

Is There an R-rated Movie Commandment?

by Orson Scott Card

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It saddens me, but does not surprise me, that most of responses I've received from LDS readers about my review of Mel Gibson's film [*The Passion of the Christ*](#) were devoted to chastising me for "defying the prophets" by counseling people to see an R-rated movie while "scoffing at those who are obedient."

I never scoff at those who are obedient to the prophets.

But yes, I do have a low opinion of those who take a piece of wise counsel completely out of context, turn it into a general rule that was never intended, and then use it to persecute others for being less righteous than they are.

This past Sunday, for instance, which was a testimony meeting in some wards, one sister (who later wrote to me) stood up and bore her testimony about how seeing *The Passion* had brought new awareness to her of the meaning of the sacrament.

At the end of the meeting, the bishop's counselor, in an obvious rebuke, told the members, "I would just like to say that our church does not condone going to see R-rated movies based on their violence, graphic and sexual content."

Then, at the end of a joint priesthood/Relief Society meeting that same day, a member of the stake presidency "challenged" members not to go to see *The Passion of the Christ*.

So here we had two local leaders of the Church, specifically charging their members not to go see the very movie that the world was condemning because it was *too Christian* -- and all because they apparently believed there is a Church commandment forbidding members ever, under any circumstances, to go to an R-rated movie.

But what is the *truth*? (You remember, the thing that will set you free, if you take the trouble to find out what it is.)

Only one President of the Church has made an official statement that mentioned R-rated movies. On three occasions, President Ezra Taft Benson, when speaking specifically to the youth of the Church, mentioned films so rated.

Here is an actual quotation, in its context. I know it will be a lot of trouble for some people to read what the prophet actually said instead of merely repeating a rumor of it as a means of condemning other Saints -- but now and then it's worth it, don't you think?

Remember, President Benson is speaking to the young men of the Church when he says:

"Consider carefully the words of the prophet Alma to his errant son, Corianton, 'Forsake your sins, and go no more after the lusts of your eyes.' (Alma 39:9.)

"'The lusts of your eyes.' In our day, what does that expression mean?

"Movies, television programs, and video recordings that are both suggestive and lewd.

"Magazines and books that are obscene and pornographic.

"We counsel you, young men, not to pollute your minds with such degrading matter, for the mind through which this filth passes is never the same afterwards. Don't see R-rated movies or vulgar videos or participate in any

entertainment that is immoral, suggestive, or pornographic. Don't listen to music that is degrading" (Ensign, May 1986, p 43).

The mention of R-rated movies is clearly linked to a specific goal -- keeping one's mind free of entertainment that is "immoral, suggestive, or pornographic." The purpose of the Prophet's wise counsel is to keep us from entertainment that will excite sexual lust in an inappropriate context.

That is absolutely true counsel. I can affirm it from my own regretted experience. The summer before my mission, I was working in a theatre company, and at a party one night, somebody brought out a Swedish porn film (this was before videos -- yes, I'm that old) that some clown had brought home from his mission. Nobody dared to admit they were too righteous to watch it. But it was unpleasant, ugly, disgusting. I vowed never to see another, or anything like it.

Despite my immediate regret and repentance, guess what came to my mind a few months later, as I went through the temple for the first time? It took a lot of prayer to get that out of my head.

When President Benson says, "the mind through which this filth passes is never the same afterwards," he's absolutely right. I knew I shouldn't watch it before I did; what I didn't know was that it would never go away. I hope the prophet's words can keep others from making similar mistakes.

But what does any of this have to do with a beautiful, faith-based film like *The Passion of the Christ*? How does President Benson's counsel even remotely apply to this work of Christian art? There is nothing in this film that appeals to the "lusts of your eyes"; there is nothing "lewd" or "obscene" or "immoral, suggestive, or pornographic."

Quite the contrary. This film inspires you to feel gratitude to the Savior and love for those that he loved and who loved him. It inspires you with a dread of and revulsion for Satan and all his ways. It leaves you with a broken heart and a contrite spirit.

In my review, I specifically said that this film was not for children. The R-rating is exactly appropriate -- unless parents are sure their children are mature enough to deal with powerful scenes of the unspeakable things done to the Savior's body, and accompany them to see it, those children should not be permitted inside the theater.

But perhaps you think the words of other General Authorities justify publicly rebuking other Saints for seeing this film, or "challenging" members of a stake to specifically avoid a movie about the suffering of Christ.

Here are the words of Elder Joe J. Christensen: "It is a concern that some of our young Latter-day Saints, as well as their parents, regularly watch R-rated and other inappropriate movies and videos. One more reason why the 'devil laugheth, and his angels rejoice' (3 Ne. 9:2)" (Gen. Conf. Oct. 1996).

Well, of course it's a concern when members regularly see inappropriate movies. I agree that seeing R-rated movies should be extremely rare. Perhaps one should obey Elder Christensen's counsel by seeing such films only when they faithfully depict the sacrifice of the Savior.

What about the counsel of Elder H. Burke Peterson: "Again I say, leave it alone. Turn it off, walk away from it, burn it, erase it, destroy it. I know it is hard counsel we give when we say movies that are R-rated, and many with PG-13 ratings, are produced by satanic influences. Our standards should not be dictated by the rating system. I repeat, because of what they really represent, these types of movies, music, tapes, etc. serve the purposes of the author of all darkness" (Gen. Conf. Oct. 1993).

I affirm to you here and now that *The Passion of the Christ* is definitely *not* produced by satanic influences. In fact, the very people who *do* create films with satanic influences were arrayed against this film, to try to suppress it or keep it from being released. This is a film that is specifically meant to bless the lives of Christians -- and others -- with a living awareness of the sacrifice of Christ and his unfathomable love for us. Does anyone really think this was the kind of film Elder Peterson was warning us against?

You who take quotes out of context: When Elder Peterson says "our standards should not be dictated by the rating system," why not take *that* as the principle to guide us?

If you and your family decide never to see R-rated or PG-13 movies, without exception, then by all means, I won't condemn you for doing so. But it is outrageous when you condemn others for reaching a different decision about a particular movie.

We have laws and rules in our church that are adamant: No coffee. No tea. No alcohol, tobacco, or dangerous drugs. That's a commandment.

No dating -- not even group dating -- before age sixteen. That's a rule, and I salute parents who insist, as we did, on following it even when other parents decide their child is "mature" enough to be the exception. (If your kid is so mature, I always wonder, then why isn't he or she mature enough to *want* to follow clear, longstanding Church rules?)

But there are other rules that the Church leadership specifically resists interpreting for us. Keeping the sabbath day holy, for instance -- we are expected to decide in our own family precisely how we go about obeying that commandment, and people draw the line in different places. For instance, nobody that I know of has ever been disciplined by Church leaders because their employment requires Sunday work -- or how could any Saints work at the Church's own tv and radio stations?

Tithing is another law about which we are taught the correct principle, and then govern ourselves. President Hinckley in particular has tried to get us to make wise decisions about such things on our own, refusing to get roped into giving us specific regulations that allow us to turn off our own consciences.

Yet there are always Latter-day Saints who want to live in a pharisaical church.

The Pharisees had a pious goal: Because they wanted to avoid disobeying the law even by accident, they decided to "build a fence around the law," surrounding the deep principles of Torah with a lot of small, specific regulations, so that by obeying those little rules, the Lord's people could be sure they wouldn't accidentally stray from the great law.

The problem is that such a "fence around the law" can give us a false sense of safety. It's so easy to obey such laws and yet join the category of "fools" and "hypocrites" that Jesus repeatedly rebuked. You condemn your brother for the mote in his eye, Jesus said, but don't see the beam in your own. The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath.

Paul called them whited sepulchers, those hyper-obedient souls who went to extraordinary lengths to defend the law -- and broke it repeatedly with their pride and their persecution of others.

Surely we can recognize that Jesus was not being lax or careless with the law when he resisted the Pharisees.

On the contrary. Jesus was teaching us that you *can't* build a fence around the law, and then feel safe. Instead you have to take the law into your heart and embrace it so that you understand and obey its *purpose*.

Isn't that what Jesus was talking about when he warned us that merely avoiding adultery wasn't enough, that merely refraining from killing people wasn't enough. If in your heart you're a lawbreaker, then how can you be considered clean in the eyes of God?

Maybe I'm completely wrong. Maybe the Savior really means to have local leaders of the Church rebuke someone for bearing a testimony of what they learned about the Savior from watching a beautiful film created by faithful artists who love him. Maybe the prophet and General Authorities who urged us to avoid lewd and obscene and suggestive films meant for us to use this as a reason for not seeing a powerful, moving film that was rated R in order to warn parents that it might be too powerful for their children.

But I don't think I'm wrong. I'm reasonably confident that the goal of the prophet and General Authorities who urged us (particularly the youth) to avoid R-rated films was to keep us from seeing sexually provocative films that would seduce us into following the "lust of our eyes."

I don't think they intended for us to so blindly obey that we couldn't tell the difference when a movie was given an R because it absolutely, strictly, literally followed a very painful portion of the scriptures.

There's another exceptional movie coming out soon. It's called *Saints and Soldiers*, and may well be the best war movie ever made -- and there have been some very fine movies that attempted to explore the moral and human dimensions of war.

This film has been given a preliminary R-rating. I find this almost laughable, because I've seen more violence in movies like the Jim Carrey *Grinch*. And there is absolutely nothing lewd, suggestive, obscene, or immoral in this film.

The movie was made by talented Mormons who were determined to examine important moral issues at a time when our own country is at war and these issues are not just academic. It is ironic that because the MPAA, in its madness, has slapped an R on this film, many Mormons will self-righteously condemn this movie.

Maybe what we need is for all of us Latter-day Saints to take the words of our leaders in their proper context, and with a full sense of our personal responsibility for making moral judgments instead of blindly following rules even in situations that clearly were not intended.

For instance, President Benson's remarks quoted above were part of a sermon urging young Mormons to read the Book of Mormon and take its lessons to heart. Alma 31 might make interesting reading for those who condemn others for having a different view of what the gospel requires them to do. Sometimes those who are most sure they are right -- so sure that they would rebuke a fellow saint in testimony meeting -- are the ones who have actually got it wrong.

But I'm not optimistic. Even as I get pilloried by the PC Left for publicly defending marriage in an essay a couple of weeks ago, I get mail just as hate-filled and virulent from Mormons, because I dared to suggest that the advice about R-rated movies should not be construed as applying to Mel Gibson's Christ-loving film.

And I confidently predict that this essay will provoke even more angry letters assuring me, in a spirit of brotherhood, that I'm obviously a servant of Satan.

Meanwhile, as American Christians embrace this great movie about the Savior, a significant percentage of Mormons are boycotting it -- because they have turned their consciences over to Hollywood.

<http://www.nauvoo.com/library/card-r-rated-movie.html>

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