided a substantial proportion of *Fireproof*'s budget.

Provident Films is a small-scale distribution operation established by Sony International Pictures in 2006 to target Christian film-viewers, by capitalizing on Sony's established links to the Christian music market.<sup>49</sup> It is one of a number of distribution enterprises set up by the majors following the success of *The Passion of the Christ* (others include Fox's Foxfaith brand, and Disney's aforementioned association with Walden Media). Provident marketing executive Jonathan Bock described their relationship with Sherwood in these terms, "A lot of it has to do with providing them access and information ... [we] try to provide the ability for these outlets and leaders to see a film for themselves and draw their own conclusions and tell their constituencies what they think."<sup>50</sup> Like many of the new independent brands operating in this market, Provident go out of their way to stress the "hands-off" approach that they take, presenting themselves as facilitators helping Christian filmmakers to reach a wider audience, rather than as members of the Hollywood establishment. In this way, they seek to maintain the discourse of independence considered vital to the promotional efforts associated with *Fireproof* and related Christian films.

To some extent, the basic operating relationship between Sony, Provident and Sherwood is a familiar, if not standard, mode of production in modern Hollywood. The vast majority of films have been made this way since the 1960s, with major distributors outsourcing the actual business of filmmaking to bespoke independent production companies – a system known as "package unit" production.<sup>51</sup> However, very few independent producers make such an obvious virtue of their distance from the distributors, and hardly any have ever sought to conceal their relationship with Hollywood. Rather than treating Sherwood as an small company which inadvertently stumbled into a relationship with a big distributor, we can begin to understand the significance of a film like *Fireproof* if we view Sherwood Pictures as a filmmaking

<sup>49</sup> Nicole Laport, "Sony Takes Chance," *Variety*, 15 Dec. 2005, obtained from <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117934733>.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Debruge, "The Gospel According to Research," *Variety*, 2 Apr. 2007, obtained from <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117962420>.

<sup>51</sup> The term "package unit production" was coined by Janet Staiger in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 330–38. The operation of the modern industry is most clearly described in Janet Wasko, *How Hollywood Works* (London: Sage, 2003).

“brand” that has been acquired and then carefully developed by a major Hollywood studio.

The nature of that “branding” exercise is visible in almost all aspects of Sherwood’s films, which are very much the product of a homegrown, amateur production method, itself a response to Culture Wars discourses. They also deal with subjects and settings that rarely feature in Hollywood movies, and much of the related therapeutic marketing is designed to reinforce conservative Christian values in such a way as to render the films themselves palatable to Evangelicals. In the past, the fraught assumptions of the Culture Wars have made it difficult for major distributors even to contemplate making films of these kinds. Remarkably, Provident Films and their ilk actually rely on Culture Wars rhetoric as part of a larger promotional strategy, designed to maintain the Evangelical audiences’ presumed sense of cultural distance from conventional entertainment cinema. Thus the relationship between Sherwood Pictures and Provident Films can be seen as a new, more carefully judged, attempt by Hollywood to engage the potentially ‘difficult’ yet massive Evangelical American audience.