

THE APOSTLE: A BELATED MOVIE REVIEW

by Prof. John M. Frame

This film, featuring Robert Duvall as writer and star, deals with a Southern pastor-evangelist. It captures much of the authentic flavor of “holiness” Christianity in the heart of the Bible Belt.

The film touches a lot of “hot buttons” for Reformed Christian viewers. Clearly Duvall’s preacher is not a Calvinist. And we are rightly appalled at the film’s light view of sin, continuing revelation, self-ordained church leaders, churches without church discipline, superficial preaching, and so on. Some may even object to the bouncy gospel music, but I thought that was wonderful.

But I think we should be grateful for small blessings. Hollywood rarely treats Protestant Christianity with any respect at all. Bible-belt preachers in films are almost inevitably charlatans and hypocrites. Only occasionally will there be a positive picture of Christian faith, so occasionally that one can almost count the recent films of this kind on one hand: *Tender Mercies* (also starring Duvall), *Chariots of Fire*, *The Trip to Bountiful*, *Shadowlands* (sort of).

Sonny, the preacher played by Robert Duvall is, for all his other sins, not a charlatan. He really believes in God. Toward the beginning, he stops at a car accident and walks out in the field to find the injured (maybe dying) driver. He rouses the driver slightly and tells him of Jesus. This early moment establishes Sonny’s main motivation. His witness to the dying man brings him no earthly profit, fame, or pleasure. He really believes that the man needs Jesus.

Nevertheless, Sonny is a sinful man. He is an adulterer, and early in the film he discovers that his wife is also adulterous, cheating on him with the youth pastor. Then he discovers that she and the youth minister have pulled some legal strings to take over the church and force him, Sonny, out. (I can’t imagine any church polity that would allow this, but the film justifies our suspension of disbelief.) He confronts her, and then confronts God. He admits he is angry with God, but also that he loves Him. He begs for guidance. His first instinct is to go to the church service, now being run by the adulterous couple, join in the worship, embrace them, and go on his way, returning good for evil. But later on, when he visits his son’s Little League game, the youth minister gets into Sonny’s space, and Sonny

first abuses him verbally, and then hits him with a baseball bat. Eventually the youth minister dies of the injury.

Rather than face the music, Sonny takes off. As he travels, he talks to God, and he becomes convinced that God wants him to baptize himself (literally) as an “apostle.” His new identity: “The Apostle E. F.” The film tantalizes us about the meaning of these initials, but if the meaning was ever given I missed it.

In a typical Hollywood film, the plot would at this point focus on police investigation, concluding in a car chase. But in this film, the focus turns to church planting! Sonny makes contact in a Louisiana town with a retired black minister, and together they fix up an old church building and gather a congregation. The methods and dynamics of it are fascinating and feel entirely authentic. Sonny preaches over the radio, gathers shopping bags full of food and deposits them as a “surprise” at the homes of poor families. He fixes up a bus and drives it around to pick up people on Sunday morning.

One character, played by Billy Bob Thornton, is described in the cast listing only as “troublemaker.” He appears at the service and makes racist comments and threats. Sonny takes him out back and punches him out. But when Troublemaker returns, to bulldoze the church building during a congregational picnic, Sonny puts his Bible in front of the bulldozer and challenges Troublemaker to drive over it. Well, this is the Bible belt, after all. Troublemaker can hate blacks, but he can’t drive over the Bible. Eventually, Sonny and Troublemaker are on their knees, praying for him to receive Christ as his savior. I’ve never seen a serious conversion to Christianity in a commercial Hollywood film. And the scene is played straight, without mockery, making it quite remarkable.

The end of the film is almost a complete church service, with another significant conversion. A friend of Sonny has found out about his legal problems. He overhears Sonny saying that the law might take him in; but he wants his valuables sold for the benefit of the church. One has the impression that the conversion is partly based, humanly speaking, on the friend’s perception of Sonny’s selfless integrity.

So Sonny is a remarkable figure indeed. He is deeply flawed, but in one sense he is always God’s man and, yes, selfless. We ask, of course, how could God use someone like this? But then we recall that King David was also an adulterer and, in effect, a murderer; and Saul of Tarsus was responsible for the deaths of Christians. Luther was an anti-Semite; Calvin condoned the killing of Servetus. In real life, there is the worst in the best of us; that is the Bible’s realistic teaching about man’s condition.

But I found more in the film than Sonny. It really does seem as though the chief character here is God. God works, through the foolishness and sin of man, to build his church. The three conversions in the film (the dying driver, the

Troublemaker, Sonny's friend) seemed entirely credible to me, granted the context of Bible-belt culture. And the film clearly sees the building of the church as a great benefit to the community.

Considering Hollywood's track record with Christianity, it is astounding to find a film like this that is so positive about the gospel. The films I mentioned earlier (listed on one hand) present in a positive way the benefits of Christian faith to individuals. This film actually states the gospel clearly and puts it in the context of a real church community. Old movies about churches (like the 1940s Bing Crosby films, "Going My Way" and "The Bells of St. Mary's") tended to present church life at its best as a kind of secular fun-time for everybody, despite bad guys trying to get them to tear down the building. But "The Apostle" presents the church as it should be — as a community of believers centered on the gospel of Jesus. Certainly, then, "The Apostle" marks a long step forward in Hollywood's understanding of Christianity.