

Celluloid Gospel

The Untold Story of
20th Century Christian Films

A two-hour documentary currently in production

Forgotten History of the Bible on Film

This is the story of a forgotten branch of film history that reflects how the Bible was communicated during the twentieth century by means of film and television. In *Celluloid Gospel*, audiences will be taken beyond the secular Hollywood studios and their biblical epics to discover a rich history of pioneer religious filmmakers and the independent Christian studios that thrived during the golden age of film and television.

Literally thousands of inspired and engaging religious films were produced during the 20th century but have remained mostly out of circulation and inaccessible to the public. This is because most exist only in 16mm and 35mm film formats held by private collectors and a handful of private film archives. These films have not been digitally transferred and restored for broadcast, streaming and home video access.

Scope of Project

Our story focuses on ten pioneer filmmakers and the film industry that emerged from their creativity and business acumen. Visionaries like James K. Friedrich, founder of Cathedral Films; and Sam Hersh, founder of Family Films. These two men were among the earliest to set up shop in Hollywood, determined to make faith-based films comparable to secular studio productions. Friedrich and Hersh each reached out to the filmmaking community to build an ensemble of seasoned talent and to produce hundreds of Christian films. Many of their productions were created early in the careers of some of Hollywood's most accomplished producers, directors, writers, actors and technicians.

Other pioneer entrepreneurs to be prominently featured in our story include Ken Anderson, founder of Gospel Films, Billy Zeoli, who liked to be known as the "Godfather of Christian film," producer Dick Ross and Billy Graham's Worldwide Pictures; Dwight Moody, Moody Films founder; Rolf Forsberg, who inspired fresh ways of communicating the Gospel on film; and Ken Curtis, founder of Gateway Films/Vision Video.

To tell our story, we have assembled a distinguished roster of on-camera storytellers, including six progeny of studio founders, as well as writers, producers, directors and studio staff – all eyewitnesses to this remarkable and long neglected history. Included will be rare behind-the-scenes footage and exclusive on-screen commentary by authors and film historians. For the past six years, the producers have been gathering and restoring the finest of these inspired films from private archives and collectors worldwide and are working closely with Christian media experts to document this little-known history.

Production Notes

Celluloid Gospel: the Untold Story of 20th Century Christian Films will be a two-hour documentary. Distribution plans include film festivals, theatrical venues, broadcast markets, streaming platforms, Blu-ray and DVD. Project milestones to date include:

- Pre-production is mostly completed. Funding sources are being explored.
- Christian History Institute is fiscal sponsor for GFA, provides non-profit status.
- 14 on-camera storytellers are waiting in the wings to tell their stories on camera.
- Scripting is well underway while awaiting the filming of the storytellers.
- Post-production and release are planned for completion by the end of 2026.
- Distribution will be by Gateway Films/Vision Video.

Fundraising efforts were put on hold in April 2020 due to Covid. Scripting, additional research and funding efforts are once again underway.

Production Team

Celluloid Gospel is being produced by accomplished film industry veterans Bob Campbell, Jim Friedrich and Bob Cording (tentatively). Project consultants are Bill Curtis and Paul Marks.

Confirmed On Camera Storytellers

- **Jim Friedrich** – son of Rev. James K. Friedrich; Cathedral Films founder, pioneer filmmaker.
- **Paul Hersh** – grandson of Sam Hersh, Family Films founder and son of successor Stan Hersh.
- **Steve Zeoli** – son of Billy Zeoli, pioneer filmmaker and head of Gospel Films from 1962-1998.
- **Jill Anderson** – wife of Ken Anderson's deceased son Lane. Jill worked with both filmmakers.
- **Stephen Erkel** - Family Films staff writer, producer, and director from 1977-83.
- **Colnlin Cline** - Family Films staff worker from 1951-57.
- **Bill Curtis** – son of Gateway Films/Vision Video founder Ken Curtis.
- **Paul Marks** – son of Harvey Marks; founder of Visual Aid Centers 16mm distribution company.
- **Bob Cording** - founder of Omega Films produce many films during the 1970s and 80s.
- **Glenn Carlson** – son of C. Ray Carlson, filmmaker and co-founder of International Films.
- **Rick Garside** – founder of Side By Side Films, independent filmmaker.
- **Terry Lindvall** – co-author, *Celluloid Sermons*; Virginia Wesleyan College, C.S. Lewis chair.
- **Andrew Quicke** – co-author, *Celluloid Sermons*; Regent School of Communications, Professor.
- **Kenny Suit** – Christian film historian and author of *James Friedrich and Cathedral Films*.
- **Ted Baehr** – Movie guide (founder); media critic, advocate for family values in film.

Independent Christian Film Studios



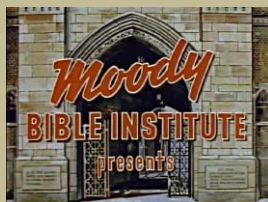
BROADMAN FILMS

In 1951, the Southern Baptist Church decided to join other religious organizations in producing 16mm films as an effective way of spreading the Gospel. Lacking experience in film production, the SBC turned to Hollywood-based Family Films to produce a series of short films to show primarily in Baptist churches. Family Films provided the writers, cast and crew; SBC established Broadman Films as the distribution brand.



CONCORDIA FILMS

When Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod sought to expand their film ministry in 1952 they turned to Family Films. Producer Sam Hersh established a separate division, Concordia Films, to create a TV series called *This is the Life*. The series proved immensely popular and continued for nearly 30 years. In 1958, Hersh sold Concordia Films and Family Films to the Lutheran Church but continued to operate as the production unit. After Hersh's death in 1969, his successors transferred the studio to Concordia Publishing.



MOODY BIBLE INSTITUTE

In 1945, Dr. Irwin Moody of The Moody Bible Institute produced the first in a series of "Sermons from Science" films called *God of Creation*. In 1953, Moody launched a series of 26 live-action and animation shorts called *Moody Bible Adventures*. The series features Mr. Fixit, a masterful storyteller who uses Bible stories to counsel troubled neighborhood kids who drop by his shop.



GOSPEL FILMS

In 1950, Ken Anderson established Gospel Films with a desire to create films that would impact young people. Anderson left 11 years later with a mission to produce audio visual resources that would reach the world for Christ. From 1961 to 1998, under the leadership of Billy Zeoli, Gospel Films continued to produce and distribute creative, thought-provoking Christian films, including the satirical *The Gospel Blimp* (1967) and Rolf Forsberg's acclaimed *Peace Child* (1972).



KEN ANDERSON FILMS

After leaving Gospel Films, Ken Anderson founded Ken Anderson Films in 1961. He continued to create conventional films for the youth and missionary markets, and in the mid-1970s took on more ambitious projects such as the film version of John Bunyan's classic Christian allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* (1977). Among other impressive KAF productions were a biopic on *Hudson Taylor* (1981) and a poignant film on the spiritual transformation of famed blind lyricist *Fanny Crosby* (1984).



WORLDWIDE PICTURES

In 1952 World Wide Pictures was formed as a subsidiary of The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. BGEA acquired Dick Ross's Great Commission Films Company and hired Ross to run the new subsidiary. The studio produced 25 feature films from 1952 to 2004, including *The Man in the 5th Dimension* for the 1964 New York World's Fair, *The Restless Ones* (1965), *The Hiding Place* (1975) and *The Prodigal* (1983).



ROLF FORSBERG FILMS

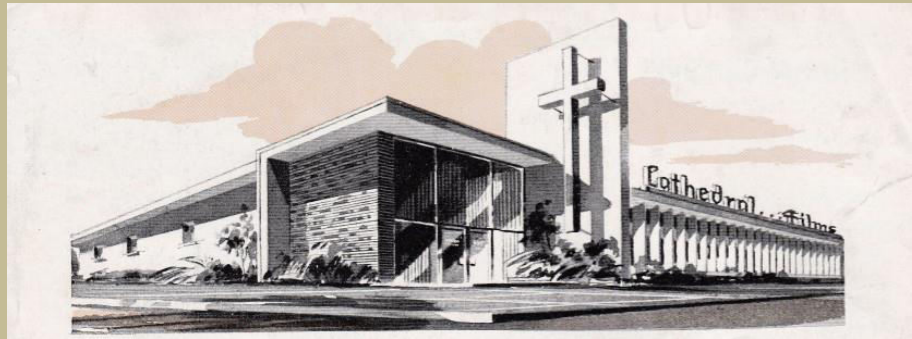
Filmmaker Rolf Forsberg created the controversial, critically acclaimed *Parable* for the 1964 New York World's Fair. The film's fresh approach to presenting the gospel triggered a trend among Christian filmmakers that inspired *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Other Forsberg works include *The Antkeeper* (1966); *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1979) and *Peace Child* (1972).



GATEWAY FILMS/VISION VIDEO

Ken Curtis started Gateway Films in 1972 to distribute the film *The Cross and the Switchblade* (1969). Among many distinguished Gateway Films productions is a BBC co-production of the C.S. Lewis drama *Shadowlands* (1986); *Jon Hus* (1979); and *First Fruits* (1981). Co-produced *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* (1992). Vision Video was established in 1981 to distribute product to home video markets.

What follows is a brief look at two prominent Christian film studios to be featured in our doc:
CATHEDRAL FILMS and FAMILY FILMS



The Cathedral Films Story



Cathedral Films was established by the Reverend James K. Friedrich, an Episcopal pastor and visionary who was obsessed with movies and advocated film as a medium of Christian ministry. In 1936, Friedrich moved his family from Minnesota to Hollywood, determined to learn the craft of making movies. Soon he began working with a handful of professional filmmakers, casts and crews and became known as the “evangelist of Hollywood.”

The first major Cathedral Films production, released in 1939, was *The Great Commandment*, which was shot on the old Selznick-International lot in Culver City, California, at the very same time as *Gone with the Wind*. The story concerns the conversion to Christianity of a young Zealot by the teachings of Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In 1941 the film received a national theatrical release from 20th Century Fox.

Another Cathedral Films production made in 1954, *Day of Triumph*, was the first life-of-Jesus’ film made since the silent movie era. Filmed in color and widescreen, it featured a top-notch cast, including Lee J. Cobb and Joanne Dru, with Robert Wilson portraying Christ.

Many of Friedrich’s films received mainstream commendation and Cathedral Films remained a leader in the production and distribution of faith-based films for the next 30 years. The company’s more than 60 short and feature-length films included *I Beheld His Glory*; *Queen Esther*, *Child of Bethlehem*; and a two 2-part mini-series, *The Life of St. Paul* and *The Living Christ*.

Rev. Friedrich died in 1966. During the 1970s, because of the rising costs of production combined with the advent of home video, the Cathedral’s board of trustees decided to transfer the company’s assets to the Episcopal Church.



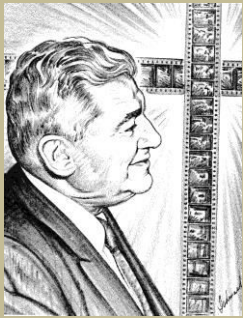
Friedrich’s son, Rev James L. Friedrich, grew up working at Cathedral Films and is an executive producer on *Celluloid Gospel*. Jim will be appearing on camera as one of our primary storytellers to speak about his father’s vision and distinguished film legacy.

Jim kept his father’s vision alive for several years following his passing, and later worked for Family Films, a former competitor of Cathedral Films.



In this photo from the 1930s, Larry Darmour Productions occupied Keywest Studios in Hollywood, which became the home of Family Films from 1955-75.

The Family Films Story



Samuel Hersh was born in 1906 in New York, the second child of Hungarian Jewish parents who had recently emigrated to the U.S. Hersh and his family moved from New York to Hollywood in 1941, where he established himself as a bookmaker, serving clients at some of the major studios. Soon he recognized a need for more films based on stories from the Bible and the Gospel of Christ and founded Family Films in 1947.

The new company's first productions included *A Boy and His Prayer* (1948) and *The Guiding Star* (1949). They were created and distributed in collaboration with The Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. The company saw its greatest success in the 1950s and 1960s, when output was at its peak.

In addition to dozens of faith-based short films featuring familiar Hollywood faces, Family Films produced several episodic series, including *The Living Bible*, a 26-part series released from 1952-55. This was followed by *Old Testament Scriptures*, a 14-part series released in 1958 and 1959.



A highly popular half-hour series, *This Is the Life*, was broadcast nationally on Sunday morning television for over 30 years. Among the more than 300 short films produced by Family Films was a series for teenagers that dealt with contemporary issues. The mini-series *Our Children* and a series of animated shorts on Bible themes were created for children.

Family Films was known for providing audiences with well written, well-acted films on biblical and contemporary themes. Sam Hersh died in 1969. His sons Melvin and Stan succeeded him as producers at Family Films until 1973 and 1978, respectively.

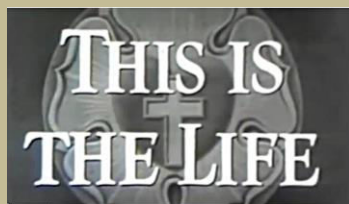


Paul Hersh, son of Stan Hersh and grandson of Sam Hersh, will be appearing on camera as one of our primary storytellers to speak about his family's vision and distinguished film legacy. Paul began his apprenticeship at Family Films with a small speaking role in an episode of *This is the Life* when he was 7 years old. He later worked on the Family Films lot in the shipping and receiving department and observed many productions on the Family Films soundstage.

Television Production

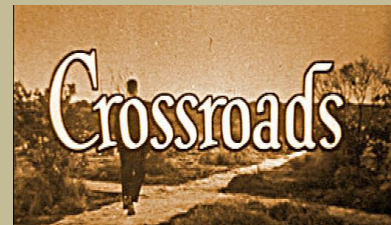
Once television came along in the early 1950s, the notion of creating Christian film content specifically for the new medium was not lost on James Friedrich and Sam Hersh. Both studios soon were developing new faith-based programming for TV and repurposing films for wide distribution that were originally produced for church audiences. Other studios and filmmakers would soon follow their lead.

For example, Cathedral Films produced the acclaimed television movie *I Beheld His Glory* for telecast during Easter week 1953 as well as for the film rental market. It is the tale of a Roman centurion who witnesses the crucifixion of Christ and is redeemed. In 1969, Family Films assembled a seasoned cast for a TV version of Henry Van Dyke's classic short story, *The Other Wise Man*.



Sam Hersh was quick to recognize the potential for episodic TV programming. While the secular networks were creating such popular shows as *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet* and *Make Room for Daddy*, Family Films was producing a weekly series about the trials and tribulations of an extended Christian family. The *This is the Life* series was first telecast in 1952, and new episodes were produced and syndicated nationwide for over 30 years.

The distinguished TV anthology series *Crossroads* (1955-57) was based on true stories from clergy of different denominations. Every episode opens with this narration: "Each Crossroads story is based on the actual experiences of American clergymen; pastor, priest or rabbi. The men who give inspiration and guidance to the people at the crossroads of life." The first season was broadcast on Friday nights on ABC-TV following *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*.



In 1945 Catholic priest Father James Keller founded a non-denominational Christian organization called The Christophers to be a positive influence and proactive force in the postwar world. He rallied Hollywood celebrities to participate and in 1952 *The Christophers* series debuted on ABC-TV with "You Can Change the World," a film featuring Father Keller along with Jack Benny, Bing Crosby, Bob Hope and other Hollywood stars. Father Keller sought to embrace not only those who accepted Judeo-Christian faith, but also those he called the "hundred million" with no ties to an organized faith.

The Stars Come Out

Many of Hollywood's biggest names appeared in faith-based films for Cathedral Films, Family Films, World Wide Pictures, Gateway Films and other prominent studios. Some were on their way up; some on their way down. And some were at the apex of their careers.



Michael Landon



James Cagney



Angie Dickinson



Jack Nicholson



Peter Graves