



Written by [Troy Anderson](#) on March 18, 2019

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## The Good, The True, The Beautiful

Universal City, California — Since its release last year, millions of people have seen the film *I Can Only Imagine* — imagining the power of faith reconciling and transforming their families.

At the 27th Annual Movieguide Faith & Values Awards Gala on February 8, producer Cindy Bond told *The New American* that the film's impact has been "absolutely phenomenal."



Movieguide

The film, one of the highest-grossing faith-based movies of 2018, earning \$85 million at the box office, won the Epiphany Prize for Most Inspiring Movie at the gala. The movie tells the story behind the most-played Christian contemporary song, "I Can Only Imagine," by the band MercyMe.

The film follows the true story of Christian singer Bart Millard, whose father was emotionally and physically abusive. The film stars J. Michael Finley as Bart, who wrote the song about his relationship with his father, played by Dennis Quaid.

"I mean I've had people tell me that they've forgiven a father they hadn't spoken to in 20 years, and that they've actually come to a relationship with God and Jesus through this," Bond says. "They've forgiven themselves for something. I mean about anything and everything — it's uplifted their lives. The movie is full of liquid hope and it's given a lot of people hope in some dark times that we go through just in life and as a society."

The film, one of an exploding number of movies with positive, redemptive content, comes amid a revival of sorts in Hollywood and hope that the trend will continue.

After issuing reports to the entertainment industry for decades finding that movies with morally uplifting themes do much better at the box office, Movieguide publisher Dr. Ted Baehr told hundreds of studio executives, producers, directors, stars, and others at the event in Universal City, California, that films with at least some Christian, redemptive content hit an all-time high in 2018.

"I've known Ted almost since the beginning [of Movieguide] and his work has been critical — there are hardly words to explain it," Bond told *The New American* on the red carpet at the Universal Hilton Hollywood. "He set the foundation for what we're doing because he proved that there is a market for these films. His annual report to the industry has been a huge help to us filmmakers to get films made because he's shown Hollywood, year in and year out, how risk-averse faith and family films are. He's helped a lot of us get movies made, so Movieguide is absolutely irreplaceable."

When Baehr founded Movieguide in 1985, Bond says few people could get into a "bona fide door in Hollywood and talk about doing a film that had faith elements or was faith-based."



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“I was here in the early 1990s and nobody was interested. You had to be careful,” Bond says. “The market and audience were there — we had seen these [faith-based] films in the 1930s, ’40s and ’50s [*The Ten Commandments*, *Ben-Hur*, etc.] — but there were a few decades when everybody kind of went away from it, so Ted opened up the market. God bless him!”

Gregg Smrz, the director of *Medal of Honor: “Hiroshi Hershey Miyamura”* on Netflix, which won Movieguide’s Faith & Freedom Award for TV, says this was the first time he attended the Movieguide awards.

“This is a great awards show,” says Smrz, a longtime Hollywood stuntman who worked on *Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation*, *Fantastic Four*, and other blockbuster films. “Any time you can promote these awards for stuff like this, I think it’s fantastic.”

## **Record Percentage of Faith Movies Hit the Big Screen in 2018**

Over the past 35 years, Movieguide, which reviews movies from a faith perspective for families, has developed working relationships with the six major studios and other production companies, encouraging them to make positive, uplifting films.

Movieguide is the largest, longest-running, nonprofit ministry dedicated to “redeeming the values of the entertainment industry.” One in three parents uses Movieguide, according to The Hollywood Reporter. Movieguide reaches 55 million people on radio, television, and social media, and via [www.movieguide.org](http://www.movieguide.org).

In the entertainment industry, the Movieguide awards gala has become known as “The Christian Oscars.” On February 24, the Academy Awards were held in Hollywood. In contrast to the Movieguide Awards that honored family-friendly films with Judeo-Christian values, the Academy Awards mostly celebrated films that embody the progressive and humanistic worldview of identity politics and political correctness. At the gala, Spike Lee won an Oscar for *BlacKkKlansman*, and *Bohemian Rhapsody* won four Oscars while *Black Panther* and *Roma* won three each. *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* won in the Animated Feature Film category, and Lady Gaga won the Oscar for Original Song for her performance in *A Star Is Born*. *Green Book* took home the Oscar for Best Picture. *Spider-Man* was also a Movieguide nominee.

In its early years, Movieguide fought an uphill battle in Hollywood to persuade the entertainment industry to make more films with redemptive content. But the tide began to shift in 1999 when 40 movies were released with strong, positive Christian content, including *The Green Mile*, *Runaway Bride*, and *Toy Story 2*.

Then, in 2004, came another watershed year when Mel Gibson released *The Passion of the Christ*, which grossed \$612 million at the box office. That proved a pivotal event in the entertainment industry, convincing Hollywood that faith-based films are profitable.

The film featured Jim Caviezel as Jesus Christ. Caviezel, who will again play Jesus in Gibson’s sequel, *The Passion of the Christ: Resurrection*, now in pre-production, told *USA Today* that it will be “the biggest film in history.” Caviezel, who played Luke in last year’s *Paul, Apostle of Christ*, thanked Baehr during the gala for “recognizing the true value of film.”

Caviezel won the Christie Peters Grace Award for Most Inspiring Performance in Movies for his role in



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*Paul, Apostle of Christ.*

“These are hard movies to make,” Caviezel told the audience:

I often say it’s like putting a square peg in a circular hole with a very limited budget. As a 19-year-old, I stumbled across a movie theater that was playing old classic films on 70-millimeter. Still to this day, I remember the impact of watching the 1959 version of *Ben-Hur* on the big screen. Not once, not twice, but I was drawn back again and again to watch this epic tale night after night for two straight weeks. What I was drawn to was the power of this three-hour masterpiece to transport people, to reaffirm me in my purpose, and to redirect my hope and belief that movies can really make a difference.

There have been many attempts at biblical films, but often they lack the power to do what the original *Ben-Hur* and a handful of other films have done, and that’s to remain in our consciousness long after the film ends. Should it not be our goal as filmmakers to make a difference, to create awareness, to demand a response long, long after the film ends?

What captured my attention with this screenplay [*Paul, Apostle of Christ*] that focused on the end of Paul’s life was how so many extraordinary gifts came out of very ordinary and often very weak people. That, ladies and gentlemen, speaks to every one of us. Paul’s message of Jesus’ transforming love spoke to people two thousand years ago and still captivates people today.

Last year, there were 66 movies with at least some strong Christian, redemptive content, compared to 34 in 2004 when *The Passion of the Christ* was released, and these movies earned more than \$5 billion in the United States and Canada alone. In 2018, the percentage of movies with at least some Christian redemptive faith and values reached a record 67 percent.

“We’ve been [reviewing movies] since 1985 and we found a pattern,” Baehr told the crowd. “We found a pattern that showed that every year it was getting better. When we started there was only one movie with positive, faith-based content.”

“Now, of the top 10 movies in 2018, 90 percent had some strong or very strong redemptive, morally- uplifting content. Last year it was only 80 percent. That means people are seeking out these movies more and more. And the percentage of movies with positive faith, values, morals and decency has increased up to 67 percent. Last year it was 62 percent. I didn’t think it would get any better, but that’s because of you and God’s grace.”

## **Has Hollywood Seen the Light?**

Some of these films in 2018 included *Incredibles 2*, *The Grinch*, *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, *Peter Rabbit*, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, *Mary Poppins Returns*, *Mission: Impossible — Fallout*, *I Can Only Imagine*, and *Ralph Breaks the Internet*.

One of the highest-grossing films of 2018, *The Grinch*, which grossed over \$270 million and won Movieguide’s Best Movie for Families award, celebrated the birth of Jesus in a “winsome, delightful way that attracted moviegoers of all ages,” according to the “2019 Movieguide Report to the Entertainment Industry.”



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Since Movieguide began releasing the report in 1991, the percentage of movies with at least some positive biblical or moral content has increased from an average of 18 percent to 75 percent last year.

“That’s a 310 percent increase,” Baehr wrote in the report. “Many major entertainment industry executives have gotten the message that movies with positive Christian, moral, biblical, redemptive content and values are great for business.”

The report noted that movies in 2018 with very strong Christian, biblical, and moral content outperformed movies with very strong mixed, non-Christian, or anti-Christian content by about 2.5 to one, and often much more. In addition, movies with very strong Christian content earned more money overall in the United States and Canada — \$796 million versus \$73 million — than movies with very strong humanist or atheistic content.

“The studios are recognizing the benefits [of faith-based films] because they’re making money,” Baehr told *The New American*. “Lionsgate, whose head of development is a close friend and Christian, did a film four years ago that we honored, and now they just did *I Can Only Imagine*, which made a lot of money. They have a contract with [the *I Can Only Imagine* directors, the] Erwin Brothers.”

“Now, everybody wants a contract with these people. Sony got a contract with the Kendrick Brothers. Christian filmmakers who used to be sort of out in the cold in Iowa have now been welcomed into Hollywood and given free rein to do what they want to do because we told [the studios] that they can make more money at the box office.”

Of the top 10 highest-grossing films in 2018, six were Movieguide award winners: *Incredibles 2*, *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, *The Grinch*, *Mission: Impossible — Fallout*, *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, and *Solo: A Star Wars Story*.

Ultimately, 90 percent of the top 10 movies had strong Christian, redemptive, or moral worldviews, and 70 percent had at least some strong or overt Christian content, references, and values. These movies earned about 77 percent of the money, or about \$5.4 billion out of \$7 billion.

“That doesn’t mean that you don’t have to continually benchmark [by releasing the annual reports] because some of the companies doing really strong family films tend to start to drift into adding some extra material, but every year we’re out there, saying these are the films that do well, and movies with faith and movies with values always do a lot better at the box office,” Baehr says. That’s because every week “125 million people go to church and only 20-25 million people go to the movies.”

## **A Gigantic Audience Hollywood Ignored**

Today, polls show 77 percent of American teenagers ages 13-17 and 76 percent of American adults 18 and over believe in God.

Meanwhile, the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* found that between 1998 and 2012 the number of congregations in the United States increased from 336,000 to 384,000, largely due to the growth of nondenominational churches. During the same period, Statista found that the number of movie theaters dropped from 7,418 to 5,683. Looking at it another way, in 2012 there were 62 churches for every movie theater.

These facts show why movies with strong and very strong Christian, biblical, or moral content make much more money than movies with non-Christian or immoral content.



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Also, thousands of scientific studies show that undisciplined media consumption has led to increased violence, aggression, sexual promiscuity, and illegal drug use among children and teenagers.

“The Hollywood entertainment industry may not want to ignore the world’s 2.51 billion Christians, including America’s 233.75 million or so Christians,” Baehr wrote in the report. “Neither can Christians afford to ignore the influence Hollywood has on the world’s children and grandchildren, and on the society in which they live.”

Despite the increase in films with redemptive content, children are deeply impacted by Hollywood and the media, often in a negative fashion. The average child or teenager spends far more time consuming products from the mass media than they do with their parents or at church, or even at school, up to 66,504 hours compared to 2,000 hours, 800 hours, and 11,000 hours, respectively, according to the Movieguide report.

As a result of the negative consequences of unfiltered media viewing, millions of people now turn to Movieguide to help them navigate the entertainment landscape.

“The audience we have includes about a third Democrats, a third Republicans, and a third independents,” Baehr says. “So, it’s kind of split like the country. It’s a gigantic audience. They want to be able to protect their children; they want to be able to make wise decisions for their children. Yet teenagers use Movieguide more than anybody, come to the site, spend longer time on the site, and look at more articles on the site. It’s quite incredible.

“The reason I say all that is the most powerful person in Hollywood is not [Disney CEO Bob] Iger or one of the studio heads, it’s the teenager. If he or she goes to see a good movie, it will do well at the box office. If they don’t go see a movie, it won’t do well at the box office. So their vote counts and there are a lot of teenagers with faith and values. The latest Barna report showed us that many of those teenagers have even stronger faith than their grandparents, so they’re making wise decisions and coming to Movieguide, and so they become a force to reckon with.”

## **The History of Movieguide and Hollywood**

During the Golden Age of Hollywood, the studios worked closely with the Protestant Film Office and the Roman Catholic Legion of Decency to reach the broadest possible audience and to avoid government censorship.

In 1946, when the Golden Age of Hollywood was in its heyday, Americans bought about 4.07 billion tickets at about 42 cents per ticket. At the time, 55 percent of the American population, about 78 million people, went to the movies every week.

Then, contrary to the desires of many studio heads, the Protestant Film Office shut its doors in 1966. Shutting down this advisory resource on spiritual, moral, and religious matters left a vacuum in the entertainment industry. Within three years, box office earnings plummeted from 44 million weekly ticket sales to 17 million weekly ticket sales.

National television had been around for 25 years at the time of this precipitous drop, and VCR and cable were 20 years into the future. The biggest impact on the box office over this three-year period was the decline in the moral content of movies.

Last year, only about 26 million Americans went to the movies every week. While box office earnings





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have been climbing over the past 12 years, the actual number of movie admissions today has declined nearly 67 percent, more than two-thirds since the apex of the Golden Age of Hollywood.

“There are many factors to consider,” Baehr wrote in the Movieguide report, “one of which is the introduction of the MPAA rating system (G, PG, PG-13, R, and NC-17) in 1968. This system was not created as a means of making culture more informed on their entertainment choices, but as a thinly veiled way for the studios to avoid censoring inappropriate content. Prior to this time, studios held to a positive set of moral codes that appealed to the viewing public. With the introduction of MPAA ratings came a significant up-swing in anti-family and anti-Christian content, and a decline in box office ticket sales.

“While the population since 1966 in the United States and Canada has increased from about 210 million people to about 348.3 million people, the number of ticket sales in North America has continued to drop — nearly 61 percent — from 9.43 tickets sold per person to less than 3.70 tickets sold per person. Annual ticket sales of 1.346 billion admissions for the domestic box office in 2017 are still about 32 percent below the 1.98 billion admissions in the middle 1960s, before MPAA’s rating system came into being and started alienating family audiences and mainstream moviegoers.”

In 1985, Baehr was given custodianship of the files and records of the Protestant Film Office and started Movieguide as a guide for parents and a helpful report card to Hollywood.

Since the first Movieguide Faith & Values Awards in 1992, the number of family movies and movies marketed to families has increased to more than 110 per year, and the number of movies with at least some redemptive or religious values has increased almost 500 percent, regularly involving more than 180 movies per year.

Movieguide is now on radio and television, online at [www.movieguide.org](http://www.movieguide.org), on YouTube, and is republished in many magazines, newspapers, newsletters, and websites domestically and overseas. Movieguide radio is on many stations and networks, reaching millions of listeners monthly in the United States and overseas. Additionally, Movieguide’s weekly television program is broadcast, cablecast, and satellite cast to millions of viewers throughout the United States and the world.

Last year, Movieguide researchers and writers screened more than 400 television programs and 330 movies. Movieguide looks at each movie in at least 30 separate ways, including aesthetics, theme, morality, cognitive impact, philosophy, politics, and faith, taking more than 150 different criteria into account. Worldview, a comprehensive way of interpreting all of reality, is one of the most important aspects of Movieguide’s analysis. Since many movies have competing or mixed worldview elements in them, Movieguide tries to pick each movie’s dominant worldview.

## **The Man Who Redeemed Hollywood**

Chris Zarpas, the executive producer of *The Sandlot*, *G.I. Jane*, and other films, says Baehr, more than anybody else in Hollywood, is responsible for the enormous increase in movies that not only are faith-based, but celebrate the traditional values that made America a great country.

“Ted has been at this for over 30 years and nobody was listening 30 years ago,” Zarpas says. “Now, to see how Movieguide has grown and how millions of people are using it as a resource to help their families determine what kind of programming is appropriate for their families — it just gives me a lot of happiness.”



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“Ted is a visionary, and families all over American can thank him for creating a resource that was never available before, which allowed you to determine what programming is appropriate for your kids and what programming is appropriate for you. There has never been anything like it. There are lots of copycats, but Ted was there first.”

See the sidebar on page 26 for the list of winners and nominees for Movieguide’s 27th Annual Faith & Values Awards Gala.

Troy Anderson is a Pulitzer Prize-nominated journalist, best-selling author of *The Babylon Code* and *Trumpocalypse*, former executive editor of *Charisma* magazine, and a Los Angeles Daily News reporter.



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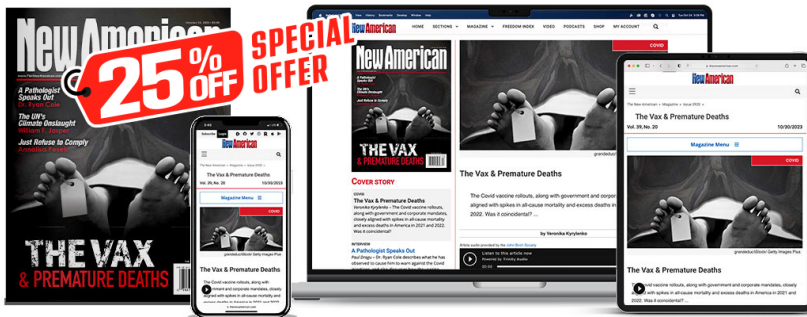
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