

**Review of: Lindvall, Terry; & Quicke, Andrew (2011). *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986*. New York, New York: NYU Press (287 pages).**

**By Jennifer Letherer, MFA, Spring Arbor University**

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The succinct pronouncement made by Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke in the conclusion of *Celluloid Sermons* is that while the vast majority of films made within the Evangelical tribe between 1930 and the mid-1980s was criticized for “substandard artistic quality and content” they still “were successful in *what they were intended to be*.” The authors’ definitions, records, and assessments of Christian movies is one of the most thorough compendiums of Christian film history; it is also an insightful discussion guided by the two scholars who could provide it like no one else.

Lindvall, whose previous work *Sanctuary Cinema* details the history of the American Protestant church in film from the turn of the century through the 1920s, is the go-to scholar on the history of nominally Christian films. And Quicke is his good company, with extensive personal experience to add to his scholarly prowess.

While the two run the risk of burdening the reader with details (which some readers, this reviewer included, are happy to have at their disposal even if it does make the text harder to process), the nature of the subject matter and the intent of the text calls for thorough investigation and discussion. The book does just that. From the visually astute, creation-celebrating films of Dr. Irwin Moon to the rapture cult classic *A Thief in the Night*, Lindvall and Quicke leave virtually no stone unturned.

The writers' attention to detail do make it difficult to keep track of names, personalities, companies, and support organizations. But this is the nature of the material. While the number of texts that treat Hollywood and film from a Christian perspective has grown palpably in the past ten years, little literature on the specific subject of films made under explicit Christian auspices exists. Lindvall and Quicke do what they can to help readers by including chapter summaries (which are sometimes more commentary than summary), a film chronology, and a list of acronyms. They also make good use of the concluding chapter, discussing widely known films like *The Jesus Film*, and *The Hiding Place* and companies like World Wide Pictures and Gateway Films again for emphasis. Making sense of the evangelical film world is a daunting task to say the least, but Lindvall and Quicke achieve it.

Quicke and Lindvall address the obvious questions of the evangelical film world: "Why are Christian movies so bad?" and "Why or how should we show conversion and salvation on film?" These are the questions Christian filmmakers and audiences have asked for years. For current aspiring filmmakers, *Celluloid Sermons* is a chance to understand the identity and reputation of the Christian film world by understanding not just how films were made by and for the tribe, but why. The role of distribution and financing for film companies and libraries is an integral part of every film's discussion, and rightly so.

The initial chapters highlight personalities that saw the potential of film and its reintroduction into the sanctuary after the integration of sound. Grappling with subject matter, mission /intention, financing, production quality, aesthetic choice, and exhibition

/distribution, the authors trace the history of Christians alongside and in Hollywood who made the first significant steps toward an evangelical film industry.

The middle chapters highlight the solidification and growth of that industry with the participation of personalities like Billy Graham (whose organization birthed World Wide Pictures) and Ken Anderson (co-founder of Gospel Films), as well as the formation of Christian film specialties, like the talking-head sermon films popularized by Dr. James Dobson (a phenomenon that the writers term the “Dobson Effect”).

Later chapters highlight the missionary efforts of figures like Anderson and the phenomenon of *The Jesus Film*. Added to all of these are a multitude of should-be-notables. If the authors are making trivial films seem more significant than they are, it is because the scholarly film world has overlooked films made within the tribe as trite and propagandistic. But as Lindvall and Quicke argue, the intention of many Christian filmmakers stressed message over artistic use of the medium. These films may seem trivial to the secular film world, although Hollywood history has its own trivialities as well, and if Lindvall and Quicke had not documented them, their presence may never have been available to the scholarly community.

*Celluloid Sermons* documents uncharted film history territory. For evangelicals, whose subculture is increasingly engaging in the integration of media, a history of the visual image in evangelical culture has never been more vital. Since current trends include the likes of Sherwood Pictures’ *Courageous*, Tyler Perry’s films, Rob Bell’s NOOMAs, and Michael Sajbel’s *One Night with the King*, information about what Christian filmmakers have done and/or tried to do for the past eighty years not only puts current success in perspective, but it also explains the difficulties faced in the very idea of

choosing how to use film as a tool for Bible stories, discipleship, evangelism, edification, and entertainment. The authors deftly include the important contexts of social, cultural, and church events, technological developments, financial cause-and-effects, and critical and audience reaction.

Lindvall and Quicke gather firsthand accounts (including some of their own) from people connected directly with the organizations and films they describe. Future generations will have them to thank for their understanding of their own culture's engagement with film. The book's final paragraph also alludes to a potential future offering of a text that covers covering Christian film from the 80s through the present. Let us hope it is not long in coming.

Although the information it documents is important, so too is its digestion by critics who are as serious about film study as they are about faith. Lindvall and Quicke feel no need to defend the poor reputation of the Christian film industry, but like good prophetic voices, they seek to understand and appreciate the efforts of filmmakers to create a successful industry and to create good films.

This is helped along by passages distinctly marked by Lindvall's signature witty and engaging prose. The book should be an easy read for college students and beyond. The most difficult passages are the ones mired by the subject matter's lack of clear narrative history and sideline information. The best passages neatly package the who, what, why, where, and how of Christians making films outside (or alongside) Hollywood.

Film lovers who grew up in evangelical culture will find the pieces of their film history puzzle falling into place as they are able to categorize films that saw theatrical distribution at the local Cineplex, the ones screened in their local church, and the ones

shown by churches around the world. For this reviewer's part, Chapter 7's discussion on Mark IV and Apocalyptic Film marked my ownership of Christian movies. I, like the authors and countless others, had an almost visceral reaction to my first encounter with *A Thief in the Night* when I saw it as a teenager at the Devil's Lake Drive-In. From that day, I wondered why I thought it was so terrible and so wonderful at the same time. It was so campy, so campy it was great. Perhaps this is the same reaction larger audiences and the film school generation had to Roger Corman's cult classics, which we learn in the book helped inspire the Mark IV post-apocalyptic films. Perhaps Christian movies were and are just as vitally a part of our cultural art as any film in popular culture. Other readers raised in evangelical culture who love movies will doubtless also find connections throughout the text.

Evangelical Christianity had (and has) its own films. There truly is a Christian film industry, and by documenting its past, the authors give it a present. As for the many Christian films that should rightly be cited for poor use of the medium, Lindvall and Quicke's admonition that the message was the goal, and was often effective, is a point well made. For those seeking ownership of their cultural heritage as well as a detailed reference of its development, *Celluloid Sermons* fits the bill. For those looking to make films from a Christian perspective better, or more effective, or both, this book is a vital resource.

*Celluloid Sermons* has a lot of information and insight in as digestible a package as could still hold a complete history. The text should sit on the shelf of every film studies professor or student in the evangelical world. For that matter, it should be on the

shelf of every Christian filmmaker serious about understanding who they are and what makes movies work.