

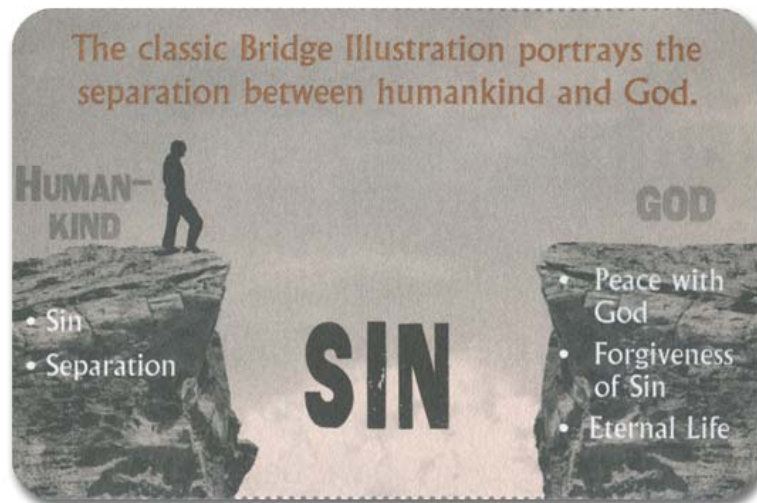
THE GOSPEL & THE CINEMATIC IMAGINATION: A JOURNEY INTO THE DARK

FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER AND MARION E. WADE CENTER EVANGELISM
ROUNDTABLE V “IMAGINATION AND THE GOSPEL: HARNESSING THE IMAGINATION TO
ENGAGE CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND COMMUNICATE THE LIFE-CHANGING GOSPEL”

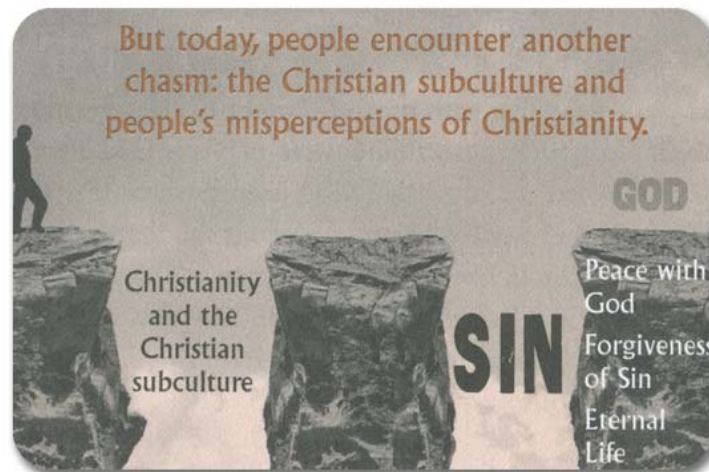
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BY CRAIG DETWEILER

In an era of abundant images, what visual metaphors can communicate the gospel? Surely, one of the more enduring portraits of Jesus’ atoning work on the cross begins by illustrating the gulf between humanity and God. Sin created a massive gap between the Creator and his people. How do we span the chasm of sin? The cross of Christ builds a bridge between fallen humanity and a holy God. Only through Jesus can we ever reach God and enter abundant life. The bridge illustration turns the biblical promises found in the letters of Saint Paul’s into an enduring visual truth.



So why hasn't this illustration captured the hearts and minds of postmodern people? Do we need a new graphic to summarize the Gospel for western audiences? In *They like Jesus, but Not the Church*, pastor Dan Kimball offers some surprising reasons why the bridge illustration has not gained a significant hearing (or viewing!) with those outside traditional Christian circles.ⁱ Kimball suggests that Christian misbehavior has created a new gap that keeps people from even considering Jesus' saving grace. The gulf between the claims of Christ and the actions of God's people has resulted in disinterest and even antipathy toward all things Christian. We have difficulty discussing the chasm created by sin because we have created a cultural chasm rooted in our own sin. We have created confused and misunderstandings around Jesus.



Kimball's anecdotes arising from his context in Santa Cruz, California find further confirmation in David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons' research for their devastating book, *unChristian* (Baker, 2007).ⁱⁱ Lyons commissioned Kinnaman and the Barna Research Group to find out what people outside the Church associate with the word, "Christian." Six haunting perceptions emerged from the one thousand people under age

thirty they surveyed. The next generation thinks of Christians as “judgmental,” “intolerant,” “anti-homosexual,” and “too political.” Many of these perceptions may be broadly traced to the politicized agenda started by the Moral Majority, advanced by the Christian Coalition, and labeled as the Religious Right. Modest legislative gains were offset by massive resentment that Christians have been too pushy, too intolerant, and too judgmental. We have dug a massive hole of our making. So how do we start to dig out, to separate Christ from Christians or at least, to answer enough valid objections to our unChristian behavior so we can begin discussing the wages of sin (besides our own)? Perhaps our apologetics must begin with apologies.

Many have tried to bridge the cultural gap between an overly entertained, biblically illiterate people and an increasingly politicized Christianity by finding traces of the Gospel within pop culture. As musicians and moviemakers express longings for wholeness, reconciliation and even redemption, pastors and evangelists have seized upon the conversation starters embedded within popular culture. Television shows like *Lost* concluded an episode about a sacrificial death by quoting Psalm 23. Movies like *Evan Almighty* updated the story of Noah to today’s Washington, D.C. Songs like “Jesus Walks” and “Jesus Take the Wheel” have placed Christ atop the charts. The best-selling *Gospel According to Peanuts* seemed like a novelty in 1969. Yet, forty years later, we now have *The Gospel According to Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and even *The Simpsons*.ⁱⁱⁱ Does the widespread merging of pop culture with the Gospel demonstrate unparalleled Christian compromise or a renewed evangelistic imagination?

AN OLD DEBATE

In 1934, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner had a heated debate about how much credit to extend toward sources of revelation beyond scripture. Their snappy rejoinders are gathered in the thin volume, *Natural Theology*.^{iv} Brunner suggested that a point of contact could be made between God and humanity. The *anknupfungspunkt* may be a glimpse of a flower, a fresh breeze, or a friend's encouragement. Could the point of contact extend to cultural artifacts? Might God speak to us through a song, a show, or a film? While Barth appreciated Mozart's music, he rejected Brunner's proposal in an essay called unambiguously entitled, "Nein!" For Barth, the initiative rests solely upon the Divine. It is veiled, only revealed by God himself. As fallen vessels, we never appropriate God—Yahweh appropriates us. The task of the evangelist is not to convict people of sin. Christians must simply introduce the God who is there, wooing and winning back people.^v

While Barth's rejection of cultural capital held sway for much of the subsequent Reformed tradition, Brunner's point of contact appears to have arrived. The marginalization of church, scripture, and tradition has left us grasping for *anknupfungspunkte* on our cell phones. I am part of a growing movement that finds theology *within* pop culture.^{vi} We are not merely scanning movies in search of sermon illustrations. We are suggesting that where scripture has fallen silent for postmodern people, the multiplex may have become the Spirit's place of refuge. We wade into the darkness of a screening room in order to find illumination. Carefully observing today's films may open us up to neglected truths of scripture. For the next generation, sound biblical exegesis may arise *out of* rigorous cultural exegesis. The love of story embodied by those obsessed with cinema may open up doors for the Gospel to enter.

THE NEW CANON

How does this work? What might it look like? For my latest book, *Into the Dark*, I studied the new cinematic canon.^{vii} I turned to the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) as the most democratic community of film lovers. The IMDb aggregates the shared wisdom of filmgoers across ages and borders. It allows anyone to be a film critic. While plenty of anomalies can emerge (like fanboys with a blind allegiance to all things Quentin Tarantino), over several months and thousands of ratings, a collective wisdom emerges. I started with their evolving list of the top films of the 21st century. I literally wandered “into the dark” in search of blinding light. In studying the movies that matter to the most dedicated film fans, what thematic tendencies emerged? Could those ‘texts’ provide a fresh window into scripture? What timeless biblical truths would emerge as relevant responses to the most vexing movies?

I am stunned by my results. The fifty-one films atop the survey broke into roughly three thematic groups (see appendix). What arises from the imaginations of today’s finest filmmakers? If you want to truly enjoy my presentation and allow it to sneak up on you, then let me allow those in attendance to study and discuss the list for themselves. What tendencies do you find? What genres stand out? What themes emerge from these influential movies? Stop reading now and pour over the appendix. Make notes for yourself and read no further. Bring your hunches to the roundtable. For those who cannot wait.....

The most brutal films dealt with evil in an uncompromising way. Oscar winners like *The Departed* and *No Country for Old Men* document the wages of sin a brutal manner. They are cautionary tales about lying, cheating and stealing. *Memento*

reinvents film *noir*. It turns the jaded private eye into an unreliable narrator. Leonard's short-term memory loss keeps us off balance, trying to piece together clues. We try to solve the mystery by incorporating his mnemonic devices. But what if the facts have been fudged? What if we have chosen to overlook salient points? In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Joel and Clementine elect to erase their memories. They'd rather feel nothing, than feel pain. But we have much more than a memory problem. By the conclusion of *Memento*, we discover our endless capacity for self-deception.

So what are the scriptural connections? For evangelists hoping to introduce the fall, recent movies cover our self-destructive tendencies in graphic detail. These dark, violent films take us back to the garden, to God's first question to humanity—"Why are you hiding? In *Memento*, I was reminded of the elaborate excuses we make. How often we blame others for our failings. Eve did it! Like Leonard, we construct missions and obsessions to make ourselves feel better, to feel justified in our self-deception. *Memento* is a brilliant meditation on original sin.

A second theme emerging from our most important movies is community. Harrowing films like *Crash* and *Hotel Rwanda* force us to consider "the other." Whether we are facing urban sprawl in Los Angeles or genocide in Rwanda, we are invited to step into another person's shoes. If one suffers, all suffer. In *Little Miss Sunshine* that empathetic invitation is comic. We discover the embarrassments crowded into our family trees. In *Mystic River*, the results of indifference are tragic. Failure to act on behalf of a friend results in the unraveling of a Boston community. In *The Lives of Others*, a Stasi agent is confronted by the beautiful lives of those he is spying upon. He chooses to undercut the Communist system and protect a persecuted playwright and actress. As we wrestle with *The Lives of Others*, I found myself confronted by God's second question to

humanity. God asks Cain, “Where is your brother?” The blood of Abel cries out from the ground. And yet, Cain dodges responsibility with a question, “Am I my brothers’ keeper?” The answer in the finest contemporary films is a resounding, “Yes.”

These powerful films remind us how utterly depraved humanity remains. The next generation of filmgoers isn’t afraid of sin—they welcome frank portraits of our fallenness. They know how deceptive we can be. They’ve seen how brutally we treat each other. They eagerly await an answer, a solution, and a glimmer of promise.

So where does our hope reside? The third (and largest) block of films forming the new cinematic canon is fantasies. It may be tempting to dismiss Pixar’s colorful cartoons as superficial. *Finding Nemo* and *The Incredibles* offer plenty of escape. They are seemingly light, frothy fun. But what can we make of complex fantasies like *Pan’s Labyrinth* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy? They are loaded with heroes adopting courage under fire, choosing self-sacrifice rather than self-aggrandizement. Traces of the Gospel infuse the most popular and enduring contemporary films. The points of contact between the Gospel and films like *Donnie Darko*, *Spirited Away*, *Pan’s Labyrinth*, *Children of Men*, and *The Lord of the Rings* are almost embarrassingly obvious. An evangelist searching for images, metaphors and contemporary gospel parallels can choose from an abundance of cinematic riches.

Given all the ugliness we’ve witnessed, we are desperate to get back to the garden, before the fall. But fantasies like *The Lord of the Rings* suggest we will not arrive without a struggle. We need a fellowship to navigate the journey to Mt. Doom. Our story doesn’t end in a garden, but in a new city, with streets paved with gold, where living waters feed trees that have healing in their leaves. We long for fantasy because we recognize our dire straits. The finest films remind us of how imaginative and hopeful

Revelation 21 and 22 remains. Our story ends with a wedding banquet. To all who are thirsty, the Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” As we wander into the dark of cinema, the longing for the light of God’s promises emerges. That’s a point of contact, an *anknupfungspunkt*, I am eager to embrace.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

How does this work itself out? What are some practical ways to rediscover the Gospel in 21st century film? I try to look at films as descriptive rather than prescriptive. Rarely do they provide answers to sin, suffering or salvation. Instead, they describe our problems, our brokenness, and our need. Once I understand what movies or music or TV can offer, then I can relax and enjoy the limited truth emerging from my pop cultural diet. My job is to become an interpretive leader, coming alongside people already engaged in a spiritual search. Like Philip, the first cross-cultural evangelist, I can simply listen carefully to what people are reading, watching, and hearing. In Acts 8, Philip comes alongside the Ethiopian eunuch, tuning into to his search, listening carefully before he speaks. The eunuch invites Philip into his chariot, to explain the scriptures to him. What an open invitation! Like Philip we can ask people, “Do you understand what you are watching, reading and hearing?”

We must start by doing our cultural homework, appreciating the art of cinema, tuning into the most popular shows, incorporating chart-topping lyrics into our proclamation. Websites like HollywoodJesus.com, Rednow.com, and [Christianity Today.com/movies](http://ChristianityToday.com/movies) provide some initial interpretive clues.^{viii} Organizations like Reel Spirituality, Movie Ministry, and Sermon Spice provide plenty of resources.^{ix} A wealth of books offer study guides, sermon series, and clips to download. Amongst the titles I

recommend are *Movies That Teach*, *Lights Camera Faith*, and *Finding God at the Movies*.^x While movies have never been more complex, the numbers of resources dedicated to helping you decipher pop culture have never been more prevalent.

To find what movies matter in your context, why not start with a simple survey. Ask those in your sphere of influence to list their all time favorite movies. See if certain thematic trends emerge. You may be ministering to people who are already firmly convicted about human frailty. They may turn to feel good films in search of hope. They may embrace horror films as a corrective to the easy answers they've been fed in church or school. They may be so depressed about their circumstances that they live in a cinematic fantasy world. Can't you connect their deepest passions expressed onscreen to Jesus' life changing work? Can't you bridge the gap between their (mis)perceptions of Christianity and Jesus' inclusive kingdom? Perhaps they will even invite into their chariot for further discussion.

I've even embarked upon my own cinematic odysseys (or oddities). I offered a fleeting portrait of a benevolent English lord in my dog story, *The Duke*. I gave glimpses of divine comfort and purpose amidst the random humor of *Extreme Days*. Having created a film for children and a film for teens, I finally reached back to college days for my new feature documentary, *Purple State of Mind*. Created with my Davidson College roommate, John Marks, *Purple State of Mind* is four conversations, over the course of a year, between two old friends. My first year in the faith was John's last year in the faith. We explore what happened in during our sophomore year at Davidson as a way into the religious and political divide in America.

Purple State of Mind will infuriate those expecting a traditional explication of the Gospel. To some, I will sound far too inclusive of homosexuals. To others, I will appear

far too soft on hell and damnation. To many, I will come across as wishy-washy, mealy-mouthed and overly tolerant. But *Purple State of Mind* is intended to address those objections cited within *unChristian* and *They Like Jesus, but Not the Church*. It is pre-evangelism: a rambling, spontaneous, unscripted apology to my old college roommate and to anyone who has ever been on the blunt end of Christian proclamation or judgment.

It is a conversation starter arriving in an era marked by conversation stoppers. It surfaces all manner of objections towards Christianity buried within highly dissatisfied people. Stories of rejection, frustration and judgment come pouring out of audience members. They flash back to nuns who scolded them, missionaries who undercut native cultures, and pastors who condemned them. By the end of the movie, even the most peaceful Buddhists want to hit me. At a time when nobody seems open to listening to anybody talk about Jesus, *Purple State of Mind* blows the lid off the cultural war. It pushes past political correctness into the postmodern spiritual stew.

What is brewing beneath the surface of our divided nation? A producer from *60 Minutes* admitted his was “pissed off” by *Purple State of Mind*, telling me, “I gave up my Catholic upbringing years ago. Now, you’ve got me thinking and talking about Jesus again. Dammit.” A Buddhist in Philadelphia told me he wanted to punch me during the movie. How dare I claim that I understand Buddhism! A Muslim in Austin, Texas told me he related to my tension. He felt embarrassed by what people had done in the name of his religion, too. *Purple State of Mind* brings out all of people’s issues with Christianity. It is kindling and starter fluid for the next generation of evangelists. For those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, the conversation has barely begun.

Craig Detweiler, PhD directs the Reel Spirituality Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary (www.brehmcenter.org). His feature documentary, *Purple State of Mind*, tours the country in 2008 (See the schedule at www.purplestateofmind.com). Craig's new book, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century* arrives in July from Baker Academic.

APPENDIX A: THE IMDB'S TOP FILMS OF THE 21ST CENTURY
By ranking within the Top 250 Films of All Time on April 15, 2008

12. The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (2003)
16. City of God (2002)
19. The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Rings (2001)
27. Memento (2000)
28. The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers (2002)
39. Amelie (2001)
42. The Departed (2006)
44. There Will Be Blood (2007)
48. The Lives of Others (2006)
51. Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004)
54. No Country for Old Men (2007)
55. Pan's Labyrinth (2006)
56. The Pianist (2002)
58. Spirited Away (2001)
62. Requiem for a Dream (2000)
68. Downfall [Der Untergang] (2004)
77. Hotel Rwanda (2004)
79. Sin City (2005)
89. The Prestige (2006)
103. Batman Begins (2005)
111. Oldboy (2003)
117. Donnie Darko (2001)
122. Kill Bill: Vol. 1 (2003)
124. Ratatouille (2007)
125. Into the Wild (2007)
126. Million Dollar Baby (2004)
127. Gladiator (2000)
129. The Bourne Ultimatum (2007)
144. Amores Perros (2000)
145. Finding Nemo (2003)
147. The Incredibles (2004)
149. V for Vendetta (2005)
153. Children of Men (2006)
159. Letters from Iwo Jima (2006)
163. Crash (2005)
165. Snatch (2000)
174. Juno (2007)
176. Kill Bill: Vol. 2 (2004)
179. Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000)
182. Little Miss Sunshine (2006)
190. American Gangster (2007)
217. Big Fish (2003)
222. Grindhouse (2007)

223. *Mystic River* (2003)
230. *Once* (2006)
233. *Infernal Affairs [Mou gaan dou]* (2002)
234. *Hot Fuzz* (2007)
240. *3:10 to Yuma* (2007)
245. *Shaun of the Dead* (2004)
247. *Hero* (2002)
248. *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003)

ⁱ Dan Kimball, *They like Jesus, but not the Church*, Zondervan, 2007.

ⁱⁱ David Kinnaman with Gabe Lyons, *unChristian*, Baker Books, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ John C. McDowell, *The Gospel According to Star Wars: Faith, Hope and the Force*, Westminster John Knox, 2007, Connie Neal, *The Gospel According to Harry Potter: Spirituality in the Stories of the World's Most Famous Seeker*, Westminster John Knox, 2002, and Mark Pinsky, *The Gospel According to the Simpsons: Bigger and Possibly Even Better Edition*, Westminster John Knox, 2007.

^{iv} Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology*, translated by Peter Fraenkel, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002.

^v Francis Schaefer, *The God Who is There*, InterVarsity Press, 1998.

^{vi} Widely read texts include Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, Baker Academic, 2006 and Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*, Baker Academic, 2003 and Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, Baker Academic, 2008.

^{vii} Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century*, Baker Academic, 2008.

^{viii} www.hollywoodjesus.com, www.rednow.com, and www.christianitytoday.com/movies.

^{ix} www.reelspirituality.org, www.movieministry.com, and www.sermonspice.com.

^x For youthworkers, I recommend Doug Fields and Eddie James, *Videos that Teach*, Zondervan, 1999, for those serving in traditional, mainline churches, Peter Malone and Rose Pacatte tied film study to the lectionary cycle in *Lights, Camera, Faith: A Movie Lectionary*, Pauline Books and Media, 2001 and Catherine Barsotti and Robert K. Johnston, *Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films about Faith*, Baker, 2004.