

RETHINKING CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT:
REFLECTIONS ON THE GOD'S NOT DEAD FRANCHISE

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Abstract

This paper examines the “God’s Not Dead” franchise as representative of a recent wave of American Christian films that present evangelism and apologetics within the framework of the so-called ‘culture war’. The films are provocative and have generated much negative comment, yet it will be argued that when they are taken as models of a particular kind of Christian response to the ever changing landscape of American society important questions can be asked about how Christians might better engage cultural change. Moreover, since the theological perspective and rhetorical style of these films have prompted the criticism that they function more as propaganda for a particular political ideology than as genuine witness to the Christian faith, it will be argued that they can provide a helpful stimulus towards greater self-criticism within the Christian faith community. The paper seeks to encourage discussion on the possible impact of these films on perceptions of the Christian faith, on the challenges they pose for Christians who might think about and approach the issues related to faith and secularism in a different way, and on the character and form of a positive and responsible engagement with secular culture.

The church exists to bear witness to the world about the nature and truth of the gospel. For that reason, Christians have always understood the need to engage the larger culture in which they find themselves in order to better communicate their particular message. Evangelism and apologetics are regularly joined together in this task since often the Christian message needs to be explained, and at times even defended, in order for those outside the faith to respond positively and effectively to the distinctive and challenging features of the gospel. History demonstrates that the church has had varied success in presenting its message clearly and appropriately. Predictably, Christians do best when their witness reflects the character of Christ and is consistent with Christian values. Likewise, they are not so effective when their witness becomes compromised by alternative agendas that confuse and needlessly aggravate the intended audience. It is the

purpose of this discussion to evaluate the success of the *God's Not Dead* movie franchise in terms of effective Christian witness. These films can be seen as representative of a recent wave of American Christian films that present evangelism and apologetics within the framework of the so-called 'culture war' that has been a feature of the conservative (principally evangelical) American Christian experience since at least the 1990s. Since the conflict between traditional, conservative values and secular, progressive values stand at the center of these films they provide a helpful test case for assessing how Christians might best approach issues related to faith and secularism.

Background to the Films

Before offering a critique of these films it would be helpful to give some essential background. To date two films in the *God's Not Dead* series have been produced. The first film, *God's Not Dead*, was released in 2014. The film has brought in over \$63 million at the box office from a \$2 million budget making it the highest grossing independent film of 2014 and one of the most financially successful Christian films ever produced. The sequel, *God's Not Dead 2*, has not matched the same level of financial success as the first film but will no doubt be profitable. The films were produced by Pure Flix Entertainment, whose mission is "to be the world leader in producing and distributing faith and family media" and whose vision is "to influence the global culture for Christ through media" (according to their website: pureflixstudio.com). The first two films (a third film has been announced) explore the challenges to faith in the public (educational) sphere. The first film is set on a University campus and concerns a Christian student who, in refusing to sign a statement that 'God is dead' to satisfy an atheist professor's requirement in a philosophy course, is required to debate God's existence with the professor before the rest of the class. The second film is set in a public high school and courtroom and concerns a Christian teacher who is charged with professional misconduct when she references Jesus' teaching on non-violence in the context of a class discussion on history. In both films the protagonists and the faith they represent are vindicated.

The Methodological Approach to Analyzing and Critiquing the Films

It was noted above that these films will be evaluated in terms of their effectiveness as instruments of Christian witness. Although the films are ostensibly evangelistic, in keeping with the vision statement of the production studio, they are clearly targeted more to a Christian audience and marketed accordingly. The films may indirectly serve as evangelistic tools, yet their primary purpose is apologetic and directed specifically towards helping Christians to better understand the context in which they live and offering them encouragement and reinforcement to remain faithful in what is seen as a hostile and anti-Christian environment. At the same time, because the films are given a theatrical release, meaning they are shown in cinemas and not church auditoriums, they represent a public Christian witness and need to be assessed accordingly. This aspect of these films gives them a unique character: on the one hand, they offer a narrative directed to the Christian 'insider' and yet are projected in venues where the 'outsider' is invited to view and deliberate upon the narrative. For this reason, it is important that Christians consider what is being communicated through these films and assess whether, as a means of Christian witness in the world, their impact on balance is positive or negative.

The *God's Not Dead* films take the form of narratives in keeping with the mission of Pure Flix Entertainment to provide an alternative to the Hollywood narratives that play a major role in shaping the current culture. This distinguishes the films from other Christian apologetic films that often use documentary, interview, or lecture forms to make their case or to advance the argument. Since the films employ the narrative form they are best examined in terms of the key features of narrative, namely characterization, plot and perspective. Moreover, their use of the narrative form makes it possible to assess their effectiveness and suitability from the vantage point of the rhetorical and apologetic purposes of New Testament narrative.

The extent to which the message of scripture is communicated in narrative form is not as well appreciated as one might expect. It is obvious that much of the New Testament is in the form of narrative (e.g. the Gospels), yet even those sections that are not strictly narrative (e.g. the letters of Paul) are informed by a narrative framework that is essential to their meaning. This feature of scripture is not surprising given that narrative has such profound informative and persuasive

value. Perhaps even less appreciated is how an understanding of New Testament narrative can assist the church in communicating its own message to the world. Since the *God's Not Dead* films intend to be Christian narratives and to advance the gospel message it is fair to evaluate them in terms of the narrative apologetic of the New Testament itself. To that end the apologetic approach of these films will be compared and contrasted with that of the New Testament. The films will be examined with respect to the narrative elements of characterization, plot and perspective with an eye to assessing the extent to which they can be described as true Christian narratives.

A Critique of Characterization in the Films

Characters are an essential feature of any story. They may be protagonists or antagonists and as such play a sympathetic or unsympathetic role in the narrative. Characters are important inasmuch as they help to establish the point of view of the narrative. The characters in the *God's Not Dead* films tend to be quite 'flat' and 'stereotypic' but more problematic is that the Christian characters are always presented positively whereas non-Christian characters are almost always presented negatively. The central protagonists, Josh Wheaton (the student of the first film) and Grace Wesley (the teacher of the second film), are decent, pleasant and virtuous people. Moreover, their very names are expressive of biblical and evangelical notions. Supportive Christian characters are likewise depicted as appealing, good and wise. Non-Christian characters, by contrast, are for the most part 'haters' unless there are moving along a trajectory towards faith. The principal antagonists, the philosophy professor of the first film and the ACLU lawyer who prosecutes the case in the second film, are portrayed in an exceptionally unsympathetic manner. Both films in a rather simplistic way represent characters from a single, biased perspective. The sympathies of the audience are bluntly steered towards the Christian characters, while the non-Christian characters are made into objects of blame, loathing or pity. This one-sidedness makes the films quite unsatisfying on the dramatic level, since 'plaster saints' versus 'horrible atheists' effectively reduces the story to a Manichean contest between good and evil lacking all nuance. But more to the point, this one-sidedness in characterization sets these stories quite apart from how characterization functions in New Testament narrative.

Three examples from the New Testament will serve to make the point:

1. Jesus taught primarily by telling stories and his stories, or parables, often have surprising twists to them. It is significant that in his parables the protagonists are often people like Samaritans, tax collectors and even 'good-for-nothing' sons whereas the antagonists are priests, Levites, Pharisees and apparently dutiful sons. This shocking element within the parables has become muted to modern ears since these stories are so familiar but it is important that this feature be understood in context. Jesus comes as Messiah and prophet to his people Israel. The apologetic aspect within his teaching is to 'defend' the character of God and the true nature of covenant before an Israel that had become hardened. He stands firmly in the Old Testament prophetic tradition that held Israel accountable often in very forceful ways. The reason for this prophetic critique is that Israel did not exist for itself or simply to be the recipient of God's blessings but rather to be a light to the nations. When the people fail to live out the meaning of covenant it is the task of the prophet to be an agent of God's judgment and hopefully to initiate a period of self-criticism. The principle that lies behind such prophetic action is that judgment must begin with the household of God. It is not surprising then that the religious leaders of Jesus' day are more often than not the target of his critique. They need to be awakened from their distorted vision of Israel and covenant so they can properly lead the people in the ways of God.
2. The Gospel writers, in imitation of Jesus, also taught through storytelling. And in the way they portray the disciples it is clear that they also learned from Jesus the importance of self-criticism. For example, in Mark even though the disciples of Jesus leave all to follow him they are nevertheless presented as slow to understand, self-absorbed and ambitious. Inasmuch as this gospel narrative was written by a disciple, the characterization of the disciples in Mark is best described as self-deprecatory. There is the same prophetic dimension to this portrayal as was noted in the teaching of Jesus. The author of Mark recognizes that living out the realities of covenant is not as simple and straightforward as one might think. To properly follow Jesus necessitates radical transformation, faithful commitment and an ongoing self-criticism.

3. Paul's letters reflect many of the pastoral challenges he faced in his churches and it is clear that his instruction to Christians is likewise informed by lessons drawn from Israel's covenant story. When Paul treats the problem of sin within the Corinthian congregation, he does not allow the church to deflect the problem as though it was a problem with the world. In 1 Cor. 5.12 he clearly states that it is not the job of Christians to judge those outside the church but rather to judge those within the church. Paul accepts that non-believers will sin because they live according to false assumptions. It is therefore pointless to judge them. However, he will judge Christians when they living according to such false assumptions because more is expected of them. Moreover, Paul is always mindful that Christian witness before the world is compromised when Christians fail to live their lives in the manner to which they are called. His apologetic is not directed towards defending the church against a threatening world, but rather defending the truth of the gospel against negligent Christians for the sake of the world. Once again, self-criticism is encouraged as an essential feature of the life of covenant people.

In the light of these examples, the type of characterization present in the *God's Not Dead* films must be described as counter Christian. How effective is an apologetic that is so self-congratulatory? The objective of these narratives is not to challenge Christians, as one finds so often in the New Testament, but to pander to and provide hollow comfort to the Christian audience. The films operate on the assumption that the world dislikes Christians. Given this type of portrayal, is it any wonder? What reasonable person would feel any sympathy towards a group that is so self-satisfied and views itself as so superior to others? When Jesus tells his disciples that the world will hate them it is because they will represent his truth before the world. That is far from the narrative world of these films. In this respect these films do a great disservice to the Christian community. While it is true that secular culture has become more hostile to the Christian community in recent years, no attempt is made in these films to seek to understand the extent to which the church may bear some responsibility for this state of affairs. There is no attempt to acknowledge any Christian failing. In short, there is no room for self-criticism in these films.

A Critique of the Storylines of the Films

Clearly there is no story without a plot and storyline is of great importance in revealing the essence and intentions of a narrative. A central problem with the storylines of the two *God's Not Dead* films is that they rely too heavily on 'straw man' scenarios. In the first film the philosophy professor acts in a patently unprofessional manner by coercing his students at the beginning of the semester to sign a statement affirming that 'God is Dead' so he need not waste class time with arguments for or against the existence of God. It is improbable that a professor could get away with such a bullying and intrinsically anti-intellectual tactic in an actual college situation. This is not to say there are not antagonistic professors within the academy, only that their antagonism operates on a more subtle and intellectual level. The storyline of the film would be much more satisfying if a more honest and sophisticated approach to the intellectual argument at its center had been taken. In the second film the scenario of the prosecution of a teacher who simply mentions Jesus' teaching on non-violence within the context of a history class is equally improbable. There are undoubtedly anxious school districts that are not fully aware of the legal statements that regulate the discussion of religion in the classroom, however, if this particular case went to trial it is more than likely that the ACLU would be defending the teacher. Once again the storyline of the film depends on a scenario that is not quite honest and thus less than satisfying.

Essential to these films is a narrative world that is unfair and inhospitable to Christian belief. The committed believer is forced to operate in a rigged system that is unsympathetic, menacing and often irrational. The dominant theme of these films is Christian victimization. If the believer is to be both faithful and forthright they will endure a fraudulent trial for which they had better possess the courage and resilience of a Daniel. The objective of these films is to show how inimical to Christian values secular culture has become and to that end implausible and dishonest storylines seem to be justified.

An apologetic narrative that is so careless with the truth is highly problematic. The dishonesty of these films has the effect of undermining their professed purpose of making the case for Christian truth claims. The goal of bearing witness to Christ or to the truth of the gospel can never justify the use of any means to achieve that end. Once a narrative

becomes fraudulent it ceases to bear witness to the truth and can no longer claim to be Christian in any proper sense of the word. Both films could have treated actual philosophical and political issues relevant to faith in a responsible and engaging manner, but they chose rather to indulge in propagandistic tactics and the worst form of advocacy politics. The plots owe much to ‘urban legends’ and ‘memes’ popular among some Christians that project particular perceptions of secular culture but at the same time reflect paranoid fantasies. An essential irony of these films is that the Christian boldness on the surface masks an underlying current of fear which points further to a disconnect from biblical truth. These films are the cinematic equivalent of the social media phenomenon of people forwarding rumors as fact and being indifferent to the consequences. A Christian apologetic must hold itself to a high standard of truth. It cannot allow for the misrepresentation of circumstances merely for effect. Moreover, a Christian apologetic should never arouse feelings of fear or suspicion. Not only are such emotions unhelpful, but they have the negative effect of generating an ‘us-versus-them’ thinking which is incompatible with the church’s mission to bear witness to Christ to the world.

An Analysis of the Perspective that Shapes the Message of the Films

Most narratives are informed by a perspective that shapes the way the story is told. The characterization and plot of the *God’s Not Dead* films indicate a specific preunderstanding or set of assumptions that provide the point of view taken up in each narrative. Four observations can be made with respect to the beliefs and sensibilities that control the perspective of these films:

1. Fundamental to these films is the idea that in recent years Christians have lost power over the culture and need to exert influence in order to regain power. The question of who has power and who exercises control is very central to both stories. Christians are portrayed as an embattled minority who, though the good of the land, have become disempowered. Additionally, the structures that once supported a Christian worldview, specifically education and the judiciary, are no longer trustworthy but rather seen as unfriendly leaving the Christian with little redress when harassed by unfair attacks. These ideas contribute to the angry and contemptuous tone that pervades

the films. They are also the source of the 'tribalism' and 'us-versus-them' tendencies within the films.

2. It is evident from the films that the producers identify Christian belief with conservative politics. The 'culture war', which has been of greater concern for those on the right than on the left, is seen as a serious threat to American society. Moreover, the 'War on Christianity' implicit in the films is seen as especially injurious to white middle-class evangelical Christians. This is the very group that has experienced the greatest loss of influence and power in recent decades and the group which during that time has become more identified with the American right. Coded language and numerous 'dog whistles' are used in the films to elicit appropriate responses from a more conservative audience. To give but a few examples: in the first film a Muslim girl comes to faith listening to Franklin Graham sermons, throughout both films there are numerous references to 'Duck Dynasty' (the films were made at a time when the stars of the series were highly popular among the Christian right), and the films include cameo appearances by personalities such as Mike Huckabee and Christian apologists best known in conservative evangelical circles. This identification with the Christian right is not remarkable given that Pure Flix is allied with the International Coalition of Apostolic Leaders, an organization whose membership includes many Christian leaders who strongly identify with the Christian right.
3. A further assumption of these films is that secular education encourages antagonism towards traditional Christian values. In both films the attack against Christianity comes from within an educational institution. Not unexpectedly the films exhibit a certain resentment to the secular academic world. It is significant that many of the leaders of the new apostolic movement (of which the ICAL is a part) are committed to the so-called 'seven mountain mandate', which refers to the seven major spheres of influence (Education, Government, Business, Media, Religion, Family, Arts/Entertainment) over which the church must take control to advance the kingdom of God. Education is seen as the most formidable of these 'mountains' since it directly influences the thinking of the culture. It is not surprising that the educational

sphere is the focus of these two films and is portrayed in a manner suggesting a regrettable departure from traditional norms.

4. The films also reveal the anti-intellectualism that continues to mark the evangelical movement. Somewhat disturbing, especially in light of the interest in education in the *God's Not Dead* films, is the impression they give that faith is ultimately non-intellectual. In the first film, the Christian student ultimately wins the day not by means of an intellectual argument but through an emotional appeal. In the second film, apologetic arguments are presented at the teacher's trial but they never address the central issue of the film. It is ironic that films ostensibly about rational debate and which seek to present believers as intellectually rigorous rely, in the end, on the emotional manipulation of the audience. To a great extent the films provide additional evidence of the 'scandal' of the evangelical mind.

One can sympathize with the perspective of these films. Christian influence has waned as American culture has become more secular. The films represent one form of response to that societal shift. Yet because this response is so joined to particular theological (fundamentalist/evangelical) and political (right wing/conservative) ideologies it raises the question of whether the films offer a very effective or constructive response. The films can, however, stimulate more critical thinking on how Christian engagement with secular culture might be conducted in a more positive and responsible way.

Conclusion

The point of this discussion is not to disparage the *God's Not Dead* films but rather, because of their high profile, to critique these films as a means to advance the conversation on how the church might better respond to secularizing tendencies within the dominant culture. The argument advanced here is that the church is best served when it learns well from its own scriptures. The Bible offers profound insight on how narratives can function in a truly prophetic way to convict, persuade and transform. Christians would do well to allow the outlook and character especially of New Testament rhetoric to inform their own approach as they engage in cultural analysis and dialogue.

A careful reading of the New Testament should check the impulse to judge harshly the attitudes and behaviors of non-believers.

Such judgment is best left to God. It is the task of the Christian to understand well the context of the unbeliever which generates their distinctive perspective and way of living in order to show them a more truthful way. Moreover, humility requires the church to acknowledge that judgment begins with the people of God. It is fitting for the Christian community to continually practice a healthy self-criticism. Part of the assessment and discussion that must take place is the extent to which the church, either through failure to fully embrace its own teaching or due to unconscious allegiance to alternate ideologies, has inadvertently contributed to negative attitudes towards the Christian faith and even pushed some to non-belief.

The church is called upon to conduct an apologetic witness before the world. Yet this should never take the form of an adversarial contest between the believer and the non-believer. The New Testament is clear that the church's struggle is not with other people even when they are promoting ideas in conflict with the truth. The struggle rather is with the ideas themselves, or, as Paul might put it, the 'spirit of the age' behind the ideas. A proper apologetic defends the truth of the gospel in a way that invites the non-believer into the struggle not as an opponent but as an observer and participant in exploring the truth. The goal of such an apologetic is not to defeat non-believers in debate but to persuade them through the strength of better ideas and a more powerful vision of life.