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Salvation in Film: The Apostle, Tender Mercies, Amistad, and Sergeant York

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“Salvation in Film:
*The Apostle, Tender Mercies, Amistad, and Sergeant York”***

written by

Daniel Nipper

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for completion of the
Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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May 5, 2000

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Daniel Nipper

Honors Thesis
Salvation in Film:

The Apostle, Tender Mercies, Amistad, and Sergeant York

May 5, 2000

There is a popular line of youth's paraphernalia in our culture known as "WWJD" or "What Would Jesus Do?" Film is also extremely popular in our culture. Those who keep up with film as a business will note that the top grossing movies can be found in the newspapers on a weekly basis much as sports standings are listed. Each year Hollywood augments itself by churning out more films than the previous year. So in a world in which our Christian youth are asking, "What Would Jesus Do?" we can ask, would Jesus have gone to the movies? Most Christians today might be quick to say "No!" to this question.

Contemporary society sees movies churned out each weekend as regularly as donuts from a bakery. Like the donuts, movies come in various forms, textures, styles, and tastes. Sadly, movies are often less satisfying than donuts. After viewing a majority of what is produced these days, audiences are left with a sour taste in their collective mouth. Hollywood deals with various onslaughts from groups who claim that film plays a prominent role in what many believe to be a moral decay in our world. Movies contain violence, sex, greed, jealousy, and foul language all in an attempt for the producers to rake in millions of dollars. Many filmmakers consider their movies to be works

of art (although this is a debatable issue with many films). Like art, movies seek to entertain, provide therapy, and/or make a statement about society. Yet there are some members of society who do not always agree with the means filmmakers use to achieve their goal.

There is perhaps no greater risk that a filmmaker can take than to deal with religion in film. Filmmakers are aware of this risk. One has to merely read current articles surrounding such films as DreamWorks SKG's recent animation flick *The Prince of Egypt* to see the measures filmmakers take to decrease risk of backlash. When dealing with the life of Moses Spielberg and his staff consulted leaders of the Jewish and Christian community as well as the Islamic community (Pryor 1). Why? Because, the story of Moses is taught in mosques just as it is in synagogues and churches worldwide. Religious tales are risky business. The risk is certainly there when filmmakers are dealing with Christianity in their work. Just ask Martin Scorsese, award-winning director of major film. Scorsese was attacked when he came out with a film based on the Nikos Kazantzakis novel The Last Temptation of Christ. Protestors took to the streets in defiance of Universal's release. Many theaters were forced to keep the film from being shown due to mass

threats of boycott. Ironically, the protest surrounding this work came from a public who had neither seen Scorsese's picture nor read Kazantzakis' novel (Reese 56).

Despite the risk, filmmakers still tackle the subject of Christianity in their films. Some of the most successful movies financially as well as critically have been films dealing with Christianity. *Sergeant York*, *The Robe*, *Chariots of Fire*, *King of Kings*, and *Ben Hur* are just a few examples of films that are labeled religious as well as classic.

Why do filmmakers go down this religious road time and again? When one considers that a majority of the world's population believes in a higher being, it is an easy question to answer. Filmmakers deal with religion in movies because it is part of humanity. Without inclusion of religion in the fabric of film the filmmakers risk failing to be realistic, assuming that this is the goal. There have been a number of films that have taken the religion of Christianity a step further. These select films have dealt with the actual redemptive quality of Christianity. Salvation, or God's grace extended to lost men that they might spend eternity with Him, has been displayed on the big screen on several occasions.

As a Christian, my salvation is the most important piece in the puzzle that is my life. Therefore, when I found myself in love with film, I was intrigued by movies that dealt with Christianity and, more specifically, salvation. I chose four films that portray salvation in very different ways to put under the microscope. Two of the films star Robert Duvall, academy-award-winning veteran of the screen. *The Apostle* and *Tender Mercies* tell tales of two men and their struggle with God with the southern United States as their backdrop. *Amistad* is the powerful drama from Steven Spielberg that deals with the mutinous actions of slaves and their struggle for freedom. The fourth film I chose to survey is the classic *Sergeant York*. This World War II era film dramatically gives us a picture of the true to life war hero Alvin York. Each of these films has been critically acclaimed and is in my eyes a brilliant work of art.

Robert Duvall's *The Apostle* is a film that tries accurately to portray a piece of the southern Pentecostal culture. This film is Robert Duvall's baby. Mr. Duvall wrote, produced, directed, starred in, and helped finance the movie. The finished product tells the story of Euliss "Sonny" Dewey, a Pentecostal preacher and native of Texas.

Sonny loves Jesus, his "beauties" (the word he uses to describe his young son and daughter) and his temple or church, fanatically (Duvall). It is this intense passion for his children and his temple that leads to Sonny's downfall.

Sonny discovers that his wife, played by Farrah Fawcett, is committing adultery with the youth minister and plans to take the children as well as the temple from him. In response, Sonny turns to the bottle. Sonny tells God that he is angry with Him in an almost comical scene (Sonny disturbs the neighbors' slumber with his raving). Despite his prayers, Sonny shows up to his children's softball game drunk and delivers a lethal blow to the youth minister. Consequently Sonny flees to Louisiana and follows the tradition of Southern literature by becoming the lone stranger who wanders into the town and changes its occupants.

Sonny baptizes himself as an apostle for God and starts a small church in his new home. He brings the people to his fold through rousing radio preaching and with the help of a retired African-American minister. Sonny enjoys his success for quite some time before his wife overhears him on the radio and reveals his whereabouts to the police.

Sonny is a man who dedicates his life to being a soldier in the army of the Lord. From the opening scene in which Sonny desperately tries to save the soul of a dying couple in a mangled vehicle to the closing credits, during which we see Sonny preaching in the chain gang, Sonny never stops serving God. In fact we see Sonny lead two men to salvation. We have very visible decisions made for Jesus in this film. Of the four films I survey, *The Apostle* delivers what I believe to be the most familiar scenes of decisions of faith. That is, this film has the evangelist, Sonny, dealing directly with the lost to stir their spirits into accepting God's call.

The first of the two decisions made is that of a racist local played by academy award winner Billy Bob Thornton. We first see this nameless character early in the film. He strolls into Sonny's young church late one night and begins asking why everyone calls Sonny "the Apostle E.F." In a fit of nervous agitation, Sonny demands Thornton's character to leave the church and ultimately ends up physically assaulting the man in the dark while his congregation sings and looks on through the sanctuary window. Thornton's character returns later in the film with a bulldozer, intending to destroy the young church.

At the time of the man's attack, Sonny's congregation is sponsoring an old-fashioned picnic in which the local radio disc jockey, Elmo, is broadcasting live. Hence we have an amazing scene in which Sonny confronts the aggressor with the Bible and the support of the congregation. However, on this occasion Sonny does not use physical force to combat the threat but the word of God and prayer. He lays his Bible in front of the bulldozer and dares the man to move "that book" (Duvall). In the repetitive style we have become accustomed to, Sonny gets the congregation to support him as he prays for the man's soul. Thornton gives a brilliant performance in this scene, as we see a bitter man full of hate and indignation start to crack under pressure. As the would-be destroyer bends to remove the Bible from the path of his bulldozer (it is interesting that a non-believer still refuses to bulldoze the Word of God) Sonny puts his arm on the man's shoulder and whispers words of comfort. Eventually, the congregation grows silent as the man begins to weep and accepts the fact that he is lost and needs Jesus.

While this salvation scene is very captivating, it is also quite humorous because Elmo is broadcasting throughout

the scene. "This is to my knowledge the first live on the air conversion!" whispers Elmo.

Like the salvation found in *Sergeant York* and *Amistad*, this salvation experience has elements of the miraculous. Although the man is not struck by lightning or witnessed to by a Bible in a jail cell, we do see a man go from the hatred of a stubborn racist to a humble weeping babe in a matter of seconds. The film does not discuss or address the life of this individual in between the two scenes in which we observe him; however, Christians can assume that God was working on him long before he drove to the picnic in the bulldozer.

Questions also arise in my mind as to whether or not this man is truly converted by his choice or whether he is reacting to the emotional situation in which he finds himself. Studies have shown that it is hard for human beings to resist conforming. Could it be that Thornton's character caves because of the pressure that Sonny and the rest of the congregation place upon him? Only Robert Duvall can answer this question for us.

The salvation of Thornton's character is not the only conversion found in this film. Throughout the film, Sonny rooms with and befriends a young mechanic named Sam. Sam is

one of those characters who make audiences want to laugh and cry at the same time. He is slow to react and listens to Sonny's constant ramblings with the utmost respect and trust. Despite Sam's loyalty to Sonny and to the new church established, we do not see Sam make a profession of faith. It is not until the last moments of the movie that Sam walks the aisle and accepts Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior.

Sam's moment of decision is the only salvation along with Alvin York's in the four films studied that is traditional of an aisle walking moment of decision. However, in cinematic fashion even this long walk down the aisle has added drama. As a result of Sonny's wife's phone call; state troopers begin entering the back of the church as Sonny preaches. Telling the police that he will be with them in a moment, Sonny keeps preaching a message of salvation through Jesus Christ. The camera keeps framing the emotion in Sam's face as Sonny gets more intense with each word. Finally, the burden is too great and in tears Sam goes to Sonny at the front of the church and gives his life to Jesus. Shortly afterwards Sonny is taken into custody.

We do not get to see Sam's life following his salvation. However, I am convinced that it is a genuine experience. This scene builds the intensity and reveals the struggle that has been going on in the soul of Sam for the entire movie. Clearly, Duvall was seeking realism in the conversion experiences of his film. It is drama at its best on the screen.

Robert Duvall believed in this film. This movie is not typical Hollywood material. What was the motivation behind it? What was going on in the creative mind of Mr. Duvall? In 1962 Duvall was acting in an off-Broadway show in which he played a man from Hughes, Arkansas. While traveling across the country with the company he stopped in Hughes and wandered into a little church. "I got off the Trailways bus and wandered into this little church. There was a lively preacher; the congregation was stomping and moving and feeling the spirit. I said I'd like to play one of these guys one day" (Corliss 70). Duvall asked Horton Foote to pen the screenplay for him; however, Foote encouraged Duvall to try and write the script himself. Duvall admits, "So many actors try to get films made, but it is difficult" (octoberfilms.com).

Duvall had a strong desire to see this film made despite the fact that it is hard to raise money for a film that looks at the life of a man who represents only 20 million Americans. "There are things I am interested in knowing and I assume that other people might be interested too. I don't have to necessarily believe in it to make a film about it," Duvall stated (octoberfilms.com). Duvall himself admits that ". . . film has a history of patronizing the preaching world" (octoberfilms.com). "I think in *Wise Blood*, Ned Beatty did a wonderful job as a street corner preacher in a cameo. That's the only time I think I've seen it done well. Usually, films tend to caricature preachers. They put everything in quotes and really look down on them by not portraying them accurately. The subject fascinated me because I'd never really seen it done. But since I like the subject and am really attracted to these guys, I figured I might do it the right way" (octoberfilms.com).

For Duvall, "the right way" was to create a movie steeped in realism in order to give it a documentary feel. The result was an Academy nominated performance. James M. Wall of Christian Century puts it well: "The Apostle stands out as a work of art in part because it explores a religious subculture with sensitivity and insight and without

condescension." Many critics agree. There is not another film out there quite like *The Apostle*.

Sonny Dewey was not the first character to encounter God portrayed by Duvall. Before there was Sonny, there was Horton Foote's Mac Sledge, a seemingly washed-up country music star in need of redemption. *Tender Mercies* is a film of few words. Like its main character, Mac Sledge, the movie is quiet, barren, and ponderous. Horton Foote penned the screenplay. *Tender Mercies* was neither the first nor the last movie on which Duvall and Foote collaborated. Foote also wrote the screenplay for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which Duvall played a supporting role (octoberfilms.com).

The film's director is Bruce Beresford. *Tender Mercies* was the first American film done by Beresford, who is an Australian. Staying true to Foote's vision, Beresford gives us a story with scenery and sets that are barren.

The movie follows the late life of Mac Sledge, a forgotten country music star. Set in rural Texas, the movie begins with Mac drinking himself into a stupor at a roadside motel. When Mac comes to his senses, he asks the owner of the motel, a young single woman played by Tess Harper, for a job. After making him promise to stay sober, Rosa Lee allows Mac to work for her. Over time, she falls in love

with Mac and, in perhaps the most unromantic proposal in the history of film, they become engaged.

However, Mac's past haunts him. It is full of stardom attained and then lost. Mac was married once before to a still famous country star named Dixie. Their marriage was destroyed by Mac's temper and his drinking. However, their marriage did not end until it had yielded them a daughter.

The story is built around Mac's trying to face the future and make something of his new life, despite the burdens and the unhealed wounds from his past. In a role that won him the Academy Award for best actor in 1983 we see Robert Duvall transform the character of Mac Sledge. Never wavering from his quiet, calm nature, Mac makes amends with his ex-wife, his daughter, and comes to terms with his own artistic ability while building a stronger relationship with his new wife and his new son. At times we feel like the world holds only the characters in this film. They seem to be lost in the middle of the barren landscape, far from any human contact.

The decision for Christ is a very subtle one here. It is not given the spotlight as in *Sergeant York* or *The Apostle*. We actually never hear Mac say anything about God or confess that he needs to become a Christian. We hear

Rosa Lee talk of God and see her singing in the choir. However, in the life-changing scene, Mac and Sonny (Rosa Lee's son) are baptized in the church. As they are driving home from their baptismal service, Sonny asks Mac if he feels any different and Mac replies that he does not.

It is hard to tell from Mac's behavior whether or not he truly makes a life-changing decision or if it is an act done to find favor in his new wife's eyes. Despite the argument one takes up it is obvious that we have a changed man by the end of the film. Mac goes from a drunkard in the first scene to a peacemaker. Years of heavy burdens are cast off as he throws a football with Sonny against the backdrop of a Texas sunset.

I was not able to find out why Foote or Beresford created this film. It is obvious from any lack of Hollywood formula on its part that this film, like *The Apostle*, was meant to be a work of art and not a blockbuster. One can speculate that the film contains elements of Christianity simply to keep with the realism of the piece. Foote is writing about a rural Texan couple, and the church, predominantly the Baptist church, plays a large role in rural Texas. The baptism of Mac could also simply be a way

of illustrating his redemption or the new life Mac is starting with Rosa Lee and Sonny.

My interview of actor\screenwriter Joseph Graves provided the idea that perhaps the baptism is one in a series of steps that lead to Mac's hurling a football with Sonny. Foote seems to be writing a tale that illustrates a great deal of change that comes in portions. However, this change can be seen now, here on Earth.

The film *Amistad* does not revolve around a central plot of salvation in the Christian or spiritual sense of the word. Rather, this plot deals with the immediate physical salvation of the African slaves found in New England. The movie is based on the true plight of the Africans who were brought to the west by slave ships. The Africans, led by a man named Cinque, revolt against their captors and take over the vessel La Amistad. However, the men they keep alive in order to steer them back to Africa deceive them. Rather than turn the ship towards mother Africa, they craftily steer towards the Eastern Coast of the United States. This results in the film's focus which is the desperate attempt of the slaves' lawyers to convince the Supreme Court of the United States that these Africans are free people and should be allowed to return to their native land.

This film is not the first time the story of La Amistad has been told. In the five months between the capture of the Africans the "Amistads" became a national sensation (Jackson 118). A play titled *The Black Schooner or The Pirate Slaver Amistad* was presented as early as September 2, only a week after their capture (Jackson 118). Books have also been written on the subject. In fact, Steven Spielberg and his company Dream Works SKG found themselves in a ten million dollar lawsuit over the film when Barbara Chase-Riboud author of Echo of Lions (a novel that also tells the tale of La Amistad) asserted that Spielberg and his team had plagiarized ideas from her book (Mead 38). Her argument noted such examples as the character in the film played by Morgan Freeman. Freeman is a black abolitionist who does not exist in historical records.

Amistad tells a gripping story. It evokes several different emotions from its audience, yet it is one scene that grabs my attention when I examine this work of art. The scene takes place mid-way through the film's two and a half hours. One of the men (whose name is not revealed in the film) receives a Bible. The Bible is given to the man early in the film while the Africans are entering the courtroom for one of the earlier hearings. A longhaired,

darkly clad man extends the Bible to the Mende captive and asks him to place his hand on the Bible so that he might pray for him. The prisoner responds with a harsh word and snatches the Bible from the Christian's grasp. This same prisoner has been rather hostile throughout his detainment.

What little the audience learns of his character is gleaned from his reactions to his new environment. He is nothing but glaring stares, harsh barks, and ominous gestures to the white captors. When I first viewed this film I thought that the filmgoers might be heading in a negative direction in its dealing with Christianity. When the Protestants first visit the Mende's cell, Cinque asks his friend why the 'entertainers' look miserable. I feared that Spielberg was heading in the direction of slapstick comedies like *Fletch*, in which Christians are the punchline and nothing else. However, it is revealed that these Christians served a different purpose.

The Africans are held in a damp, dimly lit prison cell in which they pass the time through various means of meager entertainment. In one scene the man who has received the Bible is calmly thumbing through its pages. The Bible itself is one of the large, leather-bound volumes found on coffee tables in which there are large elaborate

illustrations to accompany the text. Cinque is sitting in one of the corners of the cell hanging his head in tired reflection of the day's events. He looks up and sees his friend looking over the Bible. Cinque goes over to him and tells him that no one is around so he does not have to pretend to understand the book. However, Cinque's friend explains that he truly feels that he is beginning to understand what the book is about. This begins in my opinion one of the most beautiful pieces of film ever.

As he turns the pages and points to the different pictures of the story of Jesus, he explains in the Mende language the story of Christ. He shows Christ being born, healing others, dying, and rising again to heaven. He suggests to Cinque that, if Jesus did nothing wrong, then likewise they will surely go up into the sky when they are executed. Cinque brushes it off as a fairy tale at first. However, when his friend is finished with his explanation of the picture Bible, he sighs that the end product "does not look so bad." The face on the prisoner with the Bible is one of utmost peace. This intrigues Cinque and he offers no other words of discouragement.

While the story is being told, Spielberg takes us back and forth between the cell and an unknown chapel in which

the young catholic judge presiding over the trial of the Mende is praying for wisdom. It is interesting that this judge was a replacement for the original judge. The second judge is a young Catholic who President Van Buren believed would make a decision in favor of Spanish possession in order to keep his career. In a brilliant stroke of filmmaking, we see the symbol of the cross being drawn by the African storyteller and the praying judge.

The crucifix becomes a very important symbol in the following scenes. The next scene takes us to the day of the judge's decision. As the Mende prisoners are paraded down the street, the Bible-toting Mende clutches his book. He takes comfort in the crosses held out to him by the Protestants lining the street. In breathtaking cinematography we also see that he finds the cross in the towering masts of three ships nearby. Once inside the courthouse, the prisoners soon learn that the judge has ruled in their favor. They immediately spring up and begin jumping in celebration. The Bible toting Mende holds the Word of God high in the air in celebration of the judge's decision.

By emphasizing that the judge's beliefs compelled him to make the right decision, the film suggests that God saved

the African prisoners in the preliminary trial of La Amistad.

Nothing occurs in this film that allows us to conclude that any of the Mende become believers in Jesus Christ. The film does not show the Bible reading Mende being baptized or walking the aisle of a church. I disagree with one critic who wrote, "Thus exposed to the New Testament, Cinque is understandably an instant convert" (Simon 57). There is nothing in *Amistad* that led me to this conclusion. If anything, I was led to believe that Cinque passed the Bible off as fairy tales. What we do see, however, is the immediate effects the gospel message has on an individual's life. A character goes from bitterness and fright to peace and acceptance. He embraces the idea that he along with his Mende brothers will be executed without just cause just as Jesus was crucified without reason.

Why is this element part of *Amistad*? When I viewed *Amistad* for the first time, I asked myself where the writers were coming up with the Christian aspects of the story. I hypothesized that there must be a strong presence of Christianity in the historical facts behind the film. In my opinion it was not like Hollywood to add such elements (especially when one considers that Spielberg claims

Judaism). I was right. In my research, I found that many of the Mende prisoners not only learned to read English but also received Bible lessons while imprisoned and returned to Sierra Leone to establish a mission with four other American missionaries. The Africans also presented a Bible to John Quincy Adams in absentia (Jackson 124).

Despite lack of direct quotation from Spielberg or Steven Zaillian, the film's screenwriter, I concluded that the salvation in *Amistad* was included to increase the film's accuracy in the historical sense. It is very possible that the Bible scene was included for its dramatic effect as well.

Sergeant York was released to the theaters in 1941 (Hartung 306). The film tells the story of Sergeant Alvin Cullum York a hero of the First World War. The picture itself begins by making a dedication to a day when "man will live in peace on earth" (Lasky). The film itself was meant to be an encouragement, a call to patriotism during perhaps our nation's darkest hour. However, the film's producer, Jesse L. Lasky, had to fight a twenty-three year battle to have York's story brought to the silver screen.

Lasky approached York in 1940 about making a film and told York that "the filming of his life could now be called

a patriotic duty" (Newsweek). It was not until Alvin York felt that democracy was threatened once again that he gave the filmmakers permission to tell his story. He took the money that he received for the rights to his story and completed his Bible school. The film itself went on to become an American classic and resulted in the Academy Award for best actor in a motion picture for Gary Cooper, who was hand-picked by York to suit up for the role.

The film opens in 1916 with a small country church congregation singing "When the Role is Called Up Yonder." The congregation sings bravely despite three crazy guys outside riding their horses around the church whooping and firing their pistols. We learn that one of the men disrupting the proceedings in God's house is none other than Alvin York. The story proceeds to give us an idea of how backwoodsy the lives of the people are. Amidst scenes displaying York's sinful lifestyle, we learn that World War I is brewing and that the people are not made aware of this fact until four days after the Germans have invaded. After a brief scene or two in which we understand that war is imminent for the United States, the story begins to focus on Alvin York.

The audience discovers that it is Alvin's dream to own a piece of rich bottomland so that he can marry the girl he has fallen in love with, Gracie Williams. It is while working towards getting the land that the local pastor visits Alvin and informs him that "Satan has you (York) by the shirt tail." Alvin agrees with him but argues that a man should not have to go looking for religion but that religion should come looking for him. The pastor does not disagree with Alvin but leaves him with the remark that one day religion will come "in a flash like a bolt of lightning" (Lasky).

After Alvin's visit with the pastor, the story turns to his plight to get a piece of bottomland. Alvin strikes a deal with a local farmer by the terms of which he has to pay seventy dollars in sixty days in order to get the desired land. It is during these scenes that we learn that Alvin has an amazing work ethic as he pursues one odd job after another to pay his debt. In the waning moments of his payment time, Alvin displays remarkable talent at a shooting contest and sells his winnings to finish paying the seventy dollars. It is at this point in the film that Alvin meets God.

After the turkey-shooting contest, Alvin learns that a man by the name of Zeb has bought the land he was striving to attain. It is while riding to Zeb's house late one stormy night with the intention of killing him that Alvin is literally struck by lightning (remember the words of the pastor). Without saying a word, Alvin rides to the church. In another aisle-walking scene, Alvin slowly makes his way to the altar as the church belts out in praise "Give Me That Old Time Religion." We immediately see a remarkable change in Alvin's life from this scene on in the film.

Among the lifestyle changes Alvin goes through are a fairer deals in his trades with townsfolk, and acceptance of a Sunday school teacher position. When the townsfolk begin speaking of the draft, Alvin secretly plans to skip the register. He explains to his pastor that killing is against God's Word. The pastor calmly explains that Alvin needs to write a letter to Washington explaining his contradiction in belief rather than simply skipping the draft. The draft board denies his request and Alvin appeals the decision; however, he is drafted anyway.

While at boot camp, his commanding officer asks him to reconsider his beliefs. Alvin explains, "I done forgot the Lord, I ain't never gonna forget him again" (Lasky).

However, Alvin agrees to go home and do some soul searching. He is torn between his God and his country. Finally, while up on a mountain overlooking the valley, Alvin reads the scripture in which Jesus said, "render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God what are God's" (Lasky). He decides to head into battle.

The climax of the movie occurs during the second week of the Meuse-Argonne offense on October 8, 1918. In a heroic moment York takes 132 prisoners and kills over twenty men, in effect saving the lives of his fellow American soldiers (Newsweek). Immediately York was an all-American war hero on the home front. Marshall Ferdinand Foch said to him, "What you did was the greatest thing accomplished by any private soldier of all the armies of Europe" (trenches on the web). York was offered many endorsements (do not forget the movie itself) but told everyone that "Uncle Sam's uniform is not for sale" (Lasky). Alvin goes home at the films end to find that the people of Tennessee have gotten together to buy a house and place it on the bottomland he wanted. It is a classic Hollywood happy ending.

Sergeant York's tale is remarkable. In the four films studied for this project, I would argue that York has the most drastic about face as a result of his salvation

experience. The film is delivered in a way in which we clearly see that a man is lost and on the wrong path. York was a drinking, hell-raising, bar room brawler before God struck him by lightning. Unlike *The Apostle*, in which we have classic aisle walking as well, we get to observe Alvin's life after he is saved. The film focuses on the immediate effects of the salvation, Alvin's forgiveness of Zeb and his refusal to register for the draft, as well as the long-term effects (Alvin's heroism in World War I). The result is a film critically acclaimed and found on the shelf labeled "classics" in most video rental stores.

The choice to accept Jesus or reject Him is vital. Without the blood of Jesus Christ, I believe strongly that man will be eternally separated from God. This is not my teaching, but it can be found in God's Word. I take a personal interest in any medium of art that takes Christianity or more specifically salvation as its subject matter. Therefore these four films hold a special place in my mind as a Christian who happens to take film seriously as an art.

Each of these films' characters who seem to undergo transformation at the hands of God do so in unique ways. We have the aisle walking in *The Apostle*, country baptism in

Tender Mercies, amazing translation of Biblical illustrations in *Amistad*, and a bolt of lightning that is very reminiscent of the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus in *Sergeant York*.

Each of the scenes listed features what I believe to be symbols that a redemptive decision for Jesus has been made. However, in my conversation with the previously mentioned actor/screenwriter Mr. Joseph Graves, he made an excellent point. Mr. Graves suggested that each of these experiences could be a turning point. Salvation in these films is in his mind, a turning point in the characters' lives. The filmmakers then take these redemptive experiences and show in dramatic effect how the experience changes the characters immediately. Only *Amistad* makes any mention of the eternal effects of salvation.

I commend the makers of these movies. The directors, actors, screenwriters, and producers of each of these four films took on a very risky subject matter. When you begin to deal with people's religious beliefs in an art form you often invite harsh, biased criticism. Despite the motivations that got these stories onto the screen, regardless of the purpose the salvation scenes serve in each movie, I, a follower of Christ, found the films to possess

integrity. In the two historical pieces, *Amistad* and *Sergeant York*, Christianity is obviously very important and is given its due. The two works of fiction, *The Apostle* and *Tender Mercies*, use Christianity in a noble cause, to make the films more realistic. These four films risked controversy and succeeded. I hope to see it done again.

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