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The Modern Assumptions Underlying American Evangelical Aesthetics

Abstract

In the winter of 2000 Tim Lahaye's and Terry Jenkins's book, *Left Behind* was brought to life on the big screen by director James Cavin. The Evangelical community with great fanfare and excitement welcomed the film. The film, however, was roundly criticized as a sub par cinematic expression, as one critic wrote, "Whatever the central message, the movie's still a blundering cringefest, thanks to unintentionally laughable dialogue, hackneyed writing and uninspired direction. The more this movie tries, the worse it gets." In contrast, *The End of The Spear*, is a cinematic retelling of the historical events surround the life and death of five missionaries killed in the rain forest of Ecuador. This film, produced with a greater degree of professionalism than *Left Behind* was greeted by Evangelicals with concerns over the absences of a clear presentation of the gospel and the casting of a gay actor in the lead role. The respective reactions to the films hint at a flaw and inadequate aesthetic foundation in modern Evangelical theology.

This paper examines how American Evangelicals have appropriated modernist assumptions that have hindered the formulation of a coherent aesthetic theory. There are three assumptions to be examined in the course of this paper. First, American Evangelicals have disengaged (to use Colin Gunton's term) from the rest of society. This has fostered a closed mind not only to beauty outside of the Christian community but also to the world of nature. Second, Evangelicals have placed a premium on art that obtains the goal of evangelism at the expense of the integrity of the medium. Thus, progress rather than relationship is of primary importance. Finally, Evangelicals have appropriated a reductionist and formulaic approaches to creating art.