

Ruminations on “Lord, Save Us from Your Followers”

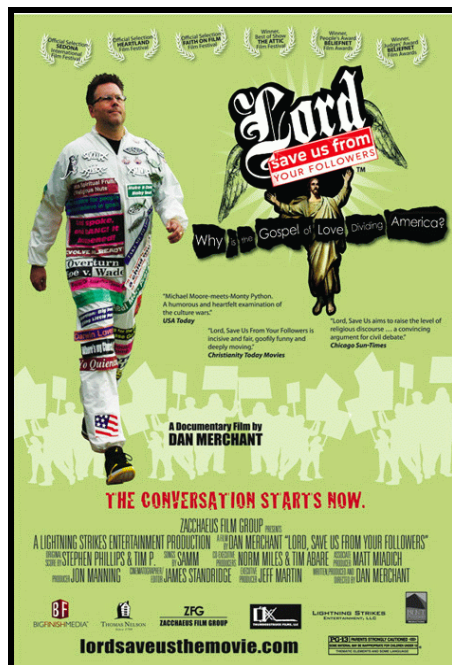
Lord, Save Us From Your Followers ...and Your Film-Makers, Too

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Lord, Save Us From Your Followers is a new documentary movie by a Christian film-maker, Dan Merchant, that is causing a ripple of interest throughout both Christian and non-Christian circles. Merchant is affable, engaging, and appears to be well-meaning, and his film makes some valid points regarding Christian hypocrisy, superficiality and judgmentalism (including, of course, the obligatory footage of the notorious “God Hates Fags” public protests led by Pastor Fred Phelps of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas). Perhaps (but hopefully not) you’ve seen Merchant interviewed on NBC’s *Today Show*, in which Matt Lauer declared that the core message of the Gospel is “tolerance”(!), and considering the generous treatment Merchant accords John Stewart and Bill Maher in his film, I wouldn’t be surprised if he showed up as a guest on their shows, too.

Merchant is concerned with the increasing polarization of American society, and especially by the role that many Christians and Christian leaders play in this division. His priority is to focus on loving sinners rather than hating their sin, which should be an incontrovertible principle that all Christians seek to apply. In the course of the film he mixes in cameo interviews with a cross-section of well-known public figures such as Rick Santorum, Al Franken, Tony Campolo, *Shack* author Paul Young, and U-2’s Bono along with sound bites from others including James Dobson, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Rick Warren, Bill O’Reilly, Jimmy Carter, Jim Wallis, and someone named Barack Obama.



Throughout much of the film Merchant strolls around Times Square and other high-volume public places dressed in a white jumpsuit plastered with bumper stickers, pins and religious symbols (including all variations on the ubiquitous ICTHUS fish and its atheist counterpart, the DARWIN fish) featuring all those embarrassingly trite slogans that make many of us cringe. In the process he interviews a wide range of people regarding their views on Christianity and Christians, and unsurprisingly, he gets a variety of responses from the thoughtful to the inane, and from respectful affirmation to contemptuous dismissal. In the course of his travels he eventually encounters everything from cowboys and used car salesmen to a San

Francisco transvestite mock-nun named Sister Mary Timothy who gets a lot of air-time to vent his/her frustrations about Christians.

As an avid reader of *The Wittenburg Door* in the 1970s and '80s, I have a keen appreciation for the use of wit and satire to expose Christian silliness, shallowness and hypocrisy. Such an approach certainly has its place, and it can be an effective methodology in terms of provoking Christians to reevaluate their assumptions. Indeed, I believe Christians should be the most introspective and self-critical of all people, both personally and corporately, because if we don't deal honestly and openly with our faults, rest assured that others will see them and expose us for what we truly are. But using wit and satire to deal with complex issues has its limitations, and it is much better suited for exposing problems than offering realistic and thoughtful solutions.

Merchant spends an inordinate amount of time focusing on the homosexual controversy, but perhaps this is justifiable considering the fact that so many Christians seem so fixated on this particular issue. As the pro-gay marriage lobby often reminds us, the greatest threat to traditional marriage is heterosexual infidelity and divorce, but of course that's no substitute for challenging the disingenuous redefinition of marriage that cultural liberals are trying to impose on our society.

The strength of Merchant's film is in the last 25 minutes in which he shows some of the good work that Christians do in terms of serving in homeless shelters in America and fighting poverty and the spread of AIDs in Africa. Unfortunately, one is left with the impression that that's pretty much the extent of legitimate Christian witness, and that any attempts to share one's faith verbally with non-believers is intrinsically preachy, obtrusive and judgmental.

Lord, Save Us From Your Followers is based on a book that is sub-titled, *Why Is the Gospel of Love Dividing American Society?* In the course of watching the film I heard the word "love" (a word I truly love, by the way) used dozens of times, but the context always seemed to imply indiscriminate affirmation and acceptance. A subliminal message of the movie is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ should unite rather than divide people, and there is never any indication that love can sometimes be blunt, uncompromising or even confrontational. Furthermore, I don't recall ever hearing the word

"truth" in the film. Certainly, there was no hint of our moral accountability before God, nor the fact that God has set forth certain moral principles (out of love, by the way) for our own good and our own protection. When we violate these principles, we do so at our own risk. But simply put, the answer to the question, "Why is the Gospel of love dividing American society?" is because the truth of love is innately divisive – as is the love of truth. It always has been and always will be, despite our preference otherwise. Jesus himself was quite clear on this as he informed his disciples...

Do not suppose that I came to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household. [Matt. 10:34-36]

That doesn't sound much like Matt Lauer's Gospel of Tolerance, does it?

Merchant treats the current controversies surrounding the culture war in such a dismissive and cavalier fashion that one gets the impression he thinks they are little more than mere annoyances – if not the manufactured illusions of right-wing proto-fascists who are trying to impose their values on everyone else. Well-informed Christians understand that we cannot, and should not, try to force specifically Christian values and behavior on mainstream society. However, we also have a responsibility to work toward a reasonably well-ordered society and culture based on the moral principles of Natural Law that encourage both private and public decency and civility for the sake of everyone – Christian and non-Christian alike. And that is precisely what the contemporary culture war is all about. It's not about Christians trying to force their views on everyone else, but neither do we want anti-Christian secularists forcing their worldview on us and our children. It's about a decent and civil public square that is free and open to all.

All of us, including Merchant, are living off the borrowed capital of America's cultural heritage, and it is that heritage that allows the kind of freedom of expression that makes it possible to produce films such as *Lord Save Us*. I'd suggest that Merchant do more research and put considerably more thought into the issues at stake

before conceding the culture war to the cultural liberals and Secular Humanists. He may think their intentions are benign – just as he infers that the Hollywood establishment has no real socio/political agenda – but the weight of the evidence argues otherwise.

This film is unmistakably tilted toward the left. The follies and foibles of right-wing Christians (many of whom, wittingly or not, are theocrats at heart) is certainly fair game. *But don't mistake a critique of the Christian right as the solution to the problem.* That's too easy. It's also naive and simplistic. Besides, the Christian left has plenty of problems of its own, not to mention the hordes of apathetic and self-absorbed Christians who occupy the middle of the political spectrum.

Ultimately, *Lord, Save Us From Your Followers* is as unbalanced and simplistic as the distorted caricature of conservative Christianity it critiques. My concern is that if militant anti-Christian secularism continues to dominate American culture, there might come a time when people like Merchant won't be free to film and distribute anything that even remotely promotes the Christian faith and message. At that point he'll undoubtedly (but belatedly) come to realize that the culture war, rather than a figment of some Christians' paranoid imaginations, was in fact REAL.

I appreciate the spirit of generosity and humility that permeates this movie, and I hope Merchant goes on to have a long and productive career as a film-maker. Furthermore, I hope many evangelicals see it, take it to heart, and organize discussion groups around it. But the film has a lot of flaws and deficiencies, as noted above, and I wish Merchant had been as critical of cultural liberals as he is of conservative Christians.

Watching the film, I couldn't help thinking that, considering the gravity of the subject matter, Merchant had jumped into a controversy far too substantive and complex for his current level of understanding. My initial reaction as I emerged from the theater was, "Yes, Lord, save us from many of your followers – and from well-meaning Christian film-makers who knoweth not what they're talking about."