QUESTIONS TO ASK OF FILMS:
A WORKSHEET

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In my discussions of film and culture, I have identified the general thrust of modern secular liberalism and its antithesis with Christianity. My reviews of movies deal with those themes in general. I wish to give some insight into the kind of questions I ask (and don’t ask) of movies and media.

There are certain questions that are always in my mind when I go to films. I do not go through this whole list in each review or in each viewing, but I do ask the ones I think are most important to the particular film.

This worksheet can be used for your personal use, but it can also form the basis for a film club, a general Christian movie night, or a youth/young adult learning activity.

1. Who wrote the film? Who produced it? Who directed it? Do we know through the writings and previous work of these people anything about their philosophy of life? The previous works of actors are also important. Actors contribute much to the quality of a film, little to its fundamental conception. But actors do tend to sign on to projects with which they have some ideological affinity (assuming financial rewards are not otherwise determinative). Mel Gibson almost never takes on films with a heavy sexual element; Mickey Rourke almost always does. The presence of certain actors, granting that they sometimes go "against type," can tell you something about the message of a film.

2. Is it well-made, aesthetically? Are the production and acting values of high quality? These factors may have little to do with the "message." But they do tend to determine the extent of the film's cultural impact, and that is important for our purposes. If a film is well-made, it can have a large impact upon the culture for good or ill. (Of course some bad films also have a major impact!)

3. Is it honest, true to its own position? This is another mark of "quality." Generally speaking, an honest film, regardless of its point of view, will have a larger cultural impact than one that blunts its points.

4. What kind of film is it? Fantasy? Biography? Realistic drama? Comedy? Obviously each film must be judged according to its purpose and genre. We don't demand of a fantasy the kind of historical accuracy we demand of a supposedly literal biography.
5. What is the worldview of the film? Is it theistic or atheistic? Christian or non-Christian? If non-Christian, is its main thrust relativistic or dogmatic? How does it employ the theme of “equality?” Is there any role for providence, for God? Is the film pessimistic or optimistic? Does the action move in deterministic fashion, or is there a significant role for human choice?

6. What is the plot? What problems do the characters face? Can these problems be correlated in some way with the Fall of mankind in Adam? Does the film in effect deny the Fall, or does it affirm it in some way?

7. Are the problems soluble? If so, how? What methods are available to the characters so that they can find the answers they need?

8. What is the moral stance of the film? Is the film relativistic, dogmatic, or both in some combination? What are its attitudes toward sex, family, human life, property, truth, heart-attitudes? What is the source of moral norms, if any? Does justice prevail?

9. In comedy, what is it that is funny? What are the typical incongruities? Who is the butt of the jokes? (Christians? traditional values? the wicked? the righteous? God? Satan?) Is the humor anarchic? Is it rationality gone awry? Is it bitter or gentle? Does it rely on caricatures? If so, of whom?

10. Are there allusions to historical events, literary works, other films, famous people, Scripture, etc. that would give us some idea where the filmmakers are coming from? We should remember, of course, that allusions may be negative, positive, ironic, or merely decorative. A biblical allusion does not necessarily indicate acceptance of biblical values.

11. What are the chief images of the film? Is there anything interesting about the lighting, the camera angles, the sound, the timing that would reinforce a particular theme? Are there significant symbols?

12. Are there any explicit religious themes? Christ-figures? Does the film express significant attitudes toward Christ, the clergy, or the church? Does it distort Christianity or present it at its worst? Or does it present it with some insight and/or sympathy? Does it recognize the element of personal piety in people's lives? There are exceptions. If so, does it approve or disapprove of it? What about Satan, the demons, the occult? Does the film recognize their activity in some way? Is the devil taken seriously? If so, how is he dealt with?

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1. Steven Spielberg's “E. T.” is, I think, a genuine Christ figure: recall the themes of pre-existence, growth, teaching, miracle, healing, death, resurrection, and ascension. Spielberg denied this parallel, but in my view it is objectively there, even if Spielberg was unconscious of it. The reason is that the human mind has a need for a gospel like that of the New Testament. Those who don't accept that gospel often instinctively give to their idolatrous inventions powers parallel to those of Christ.

2. The character of Frank Burns in the original M*A*S*H was a pious fellow who kneeled to pray at his bedside, to the scorn of his fellow soldiers. Eventually, it turned out that he was an adulterer and hypocrite. That is fairly typical of the way Hollywood portrays Christian piety.