ABSTRACT

On Resurrecting Christian Cinema

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Over the past few decades, there has been a growing tendency for independent Christian filmmaking to assert itself as a "wholesome" alternative to secular mainstream content, often at the expense of high-quality writing, production value, and a general appreciation of the film medium as something more than an avenue for messaging. To identify filmmaking methodologies that may aid in finding a middle ground between Hollywood and contemporary evangelical cinema, this thesis analyzes the work of one the Christian film industry's pioneers, Reverend James K. Friedrich. As an avid lover of the movies, Friedrich dedicated his career to creating high-quality Christian films to evangelize, educate, and entertain believers and nonbelievers alike. The *Life of St. Paul* series (1949—1951) is generally considered the pinnacle of his work, and this thesis studies how it utilizes genre conventions, scriptural dramatic liberties, and mainstream aesthetics to bridge the gap between secular and evangelical cinema.

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ON RESURRECTING CHRISTIAN CINEMA

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To every Christian

and to every filmmaker

and most of all

to everyone who happens to be both.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Sermons or Cinema?

The Christian Film Industry (Abridged)

The development of the Christian film in America is as storied and dynamic as that of any other notable genre or subgenre engaged by film historians today. In the earlier years of film's growth as a medium, especially the period between 1930 and 1950, producers began to realize a need for their films to cater to large numbers of believers in their audiences. In 1930, at an all-time high of movie theatre attendance (judging by percentage of the population rather than total number of attendees), 65% of Americans were visiting the cinema on a weekly basis,[1] and about 44% of the population were active members of a Christian church.[2] Though these figures do not immediately imply a significant overlap in going to the movies and being a Christian, they represent two realities that were both significant for the world of film production and distribution at the time. The first was that moviegoing was becoming a strong, culturally defining force for a large group of Americans, and the second was that, if distributors wanted to maintain the success of their product, they could not neglect the Christian audience.

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[1] Caterina Cowden, "Movie Attendance Has Been On A Dismal Decline Since The 1940s," Business Insider, January 6, 2015, https://www.businessinsider.com/movie-attendance-over-the-years-2015-1.

[2] United States, and U.S. Census Bureau. 1930. Statistical abstract of the United States. Washington: U.S. G.P.O.; Of course, church membership alone cannot gauge the private spiritual lives of Americans or their attitudes toward film content, but it does indicate the prominence and power of the church as an institution at the time.

As a result of these two realities, the church and Hollywood took cautious (if not hostile) notice of each other, the former institution fearful that the latter would damage the social fabric by glamorizing immorality, and the latter institution concerned that the legitimacy of their medium would be brought down by the former's indignation. In 1933, this tense mutual awareness came to a head in the form of the National Legion of Decency, a Catholic institution that served as a moral gatekeeper for Christian audiences, further stirring the pot of the Hollywood/church relationship and implying a certain level of ethical depravity in mainstream film production. This low opinion of the movies was not exclusively Catholic. Protestant voices undergirded the movie crusade as well, strengthening the religious chokehold on ideas about what was fit for the screen.[3] Though Hollywood took measures to "course correct," most notably instituting stronger self-regulation with full enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code through the Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934[4], the damage to the two institutions' relationship, characterized by ambivalence at best and condemnation at worst, had already been done.

That is not to say that the worlds of film and faith did not continue to overlap. The continued critical and commercial success of Cecil B. DeMille's epic Bible pictures in the following decades, mirroring his equally successful work in the silent era, proved that religious content, specifically Christian content, had not entirely exited the mainstream. However, the success of films in this tradition has often been attributed much more to

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[3] Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986* (New York, N.Y.: New York University Press, 2011), 1.

[4] Ibid.

their spectacular portrayal of biblical events rather than to the biblical content itself, at least in DeMille's case.[5] After all, there are few Bible story films that have stood the test of time without a knack for epic scale. In discussions about Christian films of the 20th century, the likes of *King of* Kings (1927), *Ben-Hur* (1925), and *The Ten Commandments* (1956) are bound to dominate.

Of course, these were not the only Christian films being produced. Despite mutual antagonism between the worlds of film and religion, an independent Christian film industry was born. Just as Hollywood producers realized that they could not financially thrive without placating religious institutions, organized religion (though not all at once) came to realize that film could much more plausibly be leveraged than suppressed. So the church adjusted as well. Efforts were made to integrate film into church functions, including community events, missions, and even church services.[6] Churchgoers in the silent era were witnesses to entities such as the Harmon Foundation and the Religious Motion Picture Foundation, which were created to harness the power of film in church and "help experience that true spiritual emotion which gives meaning to life," respectively.[7]

Despite technological setbacks brought about by film's transition to sound in 1929, compounded by the effects of the Depression, American churches continued to nurture their relationship with motion pictures in the 1930s. Dr. Worth Tippy, the

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[5] Ibid, 15.

[6] Kenneth Suit, *James Friedrich and Cathedral Films: The Independent Religious Cinema of the Evangelist of Hollywood, 1939-1966* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 4.

[7] Lindvall and Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986,* 7.

executive director of the Department of the Church and Social Service of the Federal Council of Churches, noted a marked "increase of the appreciation of the motion picture in churches" by 1934.[8] As the implantation of film occurred across a wide spectrum of denominations and beliefs, the specifics of the church's increasing appreciation of film varied. The Harmon Foundation drew attention to this reality by enumerating a list of five distinct Christian film categories the group sought to produce: biblical films, missionary films, historical films, biographical films, and dramatic films.

The titles of these categories are self-explanatory. Biblical films, for example, portray biblical events. Missionary films are used to both visually evangelize foreign lands and to educate domestic churches prior to mission trips. Historical and biographical films primarily chronicle the history and lives of the church and its leaders. Finally, dramatic films project Christian morality and themes onto images of daily life, not unlike parables. Of the highest importance to this work as well as the history and trajectory of the independent Christian film are the first and final categories.

Foremost among these categories in the 20th century, at least in terms of popularity and proliferation, was the biblical film.[9] As mentioned, the frequently spectacular nature of these films allowed them to be equally enjoyed by Christian and secular audiences alike, though for different reasons. Furthermore, dramatic films masked their Christian dogma in stories that could be viewed as universally relevant, affording them the same potential for wide viewership. Naturally, this commercial advantage was not as present in the missionary, historical, and biographical genres, as these were

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[8] Ibid, 10.

[9] Suit, *James Friedrich and Cathedral Films*, 6.

primarily concerned with events and incentives explicitly related to the church. Though there were certainly other factors that led to the prominence of biblical and dramatic films, their separability from the narrow purview of church functions was and is critical to their success.

The production of films under these two genres continued throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. Through the efforts of production companies such as Cathedral Films, World Wide Pictures, and Sherwood Pictures, the world has seen no shortage of faith-based films in both theatrical and non-theatrical settings.[10] However, it goes without saying that quantity does not necessarily imply quality, especially from an artistic or cinematic standpoint. It has long been a concern of mine that Christian filmmaking as an industry appears to be much more concerned with its first term (Christian) than its second (filmmaking). That is, the dramatic film is increasingly being used by Christians to present stories that are thinly veiled sermons, and the biblical film would seem to be dying out altogether. Furthermore, the genre-based compartmentalization of the industry since its inception has resulted in each type of Christian film setting narrow goals and only reaching specific audiences. Of course, reaching small audiences is not an inherently bad thing, but films that prioritize a message over cinematic craft and artistry are hard-pressed to spread that message outside of circles that already agree with it.

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[10] Cathedral Films, a Christian production company founded by James Friedrich, is discussed later in this chapter. World Wide Pictures is a production/distribution company founded by Billy Graham in 1953 as a subsidiary of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. More about their films can be found at billygraham.org/tv-and-radio. Sherwood Pictures is the production company behind the hits *Facing the Giants* (2006), *Fireproof* (2008), and *Courageous* (2011). Information about these can be found at sherwoodbaptist.net.

It should be noted that the era of biblical epics in the mainstream market began to wane in the late 1950s and early 1960s in concurrence with the decline of the PCA. This decline was due, in part, to a Supreme Court decision in 1952 that classified films as products of free speech, thereby protecting the industry from censorship. Consequently, films such as *Elmer Gantry* and *Inherit the Wind*, both released in 1960, were given more leeway to critique and challenge religious subject matter that would have been unacceptable a decade earlier. Following this monumental shift in the history of film production, the divide between Christianity and the movies, though already present, became increasingly apparent. The resulting rift between mainstream Hollywood and the independent Christian market manifested nearly two decades ago in the even more conspicuous form of PureFlix, the self-proclaimed "worldwide leader in selecting and streaming faith and family-friendly media that changes lives, inspires hearts and lifts the spirits of members like you and those you love."[11] This company, which exists primarily to provide a "cleaner" streaming alternative to services such as Netflix and Hulu, is evidence that, for many families, strict lines still exist between what is mainstream and what is morally safe to view. Though PureFlix's mission statement indicates a desire to be a "transformational voice in our culture," a quick glance at the platform's subscription numbers in comparison to those of larger streaming services proves that these films have barely encountered the culture, let alone transformed it.[12]

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[11] PureFlix, "Pure Flix Mission Story," accessed February 18, 2022, https://www.pureflix.com/mission.

[12] Josh M. Shepherd, "Sony's Pure Flix Acquisition Could Raise the Bar for Christian Movies," News & Reporting, accessed April 20, 2022, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/november/sony-acquires-pure-flix-affirm-faith-streaming-entertainmen.html.; "Netflix: Number of Subscribers Worldwide 2021," Statista, accessed April 20, 2022, https://www.statista.com/statistics/250934/quarterly-number-of-netflix-streaming-subscribers-worldwide/. According to these article from Christianity Today and Statista, PureFlix reported 350,000 subscribers in December 2019, compared to 319,000,000 for Netflix in the same year.

I want to be very clear in stating that I do not wish to demean the well-intentioned effort of the Christian film industry, nor do I believe that engaging the masses through Christian films is an impossible feat. I merely want to bring attention to the fact that current methods of explicit disassociation from the mainstream are not working. Christian films still fill a space in Christian circles and families, but if the evangelistic goal of these films is to ever be realized in a solid, consistent way, if conversations about them are to ever cross barriers of faith, there must once again be a push to integrate the best that both the cinema and the sermon have to offer. There must once again be an understanding of the inherent power of both to evangelize, educate, and entertain while straying away from overtly preachy dramatic pieces. I say "once again" because this vision of a middle ground between Hollywood and independent Christian productions predates the contemporary dissatisfaction with what faith-based films have to offer. In fact, it is a vision that was championed by one of the most influential pioneers of the sound-era Christian film, the Reverend James K. Friedrich.

His Pulpit a Movie Screen

James Kempe Friedrich, one-part minister and one-part ambitious lover of cinema, was on the front lines of what would develop into a vibrant and influential industry of Christian filmmaking. Beginning his career as a college dropout with plans of becoming an extra in Hollywood films, and eventually settling for work in his father's grocery store when those plans did not come to fruition, Friedrich experienced a conversion experience in 1932 that yielded one of the most forceful passions for the

potential of a joint relationship between film and religion.[13] The reverend, born in 1903, grew up alongside cinema in its early years, and what was then childhood wonder in the face of a budding artform later evolved into a realization of film's potential for imbuing biblical characters with life in a way that no other medium could.

This realization occurred during Friedrich's stint in Virginia Theological Seminary in the early 1930s, a period that coincided with a general decline in the Christian film industry. This decline was in large part due to increased financial pressure on churches that could not afford the transition to sound exhibition and, consequently, opted to forego the integration of sermons and cinema altogether.[14] After all, why would churches continue to supplement their services with outdated media? Furthermore, the tightening of Production Codes around this time generally strained the relationship between the church and Hollywood. By association, this soured some church members' view of film in their services, and the industry which made large strides in the 1920s came to something of a standstill.

Of course, this did not dissuade Friedrich from continuing to pursue a career in filmmaking. After graduating from seminary and being ordained to the priesthood in 1936, having written a film script about the life of St. Paul, Friedrich doubled down on his dream of producing quality Christian films by picking up his wife and infant daughter and moving to Hollywood. Over the next two years, Friedrich began and completed work on his first feature length film, *The Great Commandment* (1939). This adaptation of the Good Samaritan story in Luke 10 earned widespread acclaim for Friedrich and his new

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[13] Suit, *James Friedrich and Cathedral Films*, 10.

[14] Lindvall and Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986*, 3-5.

production company, Cathedral Films, even to the point of being purchased by 20th Century Fox for a full-scale, high budget remake. Fearing that the themes of mercy and loving one's enemy would not play well during wartime, though, this remake never came to fruition.[15]

The Great Commandment was only the first installment in what would become a much longer career for Friedrich and Cathedral, amounting to the production of four features, over 50 short films (averaging around 30 minutes each), and numerous co-productions with and for specific religious institutions by the time of his death in 1966.[16] Surviving through nearly a whole career of financial issues as a result of repeated over-budget productions, Friedrich succeeded in bringing the worlds of the church and film much closer together, effectively "[tilling] the theological and cinematic soil in the 1930s and 40s" and "preparing audiences to more readily accept the big-budget studio films that used all of [his] narrative approaches to the Jesus story in the 1950s and 60s."[17] While acknowledging the impressive breadth of his career and commending his deep impact on the independent Christian film industry (and, as the above quote suggest, the film industry at large), this study will focus in on one piece of Friedrich's work, the culmination of his work and aspirations in Virginia Theological Seminary: a 12-part series on the life of Paul.

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[15] Suit, *James Friedrich and Cathedral Films*, 21-32.

[16] Over the course of this period, Friedrich's company also became a distributor of Christian films.

[17] Suit, *James Friedrich and Cathedral Films*, 210.

The Potential of Paul

During an interview at a 1947 Episcopal conference, when questioned about the origins of his interest in the world of motion pictures, Reverend Friedrich had this to say:

> …It was during my course on the life of St. Paul that I saw for the first time the opportunity of a great story for the screen…. I still feel it is the greatest story in the Bible that can be adapted to the screen because there is continuity in the life of Paul. It has all the drama and excitement, the pathos, and the human interest that any theater audience would love, and, in addition, it is the story of the conversion of a man who found Christ to be as real as it is possible for anyone to know him.[18]

Friedrich's fascination with the character of Paul would be left unexplored in his work until the following year when production of the then-named "Life of Paul Series" began. Originally written as a series of three short feature films, Friedrich ultimately decided in post-production to subdivide the series into 12 shorter episodes, including a previously produced Cathedral short film, "Stephen, The First Christian Martyr," which would serve as Episode 1.[19]

The shift in format from feature film length to half hour episodes indicates Friedrich's career-long concern of using his films in a church setting, especially for the teaching of children.[20] However, as his use of "theater audiences" in the quote above suggests, the reverend's ambitions for education and spiritual fulfillment were by no means relegated to church members, and general audiences were starting to take notice of his work, as evidenced by multiple mentions of his upcoming work in the *New York*

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[18] "Interview with James K. Frederick [sic] at the Fourth International Workshop in Audio-Visual Education, Green Lake, Wisconsin," 1947, Audiotape recording, Collection 327, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, Illinois.

[19] Suit, *James Friedrich and Cathedral Films*, 100-101.

[20] A more thorough discussion of Friedrich's interest in children's scriptural education through film can be found in the interview cited in note 1.

Times in the late 1940s and early 1950s.[21] The management of this dual audience that Friedrich evidently had in mind (theatergoers and churchgoers) is one of many aspects of his work that makes it worth studying as a significant piece of film history. Furthermore, according to two of the foremost historical scholars of the independent Christian film industry, Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke, this series is the pinnacle of Friedrich's work, both in terms of its production and its influence on later films in the Christian market.[22]

The nature of the series as a culmination of Friedrich's decade-old dramatic interest in Paul, as a piece of independent Christian cinema gaining interest in mainstream journalism, and as the product of Cathedral's production value peak would reasonably suggest that it is the most accurate and successful representation of what Friedrich set out to do with his films. Consequently, it is one of the ripest selections in his filmography for critically analyzing the relationship between his aesthetic and narrative choices and his intended effects of these.

In my own viewing and studying of the series, three major production choices stand out as forming the bedrock of the series' goals and achievements. The first of these concerns the integration of several genres, particularly those enumerated by the Harmon Foundation. Whether intentionally or not, Friedrich draws on the traditions of all five of these genres (biblical, missionary, historical, biographical, and dramatic), in turn creating a film that speaks to a multitude of sensibilities in his viewers. The second group of

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[21] Thomas F. Brady, "7 Films on St. Paul Will Be Produced," *New York Times*, December 9, 1948. This is just one of many articles in the *Times* that mentions Friedrich's productions in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

[22] Lindvall and Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986*, 32.

major choices concern dramatic liberties taken with the biblical text that enhance the story of Paul as a film rather than a written text. The liberties range from additions of characters and modulations of biblical characterization to Scriptural omissions. The final major choice, and perhaps most relevant one to the discussion of integrating mainstream and Christian filmmaking, is Friedrich's use of the Christian film as both a means to engage with mainstream forms and mainstream filmmakers in what could be called "backstage evangelism."

The following chapter will take a closer look at the topic of genre blending in the *Life of St. Paul* series and how this effects the series' relationship to its source material as well as its audience. Chapter Three will investigate Friedrich's use of dramatic liberties in his series and the risk/reward factor that is inherent in cinematically adapting scriptural texts. Furthermore, Chapter Four will integrate the narrative analysis of Chapters Two and Three with Friedrich's structural and aesthetic choices to demonstrate his filmmaking philosophy regarding cultural engagement. Finally, Chapter Five will consider how Friedrich's methods and philosophy, though nearly a century old, might help to mitigate the self-imposed separation between 20th century independent Christian films and Hollywood.

CHAPTER TWO

Genre as Interpretive Tool

Engaging Multiple Audiences

Oxford's *Dictionary of Media and Communication* defines film genre as "the ways in which the film industry, critics, and audiences classify film, forming structures that shape the production and marketing of particular films and manage the expectations of both critics and audiences toward them."[1] Given James Friedrich's career-long focus on reaching diverse audiences both within and outside of the church, the marketing piece of this definition is perhaps most relevant to a conversation about his films. Interestingly though, in many cases, marketing to different audiences in Friedrich's case was not a matter of post-production work as the above definition would imply. In his work, the line between production and marketing could be blurred by combining the conventions of established subgenres under the larger umbrella of the Christian film.

As previously stated, the Harmon Foundation's list of Christian film genres has been helpful in analyzing structural, tonal, and affective components of Christian films. Though this list was created to describe the type of films that the foundation aimed to produce, rather than prescribe strict parameters in independent Christian film production, independent Christian films in large part have continued to fall into the boundaries of biblical, missional, historical, biographical, and dramatic. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to observe how Friedrich blends the first four of these genres in his *Life of St. Paul* series

[1] "Film Genres," Oxford Reference, accessed March 24, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095818364.

and how that blending is used to appeal to wide audiences. The final genre, which Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke describe as one in which "the narrative… [emphasizes] story rather than instruction, often by illustrating various anecdotes and parables,"[2] will be reserved for the following chapter, owing to the fact that the dramatic liberties in the series are numerous. Furthermore, this study will investigate how choice of genre can be used as an interpretive tool in cinematic depictions of scriptural texts. The resulting conclusions will serve to better explain Friedrich's methodology behind the self-proclaimed, tripartite goal in his work: to educate, to entertain, and to evangelize.

The (Biblical) Life of St. Paul[3]

There are two primary ways to conceptualize a film as fitting within the biblical genre. The most common and self-explanatory criterion for film in this category is directly drawing from the biblical narrative(s) as source material. Films in this tradition include *The Ten Commandments* (1956) as well as *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), the joint directorial effort of George Stevens, David Lean, and Jean Negulesco. The second (and much less common) way to frame the meaning of "biblical film" is through setting and/or loose inclusion of biblical content. Although these films take place in the temporal and geographical world of the scriptures, and they even frequently depict biblical characters, their narratives are fictionalized, or at least not drawn directly from the Bible. Some of the most famous examples of this subgenre are *The Robe* (1953) and

[2] Lindvall and Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986*, 23.

[3] All direct references to the content of *Life of St. Paul* can be observed on the Christian Movie Classics website (christianmovieclassics.com). As another note, I will be referring to the episodes by their number rather than their title, but I have included a list of the episode names in the appendix.

Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ (1959), both which take place in the Roman world and feature Jesus, but which are minimally sourced from the Bible.

By merely hearing the name of Friedrich's series on Paul, one can glean its association with the biblical genre by the former definition. However, the series is by no means solely a recreation of the book of Acts, as its various editorial additions, subtractions, and tweaks (which will be more closely examined in the next chapter) allow it to be considered biblical by the latter definition as well. It is important to note here that Friedrich's *modus operandi* in the biblical genre leaned more heavily toward films that fit within the second definition. Therefore, there is something to be said about Friedrich's divergence from his tendency to produce stories in the second tradition to the production of a story that is so closely influenced by the biblical text.

Since the production of *The Great Commandment* in 1939, Friedrich had been interested in revealing biblical events through the eyes of either minor biblical characters or characters who do not appear at all in the text, and he revisited this narrative device in much of his early work leading up to the St. Paul series.[4] In these films, principal New Testament characters such as Jesus and the disciples appear much more often as names in conversation than as bodies in the frame. When they do appear, it is typically for a short amount of time, and Jesus' face is often obscured in favor of highlighting the people to whom he preached. This structural trend in Friedrich's work reflects his interest in depicting those to whom Jesus briefly appears but for whom that appearance proves to be life changing. A notable example of this technique is the story of *The Rich Young Ruler* (1946), a Bible story film based on Jesus' discussion with a rich man in Mark 10:17—29.

[4] Suit, *James Friedrich and Cathedral Films*, 84-86.

"…The actual Bible passage that serves as the inspiration for this half-hour film occupies only about a fifth of the total running time, at the midpoint. The rest of the drama revolves around this scene and has been expanded to create a fictional, extra-Biblical frame story for the passage."[5]

So, what can be made of Friedrich's sudden shift toward large-scale biblical adaptation from fictionalized biblical narratives? To be sure, *Life of St. Paul* was not Friedrich's first foray into direct adaptation of biblical narrative. In fact, only a year before starting production on the series, he produced a feature-length adaptation of the book of Esther (to an underwhelming reception). However, it was not until this series that he had adapted a Bible story on such a large scale. Perhaps there is a more interesting interpretation of the series to be found by assuming that it maintains continuity with Friedrich's previous model of tangential biblical narratives, only in a different manner. Note, for example, that Paul's conversion, the dramatic arc in Episode 2 of the series, is narratively similar to the stories of previous characters in Friedrich's films, especially in their depictions of speedy spiritual revelations following brief encounters with Christ. Furthermore, Paul's status as a secondhand witness to the life of Christ[6] makes him the perfect figure to encapsulate both definitions of the biblical genre because his story, though integral to the New Testament narrative, points to a larger world outside of itself (the story of Christ) which is frequently referenced but never portrayed in the series.

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[5] Ibid, 85.

[6] This facet of Paul's relationship to Christ and the original disciples is emphasized in a fictionalized dialogue in Episode 4, in which Peter takes Paul to Gethsemane as well as the room where the Last Supper was held. Here we see that Paul, though a large contributor to the writings of the New Testament, can be likened to characters in Friedrich's previous works who were not afforded time with Christ on earth. The intention behind this appears to be increased relatability between the viewer and Paul as followers distanced from the leader.

Ultimately, in terms of the two biblical subgenres, it seems that Friedrich is playing into his tradition of fictional biblical narratives (the second category) by projecting them onto the story of a well-established biblical character and narrative (the first category). In doing so, he reaps the combined benefits of both subgenres, undergirding his story with Scriptural legitimacy on the one hand and expanding artistic potential on the other.

The way in which Friedrich explores both traditions of the biblical genre evinces the multiplicity of his goals as a filmmaker and a minister. A Christian filmmaker primarily interested in educating his or her audience about the content of Scripture would lean heavily into the direct adaptation approach to the genre. Conversely, a Christian filmmaker primarily concerned with entertainment and/or highlighting connections between the story of Paul and the viewer for the sake of evangelizing would put more stock in enhancing the story with fictionalized narrative to transform the essentially historical nature of Acts into a story more fit for cinematic sensibilities. Given Friedrich's double love for God and film, his various goals and audiences are better serviced by branching into both realms of biblical filmmaking.

The (Missional) Life of St. Paul

Like the biblical genre, there are a couple ways to classify the missionary genre during this period of the Christian film industry. First and foremost, this genre was meant to mobilize church bodies toward missionary efforts. To this end, films, most frequently documentaries, were produced to highlight the need for mission work in certain areas, to capture the triumphs of missionary endeavors overseas, or, in the case of churches who

had already planned mission work, to educate members about the cultures they were preparing to enter. Thus, films of this nature tended to be marked by exotic imagery, an appeal to churchgoers' pathos, and the explicit purposes of educating and inviting participation in service to a community.[7]

These films were not always documentaries, however. For instance, the silent Harmon Foundation production *Mr. Chang Takes a Chance* (1932), "[introduces] a drama about a desperately ill, prominent Chinese citizen, a Mr. Chang, who visits a missionary hospital, is cured, and shows his gratitude by endowing it with generous funding."[8] Similarly, Cathedral's own *For All People* (1946) is a scripted drama based on true events that sought to increase church involvement in domestic social issues surrounding inequality and juvenile delinquency. Thus, by the time Friedrich began production on the *Life of St. Paul* series, there was an established precedent of fictional missionary films that advocated three main forms of church service: medical, financial, and social.

In the St. Paul series, this thread of fictional missionary films is woven into the narrative in various ways. First, merely by virtue of telling the life story of Paul, the narrative covers three missionary journeys, conveniently indicated by the titles of Episodes 6, 8, and 10. As Paul ventures into foreign lands with the goal of spreading the message of the Messiah's coming, we catch glimpses of missionary service that draw on the genre's emphasis on the three types of servitude. Least emphasized in the series is

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[7] Lindvall and Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986*, 17-19; Several productions in which Cathedral had a hand, such as *For All People* (1946), *The Footsteps of the Witchdoctor* (1950), and *Indian American* (1955), served a missionary purpose.

[8] Ibid., 17.

medical service, which can nevertheless be seen in Paul's healing of a crippled man in Episode 7 and in his exorcism of a young girl in Episode 8. However, these events are both Scriptural, and Friedrich does little with them outside of direct adaptation.

Rather, his integration of the missionary film genre appears most heavily in the form of financial and social service. In Episode 5, Paul travels to Antioch at the urging of the disciple Barnabas, and the two men witness a slave auction immediately after their arrival. Using the last bit of money he has, Paul pays for the freedom of a slave girl named Melita, much to the chagrin of the nobleman Aran. This gesture, absent from the biblical text, is an example of Friedrich championing both financial and social mission work. The theme of financial mission work is compounded later in the episode when news of an impending famine reaches Antioch via the prophet Agabus. Upon hearing this news, Paul encourages the people in Antioch to make donations to Jerusalem, which will bear the brunt of the famine. This event, which is based on only two verses in Acts, serves as the dramatic centerpiece of the episode.

As the citizens of Antioch heed Jerusalem's call, Aran, having been moved by Paul's words about Jesus' riddance of the slave/free dichotomy in a previous scene,[9] contributes the same amount of money to the Jerusalem fund that Paul paid to release Melita. To further prove his change of heart, Aran accompanies Paul and Barnabas on their journey to deliver the donation to Jerusalem. In this interaction, we see Friedrich's attempt to dramatically intertwine the virtuosity of missions with the redeeming power of preaching the gospel in foreign lands. Aran's swift conversion (or, at least, increased interest in Paul's preaching) exhibits the capability of missions to affect the financial and

[9] This, of course, is a reference to Galatians 3:28.

social paradigms of the common foreigner, thereby calling for participation in this kind of work. Furthermore, John Mark, a young disciple who is initially skeptical of Paul is urged by Aran's story to pursue missionary endeavors himself alongside Paul. The John Mark of Acts joins Paul and Barnabas with no explicit explanation, so Friedrich uses the fictional character of Aran to wed the merits of mission work with a slight narrative hole in the text. Thus, the genres of missionary film and biblical film meet. If this narrative development is not enough to clue the viewer into Friedrich's foreign missionary advocacy, the narrator's contribution during the donation collection scene surely does: "Perhaps for the first time in the history of the world, men and women gave money to help the people of another land. For people they would never know, they gave in the name of Jesus Christ."[10]

Though this approach to missionary encouragement may initially seem heavy-handed or overtly dogmatic, Friedrich's narrative acknowledgement of the dangers and hardships of missionary work in later episodes precludes the labeling of his work as pure indoctrination. That is, a film that seeks merely to persuade its audience to participate in missionary endeavors as a requirement of the Christian faith would, presumably, avoid mention of the substantial risks associated with those endeavors. This issue is addressed more directly in the following chapter.

The (Historical) Life of St. Paul

At this point in the study of genre in this series, we can see Friedrich's layered goals of biblical education and entertainment, primarily fueled by the biblical genre, as

[10] *Life of St. Paul*. 1949. "Ambassador for Christ." Directed by John T. Coyle.

well as his goal of advocacy, indicated by his continued emphasis on missionary journeys, foreign church building, and medical/financial/social healing. From these goals can be extrapolated likely intended audiences. For example, both the biblical and the missionary genres can be viewed as most compelling in the context of a Christian audience, as the essence of these genres (the authority of the Bible, rapid spiritual conversion narratives, virtuosity of giving in the name of Christ, etc.) rely on religious agreement concerning the subject matter. In other words, a series that leans heavily into the biblical and missionary genres has little to no value for people outside the faith community. The following three genres that Friedrich projects onto the story of Paul help to counterbalance this effect.

The first of these three is the historical genre, specifically the genre that deals with church history. It is reasonable to assume that the historical presentation of Paul's story would merely be bolstering the educational/biblical literacy aim established by the series' status as a biblical genre film. This is the case, but not entirely. For one, the educational value gained by adding a historicity to the *Life of St. Paul* series yields other rewards besides simple biblical literacy. Rather, it is a subtle way of incorporating academic concerns of New Testament formulation, specifically as it relates to Paul's epistles. Consequently, this expands the audience, albeit perhaps only slightly, to include those for whom the spiritual aspects of the series may fall flat but for whom the New Testament nevertheless holds meaning or intrigue as a historical document.

Granted, Friedrich's series is overwhelmingly more concerned with the religious implications of Paul's life, but it should not go unnoticed that he makes it a point to foreground historicity of his narrative. One general indication of this foregrounding is the

frequent quoting of the epistles by Paul and the subsequent dictation of his words by Timothy. In many scenes that feature Paul preaching, his teachings include phrases that would later be included in his epistles to the various churches he has established or visited. One example of this can be found in Episode 8 during a meeting of the disciples in Jerusalem. Following an increase in Gentile converts, the disciples quarrel about whether non-Jewish newcomers to the faith should have to follow the Jewish laws to be called righteous. Framed between the disciples on the left who argue against this requirement and the Jewish leaders on the right who see adherence to the law as an essential tenet of the faith, Paul's contribution (in short) is this: "It is through the law that I have become dead to the law, that I may live for God. It is no longer I who live but Christ that lives in me."[11] This, of course, is a direct quote of Galatians 2, and throughout the series, there are numerous other examples of similar direct quotes.

By drawing attention to these familiar verses in a context prior to their being written, Friedrich cleverly weaves the narrative of Acts with the personal writings of Paul, simultaneously driving his narrative forward and providing a sort of speculative etiology of phrases and ideas in Paul's epistles. This use of historical intertextuality is further strengthened by multiple depictions of Paul dictating his epistles to Timothy, a young scribe. In academic discussion surrounding the authorship of the New Testament epistles, several letters traditionally attributed to Paul have since become disputed. This dispute, beginning with the work of Ferdinand Christian Baur in the 19th century,

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[11] *Life of St. Paul*. 1950. "Second Missionary Journey." Directed by John T. Coyle.

prompted scholars to reevaluate the definition of authorship in terms of ancient texts.[12] Two conclusions from this line of research are important to the discussion of historicity in Friedrich's series.

The first insight yielded by this academic endeavor is that 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, and Romans are all undisputed in their Pauline authorship, while the authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus is disputed. Within these disputed writings, Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians have all been deemed as more likely to be direct products of Paul than the other three texts.[13] Interestingly, Friedrich's series most frequently quotes the epistles that are verified by scholars as undisputed. Granted, Paul does quote 2 Timothy when he preaches to Felix in the penultimate episode, but, for the most part, Friedrich sources the undisputed texts for Paul's dialogue.

The second insight of the historical study of the epistles is that there are different ways to look at the concept of authorship in antiquity. One of these conceptions, ranked immediately after direct inscription in terms of authenticity, is dictation.[14] At various point throughout the series, most notably in Episode 7, Episode 9, and Episode 10, Timothy is seen dictating Paul's words to the various churches he had visited. Though

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[12] Christof Landmesser, "Ferdinand Christian Baur as Interpreter of Paul: History, the Absolute, and Freedom," in *Ferdinand Christian Baur and the History of Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[13] Jerry L Sumney, "The Disputed Pauline Letters: Continuing Advice in Paul's Name," in *The Bible*, 3rd ed. (Fortress Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv17vf4s7.23.

[14] Armin D. Baum. "Content and Form: Authorship Attribution and Pseudonymity in Ancient Speeches, Letters, Lectures, and Translations—A Rejoinder to Bart Ehrman." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136, no. 2 (2017): 381–403. https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1362.2017.200369.

Timothy is not thought by scholars to be the scribe responsible for dictating the epistles, Friedrich's choice to depict the epistles as being penned by someone other than Paul reflects his interest in the historical aspect of biblical formation that would be absent had the series shown Paul writing the letters himself. This is a great example of Friedrich expanding relatively small pieces of his source material (in this case, Timothy's contribution to Acts) to fulfill several generic functions Just as the story of Aran brings together conventions of the missionary and biblical genres, the former informing the latter, the series' use of Timothy brings together the genres of church/Bible history and biblical adaptation.

This relationship is even more apparent in several pieces of narration throughout the series. At the top of numerous scenes, the narrator establishes information about the upcoming scene which is based on historical research rather than the book of Acts. This occurs a few times in Episode 10, for example. The episode opens with the narrator providing the exact date of the following events ("the year of our Lord, 52"), immediately contextualizing the following events within a specific historical setting. Later in the episode, when Paul journeys to Ephesus, the narrator introduces the temple of Diana and notes the landmark's importance as a destination of pilgrims at that point in history (now 54AD). Finally, when Paul arrives in Jerusalem toward the end of the episode, the narrator introduces Jerusalem in the year 48AD as a city "seething with resentment against the tyranny of the Roman empire."[15] Though quick and subtle, the inclusion of

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[15] *Life of St. Paul*. 1950. "Third Missionary Journey," Directed by John T. Coyle. Note that the narrator introduces Jerusalem in the year 48 A.D., even though the previous two indications of the time were 52 A.D. and 54 A.D. This jump backward is unexplained in the series, and there is nothing historically significant about that year in the story of Paul except for its closeness to the beginning of his first missionary journey, which would have occurred in Episode 6. This apparent mistake may have resulted from an accidental change of 58 to 48, or the dialogue may have initially been captured for an earlier episode.

specific dates reveals Friedrich's interest in the historical context of his story. Furthermore, this technique opens the series up to be viewed from a lens that isn't solely religious or based on religious texts. Much more than strengthening faith, these small touches aim to enrich the audience's knowledge of ancient society.

Friedrich's most blatant appeal to the genre of church history comes at the very end of the series when Paul arrives in Rome. Instead of following Paul as he meets with the Roman Jewish leaders like we do in Acts, we are treated to a short history lesson on Emperor Nero, and we watch as he is advised by Seneca about Paul's fate. Although Nero does not play a part in the narrative of Acts, the conclusion of Friedrich's series, a conversation between Paul and Julius the centurion, establishes him as a large antagonistic force in the world of the early church, an insight that only history could provide. In this final scene, the missionary and historical genres are woven together as Julius tells Paul that Rome suffered damage from a large fire and that Nero is blaming it on Christians. Though Paul reacts in dismay at hearing of his fellow Christians' physical torment at the hands of the empire, his final monologue is driven by an assurance that "[Christ's] light will be carried forward, not only now, but in centuries to come. His word will live in the hearts and lives of men until there is no more darkness. Only his light."[16] With this final line of dialogue in the series, Friedrich positions Paul at the historical origin of a new moral imperative for Christians, an obligation to endure even the most brutal hardship for the sake of Christianity's flourishing. History, rather than the biblical text, is thereby used to encourage missionary action and to provide a dramatic conclusion to the series.

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[16] *Life of St. Paul*. 1951. "Voyage to Rome." Directed by John T. Coyle.

The (Biographical) Life of St. Paul

The second genre that appeals to those outside of the Christian community, the genre of biographical films, is closely linked with the genre of church history. After all, they both aim to provide the audience with a more complete understanding of how the church came to be, whether by observing the historical circumstances surrounding events or by following a specific leader in the church's formation. However, Friedrich's employment of the latter method (biographical genre) has a couple of distinct results that his use of the historical genre does not achieve.

The first result is that the story of Acts, not primarily a biographical document, is lodged into the framework of the life and missionary work of Paul. Thus, Friedrich's series cannot strictly be called a biblical genre series because it draws on the conventions of biography at the expense of several other prominent characters in the Acts narrative, particularly Peter. Large portions of Acts that feature the mission work of other apostles have been redacted from Friedrich's version of the story to suggest the primacy of Paul's point of view.[17] Given that there is contemporary theological and doctrinal debate stemming from the issue of whether more stock should be put in the teaching of Paul or Peter, the choice to focus exclusively on one of them certainly makes a statement within the Christian community. This debate is essentially split down Protestant/Roman Catholic lines, so it makes sense that Friedrich falls comfortably on one side of the discussion, although it still has theological implications.

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[17] The entirety of Acts 10, in which Peter receives a vision from God about preaching to the Gentiles, is entirely absent from the series. Similarly, Peter's imprisonment and subsequent escape at the hands of an angel (Acts 12) is also absent.

It is important to note that, on many occasions, Friedrich produced two versions of his films, one for Protestant viewers, and one for Catholic viewers.[18] This arose as a response to increasing requests from Roman Catholic groups for cinematic church content near the end of the 1940s. However, due to budgetary restrictions, variations in Protestant and Catholic film versions were often limited to relatively minor dialogue changes. Thus, he was not opposed to creating content for churches that held different theological convictions than he did, but the large disparity between a film that adapts Paul's story and a film that adapts both Paul and Peter's story made it difficult to accommodate both audiences in this case. This makes the choice to remove the majority of Peter's story from his series seem less like a brazen privileging of one theological outlook over another and more like an issue of establishing his series within the genre of biography and creating within his means.

This begs the question of what Friedrich gains by so heavily asserting the biographical elements of Acts. For one, this increases his chances of developing Paul as a character with whom the audience can identify. Whereas Acts is concerned mainly with recording the comings and goings of Christ's followers in the years following his death, Friedrich's series is more interested in following Paul through a character arc as a result of those events. Similarly, the purpose of biographical work is not mere reporting of random occurrences, but rather to create a journey that the viewer takes alongside another person as they grow in their maturity and convictions. This context is sure to inspire a stronger emotional connection than a simple recounting of the source material would.

[18] Suit, *James Friedrich and Cathedral Films*, 92-93.

Another reason that appealing to the biographical genre may have been so important to Friedrich is that, by placing dramatic focus on one person, he expands his viewership from people who hold similar religious views to the wider audience of people who share fundamental modern Western values. Individualism, foremost among these values, is certainly serviced by the biographical genre because there is a presupposition in biographical work that there is value in observing the life of a single person. Thus, regardless of religious beliefs, the biographical aspect of the series and the triumphant spirit of Paul as an individual called by God helps Friedrich's adaptation to resonate with wider audiences or, at least, to resonate with more people than a direct adaptation of Acts might have.

Thus, the biblical and missionary genres which aim to educate, empower, and entertain a Christian audience are balanced and enriched by the inclusion of historical and biographical conventions.

Conclusion

By looking at the *Life of St. Paul* series through the lens of genre, particularly the most common genres in the independent Christian film market at the time, Friedrich's narrative intentions and target audience(s) become clearer. As a biblical and/or missionary piece, the series emphasizes the goals of promoting biblical literacy, addressing the virtues and costs of evangelism, and entertaining Christian audiences. However, as a historical and biographical piece, the series also builds on extrabiblical material to more fully present the world in which the biblical text was produced. *Life of St. Paul* is never just one of these genres, and Friedrich's innovative significance as a

Christian filmmaker is, in part, due to his tendency to thread them together in ways that balance his intentions of educating, evangelizing, and entertaining. Regardless of how well this generic mixture is managed, it is apparent that the intention is there. In the next chapter, I will isolate specific examples of Friedrich's dramatic liberties with Acts to demonstrate his use of the final biblical genre and to further reveal Friedrich's primary concerns as a Christian filmmaker.

CHAPTER THREE

Converting the Bible to the Screen

Inherent Interpretation

Any cinematic adaptation of biblical material is necessarily an interpretation. There are two reasons for this. First, the Bible is a text for which authorial intent cannot be entirely established. Consequently, while there are codified Scriptures, there is not a codified way to read and interpret them, and this has manifested in countless theologies with differently organized values and doctrines. The second reason is that the Bible and the cinematic medium speak different languages. That is, the textual mode of the Bible can never be given a 1:1 translation into a visual artform. The implication of this reality when adapting a film from Scripture is that some editorial choices must be made regarding content, depiction of that content in the face of conflicting biblical accounts (as is the case in the Gospels), and the content's pacing.

Given the Bible's weighty cultural, theological, and historical value, it is a somewhat dangerous endeavor to artistically editorialize its passages, as the controversy surrounding the release of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* demonstrated in 1988. However, the transition from written to visual media necessitates change and, more specifically, interpretation. Especially in a text such as Acts, in which long periods of time are condensed into a few verses and historical documentation is privileged over narrative structure or character development, the source material must bend to fit the

conventions of its new medium if it has any hope of reaching and compelling a wide audience.

This issue of necessary interpretation is one that has and will continue to be a part of Christian filmmaking. Most Christian films produced today are not biblical adaptations, and perhaps this conundrum is the reason for that. After all, it's always safer to create a contemporary drama with biblical themes rather than to take on the authoritative text itself. Conversely, to shudder at the prospect of reshaping the biblical narrative for film, as theologies with an iconoclastic bent tend to do, is to imply that the truth of Scripture is bound by the written word, that there is no other medium through which the Word of God can be delivered. As someone who deeply believed in and respected the power of film as a medium, not just as an amplifier of sermons, Friedrich easily made peace with the reality of inherent interpretation. Instead of suppressing it or avoiding it, he used it to create stories that better served cinematic narrative structure and, by extension, appealed to audiences whose knowledge of film surpassed their knowledge of Scripture. By adding characters, embellishing the arcs of established biblical characters, and omitting certain pieces of Scripture, Friedrich leans into his medium and inherent interpretations rather than viewing them as evangelistic obstacles to overcome.

Characterization

Perhaps the most obvious way in which Friedrich alters the biblical narrative is his treatment of characters and their development. Throughout the series, the audience is introduced to characters on Paul's missionary journeys who never appear in Acts but serve several narrative functions for Friedrich. First, they personalize amorphous forces

or institutions in the Scriptures. Second, they provide motivations for established characters that are absent from Acts. Third, they subtly argue for the importance of the individual's role in evangelism, bolstering the missionary spirit of Friedrich's goal as a filmmaker. Extrabiblical characters are not the only ones whose characterization is adjusted by Friedrich. Primary characters in the Acts narrative, including Paul himself, are provided more emotional depth and insecurities to allow for growth across the series' 6-hour runtime. Each of these categories of change will be discussed more thoroughly below.

In many cases, the book of Acts records the history of groups rather than of specific individuals. Of course, many of the disciples are mentioned by name and thereby maintain an individual quality, but the broader Acts narrative remains an interplay between the forces of larger groups such as the Jews, the Gentiles, the disciples, and the Romans. Especially in the section of Acts dedicated to Paul's missionary journeys (roughly Acts 13—21), group status often supersedes the individual. Presumably, readers of Acts do not seek primarily to relate to any one of these groups, or at least the author of the text doesn't seem to have this as his goal.[1] The cinematic medium, however, particularly in its narrative form, heavily relies on character to draw the audience in on a personal level. Comprehending this, Friedrich accounts for the group tension in the biblical text while compensating for his medium by creating characters who serve as models for their larger communities, as well as potential emotional gateways into the story.

[1] The primary intention of Acts appears to be, rather, chronicling the historical transition from Jewish Christianity to Gentile Christianity.

One example of this occurs at the beginning of the series in Episodes 2 and 3. Following the stoning of the Apostle Stephen at the hands of Paul and his fellow Pharisees, we meet Deborah and Johnathan, a married couple who acts as Friedrich's individual depiction of "the church which was at Jerusalem" in Acts 8, the church which Paul (then Saul) fervently persecuted. Throughout these two episodes, Johnathan and Deborah are the first characters to demonstrate the virtues of Christianity to Paul, priming him for his conversion experience near the end of Chapter 2. The dramatic thrust behind this episode is Paul's zealous pursuit of Christians in Jerusalem in the aftermath of Stephen's death, yet we see each step of this pursuit from the point of view of Johnathan and Deborah. When Saul ambushes a meeting of Christians, he is confronted by the couple and strikes Deborah's father on the head before the couple manage to escape. Soon after, we watch Deborah mourn the passing of her father as a result of this altercation. When we return to Paul, he is tormented by the words spoken to him by these two characters, as he does not yet comprehend their grace. Echoes of their words in his head are the implied impetus for Paul's request to the high priest in Acts 9. Thus, even though the arc of the episode (and the whole series) is concerned with Paul, the audience is provided with other characters to relate to and through whom the amorphous "church of Jerusalem" in Acts is personified.

A similar addition can be seen in the previously mentioned story of Aran, in which that character can be viewed as the audience's first personified encounter of "the Gentiles." Furthermore, several episodes, including Episode 9 for instance, personify the Jewish forces opposing Paul on his missionary journeys, up until the end of the series when Jacob, the fictional character who spans the most episodes (3), takes the role of

Jewish foreperson for the remainder of the series. In all cases of this scriptural modification, the result is that the conflict is made more personal than in its narrative-based source material. This reveals an intention in Friedrich's work that hails audience-character relatability over direct scriptural adaptation and, by extension, film as a medium over film as a vessel.

Another effect of Friedrich's character additions is logical explanations for character motivations in the Bible. Once again, since Acts is primarily a historical text, matters of character motivation take a backseat to restating information. In classical narrative film, though, with its tradition of cause-and-effect structure populated by psychologically defined and motivated characters, it is not enough to say that Paul "departed [from Antioch], and went over all the country of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples."[2] Rather, the narrative must provide some impetus for the travel. The adaptation of this verse, found in Episode 10, does just that by introducing Titus, a character who never appears in Acts despite his apparent importance in Paul's ministry. At the beginning of the episode, Titus brings news to Paul and John Mark from Galatia that faith is growing lukewarm in churches around that country. When Paul hears of this, he immediately dictates a letter to the Galatians and instructs Timothy to deliver it.[3] Then, partially in a state of frustration, he chooses to revisit the church in Galatia to strengthen it in a time of need. This addition of Titus, though small, both provides a

[2] Acts 18:23 KJV; biblical quotations are taken from the King James Version, as this was the standard translation used by the Episcopal church at the time of Friedrich's production.

[3] Note here the interplay between character addition (Titus) and historicity (writing and delivering of epistles).

"cameo" for biblical audiences and strengthens the causal narrative quality of the episode.

A few more examples of this can be found in the story of John Mark, particularly in Episodes 5 and 7. Aran, the Gentile, and John Mark's mother, mentioned in a single verse of Acts (albeit within a chapter that Friedrich omitted), both play a significant role in John Mark's characterization and, consequently, elucidate his abrupt choices in Scripture to join and later leave Paul and Barnabas on their journey. As previously mentioned, Aran decides to assist Paul and Barnabas in delivering food to the disciples in Jerusalem prior to a famine. Even more, he volunteers to travel ahead of the group to alert the disciples of the coming help. When John Mark sees Aran's fervor upon his arrival, he witnesses firsthand the power of missionary work in the form of a converted and zealous Gentile. He later asks Paul to join in his missionary work and refers to Aran as his reason. Acts, on the other hand, only briefly mentions John Mark joining Paul and Barnabas in 12:25. Thus, narrative and logic motivation are strengthened through the addition of a character.

As John Mark prepares to leave with Paul, he and his mother say farewell, establishing stakes for John Mark's character in leaving his home. This provides an explanation for his sudden exit from the party in Episode 7 when he becomes homesick. Had Friedrich not expanded the role of the mother, there would be no reason for John's prompt departure. This small embellishment also endears the audience to John Mark as a relatable figure amongst some of the most devoted missionaries in the church's history. This relatability effectively bridges the historical gap between Paul's story and the

audience's, urging viewers to draw parallels between the biblical world and the modern one and fulfilling the aims of a conventional dramatic genre film.

In the same vein of audience identification, character additions are also used to demystify and humanize several events in the biblical narrative. That is, moments such as Paul's conversion in Episode 2, his vision of a Macedonian man in Episode 8, and his decision to appeal to Caesar in Episode 11, all moments present in the biblical text, are here given a greater humanness through the addition of character. The first of these moments, Paul's conversion, is Scripturally portrayed as an instantaneous occurrence, prompted singlehandedly by God's revelation to Paul on the road to Damascus. In Acts 9:3, Paul is one of the most fervent persecutors of the church, and by 9:6 he is asking the Lord "what wilt thou have me to do?" This moment is jarring in terms of character development, as its association with the utterly miraculous removes a certain level of humanness from the narrative's equation. In other words, this event is entirely an act of God. Because many people cannot claim to have experienced this kind of direct contact with the divine which led to immediate conversion (though, undoubtedly, there are some who could), this moment feels particularly of a certain age of miracles with which post-Enlightenment viewers are not familiar.

Of course, Friedrich could not have altered this event too much in his series for the sake of relatability because it is an integral moment in Paul's story. He does, however, through the added characters of Deborah and Johnathan, add a human layer to Paul's conversion. During the previously mentioned confrontation between Paul and these two characters, Deborah says, "May our Lord forgive you, Saul of Tarsus" even after being beaten by him. Before that, during Stephen's stoning at the conclusion of

Episode 1, Paul hears the dying man say, "Do not lay this sin up against them." On two separate occasions before his conversion, Paul is shown in a conflicted state upon the recollection of these words, and he forcefully hardens his heart to them, doubling down on his actions. It is within the context of this struggle, a struggle brought about by human influence, that Paul eventually encounters the Lord on the road to Damascus. Thus, Friedrich emphasizes the conversion *process* over the conversion moment, drawing special attention to the role of God's people in that process. The result is a more dramatically interesting internal conflict for Paul which both engages the audience narratively and challenges them evangelistically without breaching the integrity of the Acts narrative.

A later occurrence, Paul's vision of a Macedonian man during his stay in Troas, is altered to a similar end. This moment, portrayed in Episode 8, gains new meaning with the introduction of Luke. Once again, the biblical account of this event in Acts 16:9 has a miraculous quality to it, and there is no rational or character-based explanation for its occurrence other than implied divine intervention. Although Friedrich does not remove this miraculous quality, he recontextualizes the scene within a more dramatically cohesive sequence. In the scene before Paul's vision, he falls ill while preaching in the street. Thus, his vision of the Macedonian man, at least in part, is attributed to sickness. There is a reason given for an inexplicable event in Acts which ties something human, sickness, to the divine vision. Furthermore, it is later revealed that the Macedonian man is Luke, the doctor nursing Paul back to health. In this case, Friedrich's specific identification of the scriptural Macedonian man through character addition serves to

demystify the biblical narrative, to provide a logical dramatic reasoning for events, and to add a relatable, human quality to Paul by depicting him in a vulnerable state.

In the final four episodes, Luke becomes a confidant for Paul, filling the gap that Barnabas leaves after his departure in Episode 8. In Episode 11, for instance, Luke visits Paul in Caesarea to discuss the latter's trial before the Roman governors, and much of the scene revolves around Paul's uncertainty about the matter. He is torn between turning himself over to the Jewish leaders for a religious trial and appealing to Caesar to avoid an almost guaranteed death sentence at the hands of the Jewish leaders. He knows that, were he to appeal, he would risk "severing himself" from his own people, so the decision is an especially personal one. This tension and uncertainty are not present in Acts, and the addition of Luke earlier in the series provides a character to whom Paul can express his uncertainty. This scene further humanizes Paul by appealing to his fear, sadness, and uncertainty, and it increases the dramatic tension between himself and the Jewish people that has grown throughout the series. This conversation between close friends is one of the few additions that Friedrich made to Episode 11, so it sticks out even more as a deliberate attempt to further Paul's development into his identity as a Christian.

Addition by Subtraction

Though addition is Friedrich's primary mode of editorial change in the series, there are several examples of omissions from the biblical text that bear brief note due to their dramatic implications. The general glossing over of Peter's storyline is the largest omission, the significance of which was covered in the previous chapter. Here, I am

concerned with smaller changes that exemplify Friedrich's attention to dramatic structure.

The first of these can be found in Episode 7, the first episode that addresses the physical and emotional costs of missionary work. At the beginning of the episode, Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark journey into Perga, a town engulfed in sickness. While preaching there, Paul takes ill and is bedridden for several days. Soon after, John Mark decides to leave Paul and Barnabas due to homesickness. When Paul and Barnabas journey on to Pisidian Antioch and Lystra, they are met with heavy physical opposition from the people there, including flogging, all culminating in the titular stoning of Paul at the conclusion of the episode. It seems throughout this segment of Paul's story that nothing is going according to plan for his ministry. Even when the people of Lystra witness the miracle of Paul healing a crippled man, they mistake him for a god and thereby misunderstand his message. When comparing this episode to the section of Acts on which it is based (roughly Acts 13—14), it becomes clear that Friedrich omits mentions of Paul succeeding in spreading God's message among the Gentiles, particularly in 13:42 and 13:48—49, to focus on Paul's failures. Furthermore, the reference to the disciples being filled with joy in 13:52 is nowhere to be found in the narrator's recounting of that passage. By the end of the episode, the narrator declares, "From that day, the Word flourished in Lystra," so there is at least a triumphant conclusion to Paul's journey, but only after constant trials does this occur. This suspension of conflict, which is only resolved in the last moments of the episode, is a function of Friedrich's minor omissions and it evinces, like his additions, an interest in perfecting the dramatic structure of Acts for the screen.

Another brief example of this technique comes in the final episode when Paul arrives in Rome. The narration omits any mention of Paul meeting with the Jewish leaders in that city, though their conversation is prominent in the final chapter of Acts. Instead, Friedrich chooses to focus on Paul's "warm welcome" from the followers of the Way, effectively concluding the narrative thread of preaching to the Gentiles and Jews alike. In removing any explicit mention of Jew or Gentile and eliding the two groups into one group of followers, Friedrich implies that Paul's mission has been successful, and the image of "followers of the Way" embracing Paul provides a satisfying counterpoint to the beginning of the series, in which the followers evaded him.

Conclusion

To sum up the result of added characters and characterization in the series, primarily manifested in the character development of Paul, one can glean a deliberate attempt by Friedrich to take advantage of the emotional and relatable impact that film can have on an audience. By personalizing groups, specifying character motivations, and adding a human quality to divine events, all through the creation of characters and character arcs, Friedrich fulfills the criteria of the dramatic Christian film by personalizing the story of Paul and by prioritizing narrative and drama over historical documentation. In showing the audience that even the most prominent of the church fathers faced doubt, emotional strife, and failure, the series becomes an invitation for viewers to see themselves doing the work that Paul and his companions did, despite their similar hesitancies. Most importantly, though this can be characterized as a Christian goal, Friedrich accomplishes it by respecting the strengths of cinematic narrative

structure over perfect historical and biblical accuracy. The next chapter will continue to explore Friedrich's attempts to bring together the best of faith and film by noting his specific evocation of serial aesthetics and episodic structure as well as his evangelistic use of filmmaking behind the scenes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Engaging with Established Forms

Introduction

The previous two chapters focus primarily on issues of genre and creative liberties, particularly how these two cinematic elements can be used to construct a multi-purpose narrative that leans into its identity as an adaptation, rather than a "faithful" copy of its source material. This chapter will transition to look at the *Life of St. Paul* series in terms of its relationship to previously established narrative structures and aesthetics and how it uses those to engage and utilize established mainstream film forms. Furthermore, this chapter will briefly discuss aspects of Friedrich's cinematic process behind-the-scenes which affirm his onscreen attempts to evangelize, educate, and entertain and will suggest that harnessing the act of film production itself as an evangelizing tool is a large part of what makes his work successful. In viewing Friedrich's series through these lenses, his intention to merge the worlds of mainstream and Christian filmmaking becomes readily apparent.

Biblical Serialization

Perhaps the primary form that the *Life of St. Paul* seeks to imitate is that of the early 20th-century film serial. In her 2018 study of serials of this era, Ilka Brasch identifies formal conventions such as the cliffhanger; "mechanical," repetitive structure; anecdotal narratives; and suspenseful action—conventions that are all evident in

Friedrich's series.[1] Before examining each of these more closely, it is important to note that, despite its tendency to creatively fill dramatic holes in the biblical narrative, the series does not always match up flawlessly with the film serial model. What I intend to demonstrate in this chapter is not that Friedrich was attempting to recreate the story of Paul within the serial form, but rather, that he shows an interest in working with established conventions that are derived from secular, rather than religious, forms. Thus, I am merely starting with the serial model as a foundation for isolating instances of visual and structural mimicry in *Life of St. Paul*.

In the introduction to *Film Serials and the American Cinema*, Brasch asserts that "[the film serial's] approach to storytelling is anecdotal, that is, serials compile and rearrange fixed elements, settings, props, stock characters, and story elements that can be considered short, recurring anecdotes."[2] The ways in which this description also applies to Friedrich's work are clear. Episodes in *Life of St. Paul* reuse tropes such as travel, conversion, preaching, religious opposition, and chases. Each episode contains many (if not all) of these elements, and the variety among episodes is created by how they are ordered within the separate narratives. Take, for example, Episodes 3 and 9. The first of these, "Years of Apprenticeship," begins during Paul's conversion and quickly transitions to a scene of Paul preaching. When he faces opposition in the synagogue, he decides to travel in solitude "to think and to pray." After a conversation between Johnathan, Deborah, and Ananias that indicates the passage of two years, Paul travels back to Damascus and preaches once again. He faces more religious opposition in the form of a

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[1] Brasch, Ilka. "Introduction." In *Film Serials and the American Cinema, 1910-1940: Operational Detection*, 9–42. Amsterdam University Press, 2018. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv7xbs29.4.

[2] Ibid, 9-10.

preaching ban in the synagogues, so he begins preaching in the streets. Threatened by Paul’s perceived blasphemy, members of the synagogue organize a search party to capture him, resulting in a chase and Paul’s travelling once more out of the town. With respect to the five tropes listed above, the episode can be reduced to conversion, preaching, religious opposition, travel, travel, preaching, religious opposition, chase, and travel.

Episode 9, though utilizing the same narrative tropes, organizes them differently. This episode begins with Paul’s miraculous liberation from prison, an event that prompts the jailer’s conversion. When Paul and his companions are released from custody, they depart from the city and travel to Thessalonica, where they once again face persecution at the hands of the citizens. When a riot forms, another chase ensues, eventually convincing Paul to depart for Athens to avoid further trouble for the disciples in Thessalonica. In Athens, he preaches to philosophers at the Aeropagus, and the episode concludes with a narrated summary of the final legs of Paul’s travel in his first missionary journey. In short, conversion, travel, preaching, religious opposition, chase, travel, preaching, and travel. In proper serial form, these fixed elements are rearranged both in their context and in their causes and effects, but they can be recognized as the core structural elements of each episode.

This anecdotal quality is also carried out by a repetition of settings, another element mentioned in Brasch’s description. Though most episodes cycle quickly from city to city, each location is seen through the lens of familiar settings that recur throughout the series. Perhaps the most notable is the synagogue. At almost every stop in Paul’s travels, this is his first destination for preaching the Lord’s Word. In the case of a

pagan city with no synagogue, as seen in Episodes 5, 7, and 10, other religious temples stand in for the synagogue but fulfill the same narrative purpose. The town streets are also a familiar location for scenes of preaching to the Gentiles as well as chases. Furthermore, the quarters of high-ranking officials, both Jewish and Gentile, are prominently featured as places of danger and/or another setting for Paul's preaching, though a more intimate one. Conversely, the houses that shelter Paul on his journey are featured as places of safety, discipleship, and communion. These four settings—the synagogue, the streets, the high-ranking official's quarters, and the itinerant shelter—work alongside the fixed story elements to create a simple, repetitive language for the audience to easily make sense of the narrative week after week. This structural choice simultaneously echoes the popular film serial mode and remains true to the repetitive quality of Acts, fulfilling Friedrich's dual goals of adaptation and creative interpretation.

Perhaps most indicative of *Life of St. Paul*'s following in the serial, anecdotal tradition is its use of stock characters. These characters, which usually are only seen for a single episode, help to broaden the world of the narrative while still fitting within a familiar structure. In almost all cases, the stock characters correlate with the stock settings above. For example, the synagogue or temple setting is typically paired with characters who disagree with Paul's teachings and attempt to hinder his cause. In some cases, these are Jewish characters who call Paul a blasphemer and ban him from speaking in their synagogue, as in Episode 7. Otherwise, these characters are Gentiles who are worried about Paul's opposition to their Roman deities, as are the Ephesians in Episode 10. Similarly, the location of high-ranking official's quarters is naturally paired with a high-ranking official, either religious or political. Powerful characters such as Gamaliel,

Sergius Paulus, Ananias the high priest, Felix, Festus, Nero, and various Roman centurions fulfill this archetype in separate episodes, creating a looming sense of danger around Paul which commands more political and religious power than he does. Furthermore, the use of stock characters in addition to the main group of recurring characters allows each episode to be viewed separately, without too much reliance on previous episodes to understand the plot or character development. Deborah and Johnathan in Episodes 2 and 3, Melita and Aran in Episode 5, Jabez and Tobo in Episode 6, Lydia and Bernice in Episode 8, and Felix and Festus in Episode 11 are all characters that fit within a certain archetype and only remain in the story for a short consecutive period. Thus, the confluence of fixed plot elements, familiar settings, and stock characters all serve to present the series from an anecdotal angle and, like film serials, gain from this mechanical repetition an understandable narrative language that creates an overarching plot, but which also allows viewing of individual episodes.

Serial structure is further exemplified in the "bookends" of each episode: the introduction and the conclusion. Oftentimes, episodes will begin with a speedy recap of important information from the previous episode, which immediately establishes context, and often conflict, for the viewer. Appearing more sparingly is the cliffhanger ending, the device Brasch labels the most prominent component of serial formal arrangements.[3] Consistently employed at the ends of serial episodes, cliffhangers heighten the dramatic pitch in a story, urging viewers to return next week to see how a dangerous situation reaches resolution. It is frequently the role of the introductory segment to remind the

[3] Ibid, 11.

audience of the dangerous situation at the end of the previous episode and proceed to resolve it quickly.

Except for a few key moments in *Life of St. Paul*, Friedrich does not lean too heavily on the cliffhanger convention. At least, he does not leave Paul in situations of immediate, life-threatening danger as a typical serial protagonist would be. Perhaps to do this would have been to stray too far from Acts, as consistent application would necessitate 11 fabricated moments of "high-pitch" danger for Paul. Then again, there are semblances of cliffhanger in the series, only implemented with lower stakes. For instance, Episode 8 concludes with Paul being imprisoned, but there is certainly no impending doom awaiting him. Similarly, as Paul sails toward Rome at the close of Episode 11, the narrator declares that his fate will soon rest in the hands of the emperor, implying upcoming danger without leaving Paul in the midst of it. The only example of a true cliffhanger ending comes in Episode 10 when Jacob incites a riot against Paul and a large mob violently removes him from the Temple as the end credit card appears.

What is to be made of this step away from conventional serial drama? It isn't as if Friedrich avoids putting Paul in harm's way. In fact, the conclusions of Episodes 3 and 7 depict significant attempts on Paul's life, the first in the form of an assassination, and the second in the form of a stoning. Were Friedrich solely interested in replicating the serial form, these moments, already near the end of their respective episodes, could easily be repositioned as the final occurrences of their installments. However, Friedrich almost always gives these moments resolution (barring Episode 10) for the sake of character development. The assassination attempt in Episode 3 is quickly resolved for the sake of John's Mark's development, and Episode 7's stoning is surpassed in the final minutes by

an affirmation of the first missionary journey's overall success, so as not to burden the entire episode with evangelical and physical hardships. This refusal to fully copy serial structure while clearly imitating multiple of its elements is yet another indication of Friedrich's interest in appealing to more than one audience as well as more than one form. There is a fundamental mapping of Paul's story onto the serial blueprint, but Friedrich's aim to entertain, which may very well have been optimized by implementing more cliffhangers, is put in check by his aim to evangelize, an aim better served by resolving episodes on a positive note, formally demonstrating the victory of good over evil.

Aesthetic Interest

Equally reflective of Friedrich's interest in continuing established film traditions are his aesthetic choices. Though sparingly, and perhaps not always masterfully, the narrative of the *Life of St. Paul* series is colored by aesthetics that undergird the serial influence with an added sense of adventure. The aural quality of this adventure is created primarily with the voice of the narrator, reminiscent of typical radio-play vocal grandeur, and with the score, often evoking a sense of epic scale, suspense, and/or danger. In many cases, the score only appears to enhance these three senses and entirely disappears for scenes of dialogue. Very seldom does the score sit between these two extremes of grand and nonexistent. Similarly, the narrator's omniscient baritone voice lends the narrative a certain weight and intrigue, complimenting the majestic score and drawing attention to the adventurous nature of Paul's story in conjunction with the "travel-by-map" visual cue. This quality becomes especially apparent in the final episode when the narrator's

voice tonally and rhythmically shifts to aurally punctuate the shipwreck sequence. Thus, the driving forces behind the aural soundscape of the series strengthen its serial visual components, particularly emphasizing the elements of Paul's story which can be likened to an epic adventure.

Regarding specific visual techniques, Friedrich is slightly less consistent. However, it is clear at several points in the series that he strives to let the visuals speak louder than the dialogue and that he acknowledges a power in film as a medium irrespective of its capability to mass produce sermons. Of particular interest on this issue is Episode 4, wherein several applications of popular film techniques can be seen, albeit briefly. The first of these is a slow, dramatic dolly shot that occurs upon Paul's return to Jerusalem (Figure 1). The camera, initially static, sees Paul walking toward the city gates. He suddenly halts, and the camera slowly dollies to the right as he turns his head in the same direction. The movement continues as Paul approaches what his gaze is fixed on, something yet unrevealed to the audience. When he reaches his destination, the audience

Figure 1: A dolly shot slowly revealing Stephen's stone covered death bed

realizes that he has been looking at the place where he oversaw the stoning of Stephen in Episode 1. This is merely one example of the dolly shot in the series, and it gives a small sense of Friedrich's understanding of effectively using film language as well as his equal interest in both visual technique and content. Paul being confronted with his past deeds (content) is infused with a certain mood using dramatic camera movement (technique).

Figure 2: Interstitial shot that establishes tone through camera movement, music, and lighting

Later in the same episode, Friedrich includes an intriguing 34-second interstitial shot in which no dialogue is spoken, and there are no characters to be seen (Figure 2). The shot fades from black into a shot of a door, lit unnaturally with a hard spotlight, and proceeds to pan slowly to the left as we hear unsettling music on the soundtrack. As a staircase moves into the left side of the frame, the camera moves forward a bit, approaching the bottom step. Then, still moving rather slowly, the camera pans on a diagonal up the stairs until it lands on an open door, a source of light. This sequence, entirely void of dramatic content, utilizes the technique of harsh light and shadow (not unlike what might be seen in German Expressionist film) along with music to establish a mood rather than to merely

tell a story. The exact intent for this shot is not entirely clear, but it undoubtedly suggests once again that Friedrich is trying to integrate story with aesthetics, upholding both as essential components of the film medium.

There are a few more instances in the episode of prioritizing aesthetic over story, including a return to the German Expressionism-esque staircase location during the attempt on Paul's life, an unrealistic lighting cue embellishing the Eucharist goblet, and a flashback montage, but extended analysis of these would be redundant. Suffice it to say that Friedrich did not view the "Christian" aesthetic as something necessarily separate from techniques that had been in use for decades, nor did he try to visually distance his work from Hollywood productions. On the contrary, his career was, overall, an attempt to reorient an established medium for a religious cause, and he particularly believed in the power of production value and visual technique to bring biblical content to life. His philosophy regarding Hollywood and his focus on aesthetic is best expressed by a quote from a 1947 interview:

> I felt that unless we could get the quality of a theatrical film into a religious film, it would be futile to try and present religion on the screen, as it would only reflect to the detriment of the church. Because the pictures are made primarily for children, they have some sense of production value, and if the pictures we show cannot compare with the production value of the pictures they see in the theater, they are going to think that it's only because the church isn't able to do a good job.[4]

If Friedrich's emphasis on production value in the series happens to go unnoticed for the first 11 episodes, it becomes unmistakably clear in the finale with the spectacular shipwreck sequence. More than half of the episode takes place on the ship, and several

[4] "Interview with James K. Frederick [sic] at the Fourth International Workshop in Audio-Visual Education, Green Lake, Wisconsin," 1947, Audiotape recording, Collection 327, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, Illinois.

minutes are dedicated to highlighting the grandeur of the set piece (showboating, if you will) before the storm finally gets the best of it. Friedrich even breaks with his pattern of displaying the opening credits over the image of a shield in the first 11 episodes in favor of layering the credits over footage of the ship in the 12th.

Not only did Friedrich's belief in the necessity of cinematic quality affect his final products. Rather, it influenced his fundamental beliefs about the production of Christian films. Whereas other pioneers of the independent Christian film such as Carlos Baptista insisted on hiring only Christians to produce his projects, Friedrich championed the use of Hollywood casts, crews, and sets in his films, trusting that the resultant displays of technical competence would be much more effective for spreading the Gospel than reinventing the wheel would, so to speak.[5] In addition, given his frequent collaborations with non-believers, Friedrich used the filmmaking process itself as an act of evangelism, leading prayer before every shoot and wearing his clerical vestments on set. Thus, his aesthetic choices not only strengthen the storytelling of the *Life of St. Paul* series, but they reflect a broader philosophy of how Christian filmmakers ought to engage with aesthetics of a secular institution and with nonbelieving artists.

Conclusion

It would not be accurate to suggest that the *Life of St. Paul* series is an artistic masterpiece, particularly regarding its aesthetic choices and technical proficiency. There are, admittedly, plenty of scenes with flat, seemingly uninspired composition, stale

[5] Suit, *James Friedrich and Cathedral Films*, 21-23.; Lindvall and Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986*, 28-29.

acting[6], and on-the-nose dialogue. However, what is lacking in execution does not discount the reality of Friedrich's intention. By observing the way he structures his series around preexisting forms and visual techniques, specifically those of the serial film, it becomes clear that Friedrich sees value in engaging with non-Christian artists and art in his pursuit of cinematic evangelism. This engagement is further substantiated by his production practices, which advocate for collaboration between independent Christian filmmakers and Hollywood veterans. Thus, just as the content-based studies of the previous two chapters suggest an attempt to reach diverse audiences on Friedrich's part, the formal and aesthetic qualities discussed in this chapter suggest that his vision for Christian film involved an intimate working relationship with what many fellow church members might have seen as a secular institution and a secular artform.

[6] Kenneth Suit finds particular fault in the performance of Nelson Leigh, the lead actor of the series. He goes as far as to say that "there is nothing 'human' in Leigh's Paul." Suit, *James Friedrich and Cathedral Films*, 105.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion: Resurrecting Christian Cinema

At the beginning of this study, I made an assertion that recent years have been witness to a trend in Christian independent film moving away from any interest in the mainstream market, manifesting in alternative avenues of exhibition such as the streaming service PureFlix. It would take more space than an honors thesis allows to provide an exhaustive diagnosis of this problem (or a comprehensive solution, for that matter) so I have not made that the goal here. Rather, in observing a subsection of James Friedrich's career, I have attempted to draw attention to the filmmaking approach of one of the fathers of the sound-era independent Christian film and highlight in that approach a dual and unabashed love for both God and the cinema; a love that does not view the latter merely as a mass-producing vessel for the former but, rather, as a rich medium for exploring creative adaptations of sacred source material.

Though the cinematic age in which Friedrich's films were produced has long since passed, the question of the Christian filmmaker's "best practices" in the broader world of film is still entirely relevant. As things stand, there appear to be three broad avenues for the Christian filmmaker to traverse in his professional life. The first is a continuation of the current trend, a kind of Christian isolationism from the larger industry. A second, opposite option is a full entering into the world of the mainstream media industry, taking on its patterns of story, aesthetics, and production practices. The third option, of which Friedrich's work is a prototype, suggests that distance between the

Christian film and the mainstream film can be bridged without sacrificing things that the each of the first two options would necessitate.

For instance, though isolationism optimizes the level to which a film may be considered purely Christian (at least by the standards of those producing it), it also narrows that film's probable audience to those who most likely already believe what they would be meant to learn from it. Admittedly, this does not entirely devalue the film, as education is hardly the primary goal of filmmaking. However, even though the majority of American citizens identify as Christian, the current Christian cinema seems to be an afterthought in the larger array of content. This suggests that the problem of audience even exists within the faith community, so perhaps the isolationist approach is detrimental to the believer's relationship with Christian film as well. Compounding the difficulty of the isolationist approach is a typical lack of production value on strictly Christian sets. Though it would be unfair and unfounded to claim that Christian filmmakers cannot produce works as profoundly artistic as those of non-Christian filmmakers, the act of refusing to work with nonbelieving masters of the craft is clearly inhibiting. In addition, the approach to Christian filmmaking that treats content as paramount likely allows undesirable lapses in technical and aesthetic proficiency.

In committing to the second approach, entering the larger film industry on its own terms and/or working on projects with what could be considered Christian themes rather than explicitly Christian content, there is a similar risk of alienating audience members. This time, however, it the Christian audience. As has always been the case in the United States, questionable film content continues to be a target of contempt from churches and church members, so Christian filmmakers who push the envelope for the sake of

artistically presenting harder truths typically end up being criticized by their own faith community (not unlike Paul's experience). That is not to say that all Christian films ought to present themselves as such, in content, aesthetics, or messaging. On the contrary, broader themes associated with Christianity such as forgiveness, faith, and sacrificial love are consistently explored in mainstream films. Therefore, the second approach does not close off its practitioners from telling Christian stories per se. However, just as the first approach speaks the language of Christianity at the possible expense of non-Christian viewers, the second prioritizes the language of cinema at the possible expense of reaching more conservative Christian viewers.

Therefore, Friedrich's third approach can be viewed as the golden mean between the first two. Though his content is clearly in the Christian tradition, his addition concern for technical craft demonstrates a belief in the power of cinema to act as a revelatory medium. He does this in a way that, at least in intent, does not shy away from its identity as Christian nor its possibilities as a film. To be sure, there have been successors to his work in recent years, most notably *The Bible* miniseries (2013) and the currently airing *The Chosen* series (2017–)[1], but most contemporary Christian productions forego adaptation, preferring to produce films in the dramatic life genre. It is clear from the success of the *Life of St. Paul* series and the subsequent success of the two series mentioned above that Friedrich's original method of merging Christian mission and mainstream production elements is relevant in today's market. There is an audience for it.

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[1] *The Bible*, later compiled into a feature film called *Son of God* (2014) for theatrical release, received three Emmy Award nominations: Outstanding Sound Editing For A Miniseries, Movie Or A Special; Outstanding Miniseries or Movie; and Outstanding Sound Mixing For A Miniseries Or A Movie. *The Chosen*, currently between airing its 2nd and 3rd seasons, has also received acclaim from critics and audiences, boasting a 9.6/10 on IMDb and a 100% on Rotten Tomatoes at the time of this writing.

More importantly, it may hold the key to reinvigorating outside perceptions of Christian film and asserting its capacity to make meaning in an effective, artistic way that transcends mere biblical representation.

Consider Paul's words in Romans 14:14–18:

> I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of: For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men.

The specific context of this passage involves disagreements among Roman Christians regarding dietary restrictions, the same disagreement that is dramatized in Episode 8 of Friedrich's series. Though this context is bound by its original time, Paul's argument is still applicable in the conversation of proper Christian filmmaking. He speaks here of a distinction between elements of the Christian life that are essential (righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost) and those that are a matter of worldly, bodily devotion (meat and drink). Though he places the one over the other, he warns the Romans against acting dismissively toward their brothers and sisters' beliefs concerning clean and unclean worldly things. In other words, he encourages a Christian faith that meets its counterparts on their own terms and avoids acting as a stumbling block to the faith of others. This is the Christian faith that Friedrich embodies in his work. Operating within a medium and an industry that is considered by many to be unclean, he realized the obligation he had toward his brothers and sisters in faith, namely a duty to maintain a level of cleanliness and narrative purity. However, realizing that "there is nothing unclean of itself," including the medium of film, he sought to redirect that medium toward serving Christ,

upholding its integrity as a force for good. It is in this considerate redirection that the worlds of Christian and mainstream film engage with one another, and it is through this engagement that the Christian filmmaker may find success.

APPENDIX

Life of St. Paul Episodes

The following information is taken from Appendix A of Kenneth Suit's biographical work on Friedrich.

EPISODE 1 – "Stephen, the First Christian Martyr" (1949)*

Director: John T. Coyle
Writers: Rev. James K. Friedrich and John T. Coyle
Approximate Run Time: 24 minutes

EPISODE 2 – "The Conversion" (1949)

Director: John T. Coyle
Writer: Adele Seymore
Approximate Run Time: 32 minutes

EPISODE 3 – "The Years of Apprenticeship" (1949)

Director: John T. Coyle
Writer: Adele Seymore
Approximate Run Time: 29 minutes

EPISODE 4 – "Return to Jerusalem" (1949)

Director: John T. Coyle
Writer: Adele Seymore
Approximate Run Time: 31 minutes

EPISODE 5 – "Ambassador for Christ" (1949)

Director: John T. Coyle
Writer: Adele Seymore
Approximate Run Time: 30 minutes

* An earlier version of this episode was produced as a standalone short film and only later became the first episode in this series.

EPISODE 6 – “First Missionary Journey” (1949)

Director: John T. Coyle
Writer: Adele Seymore
Approximate Run Time: 31 minutes

EPISODE 7 – “Stoning at Lystra” (1949)

Director: John T. Coyle
Writer: Adele Seymore
Approximate Run Time: 27 minutes

EPISODE 8 – “Second Missionary Journey” (1950)

Director: John T. Coyle
Writer: Arthur Horman
Approximate Run Time: 29 minutes

EPISODE 9 – “Visit to Corinth” (1950)

Director: John T. Coyle
Writer: Arthur Horman
Approximate Run Time: 29 minutes

EPISODE 10 – “Third Missionary Journey” (1950)

Director: John T. Coyle
Writer: Arthur Horman
Approximate Run Time: 29 minutes

EPISODE 11 – “Trial at Jerusalem” (1951)

Director: John T. Coyle
Writer: Arthur Horman
Approximate Run Time: 32 minutes

EPISODE 12 – “Voyage to Rome” (1951)

Director: John T. Coyle
Writer: Arthur Horman
Approximate Run Time: 26 minutes

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