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What Were They Thinking? The Controversy Over *The End of the Spear*

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The controversy over the casting of actor [Chad Allen](#) in the lead role of the movie *The End of the Spear* continues to grow — and rightfully so. *The End of the Spear* is a retelling of the story of the martyrdom of missionaries Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, Peter Fleming, Roger Youderian, and Ed McCully by Waodani tribesmen in Ecuador in 1956 — and many Christians have been eagerly awaiting the film's release.

This is one of the classic narratives of Christian missions. Eventually, the widows of these five missionaries led the majority of the Waodani to faith in Christ, ending decades of tribal killings. Steve Saint, the son of Nate Saint, maintains a ministry among the Waodani even now, after having been “adopted” by Mincaye, the very tribesman who killed his father.

The story of the five missionary martyrs and their families has been recounted in several books and films — most famously Elisabeth Elliot's two books, *Shadow of the Almighty* and *Through Gates of Splendor*. Generations of young evangelicals have drawn courage and inspiration from these testimonies, and the larger story of the evangelization of the Waodani people.

This account is a precious stewardship, as are the lives of all involved. I had the honor of sharing dinner with Steve Saint and Mincaye a few years ago during a Shepherd's Conference at Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California. Their testimony is one of the most powerful affirmations of the power of the Gospel I have ever heard. I was greatly moved by meeting with them and I had looked to the release of the film with great hope.

Thus, the release of *The End of the Spear* on January 20 has been met with much enthusiasm. The movie was produced by [Every Tribe Entertainment](#) and has been received well by critics. So, what is the controversy all about?

The actor chosen to play both Nate and Steve Saint in the movie is [Chad Allen](#), an actor well known to American television viewers for his roles in *St. Elsewhere*, *Our House*, and *Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman*. But Chad Allen is also known for something else — his very public homosexual activism. As a matter of fact, he has been on the cover of *The Advocate*, the leading homosexual news magazine, at least three times. He also staged Terence McNally's play, *Corpus Christi*, which portrays Christ as a homosexual involved in a homoerotic dynamic with his disciples.

What were they thinking? Beyond this, Allen (whose real name is Chad Allen Lazzari) also speaks straightforwardly about his syncretistic faith, freely mixing elements of Christianity, Native American spirituality, Buddhism, etc. When I appeared with him on *Larry King Live* Tuesday night, I found him to be personally friendly and engaging, but I was not surprised to hear him speak of his own personal religion — a religion that excludes God's commandments concerning sexuality. “I have a deep relationship with God of my understanding. It's very powerful, and it's taken its own shape and form. And I am very much at peace in the knowledge that in my heart God created this beautiful expression of my love,” he told the CNN audience [[see transcript](#)].

Here's how Mr. Allen described his process of moral decision-making: "These days I judge all of my actions by my relationship with God of my understanding. It is a deep-founded, faith-based belief in God based upon the work that I've done growing up as a Catholic boy and then reaching out to Buddhism philosophy, to Hindu philosophy, to Native American beliefs and finally as I got through my course with addiction and alcoholism and finding a higher power that worked for me." That's not a convenient disclosure on national television just days before the film is released, and Mr. Allen's appearance offered yet another opportunity to witness his advocacy for homosexuality. He went so far as to suggest that his opportunity in this film represents a form of "bridge-building" between Christians and homosexuals: "You know, I made this movie with a group of conservative Christians who do not agree with my expression of sexuality. But we said to each other, I will walk with you accepting your differences, and we can create together. I will give you your space to respect you fully. They don't need to take away from my freedom, I don't need to take away from theirs. And I am so proud to have done that. That's the kind of bridge-building I think we can get to." What should we make of all this? Should Christians see the film, boycott the film, or what? Some thoughts:

First, Christians must have the cultural maturity to know that many of the most famous and influential producers of cultural materials, whether in literature, art, or entertainment, have been homosexuals. This does not mean that we cannot enjoy their music, art, or performances. Christians start from the presupposition that all humans are sinners, and that every artistic endeavor is marred by sin in both its conception and its demonstration.

Second, Christians must learn the discipline of cultural discernment based upon Christian truth. We must learn to engage the culture in a way that is both honest and missiological — and we must work hard to develop a mind that brings all things under subjection to Christ, including our entertainment preferences and choices.

Third, we must avoid hypocrisy. We should not pick and choose recklessly as we condemn or praise without any obvious tie to biblical truth. We must not condemn publicly what we enjoy privately. We must not assert matters of taste as matters of principle.

Fourth, we must understand the nature of the art form and learn how to discriminate on the basis of an informed cultural understanding, not a knee-jerk reaction. Accordingly, we must understand that the very nature of acting, whether on stage or on screen, is based upon the ability of the actor to make the audience see the character portrayed, not the actor, in the performance.

That said, this last point is the real problem when it comes to Chad Allen. Every Tribe Entertainment has chosen an actor — perhaps even *the* actor — least likely to be able to make us forget him and see Nate Saint. Chad Allen's activism is what many audience members will see, not Nate and Steve Saint.

Christians loved the film *Chariots of Fire*, but the lead role of Eric Liddell was played by [Ian Charleston](#), a gay man. Another great performance in that film was given by [Sir John Gielgud](#), a homosexual man who was probably the greatest Shakespearean actor of the last century. Similarly, the role of Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was played by [Sir Ian McKellen](#), who has also been known as a homosexual activist. Yet, I was not aware of these identifications as I viewed these movies. Thus, the associations never crossed my mind.

Careful thinking is required here. We do not know what sexual sins or sins of other sorts may characterize so many of the actors, actresses, singers, music writers, authors, musicians, painters, sculptors, or directors we enjoy and appreciate. Christians are not called to conduct investigative hearings on such matters, and we begin with the assumption that all these, like ourselves, are sinners.

Furthermore, we are not required to enjoy or appreciate as artists only those who are Christians. Yet, we should learn to look for the connections between worldview and art that always underlie a work or performance.

So, what of *The End of the Spear*? Put bluntly, I believe that the makers of this movie made a very reckless decision in casting Chad Allen as Nate and Steve Saint. Given the publicity of Chad Allen's activism and the intensity of his mission to normalize homosexuality — a mission clearly articulated on his Web site — it is hard, if not impossible, to suspend belief and see him as a missionary martyr for the Gospel. The distance between Nate Saint and Chad Allen is just too great. This mistake is compounded by the fact that this activism is so well known and well documented — it's what Chad Allen makes central to his own identity.

In learning cultural discernment, Christians must learn to make decisions about a movie like *The End of the Spear*. In this case, the problem was unnecessary. This controversy is over a member of the cast, not the foundational story or the larger shape of the project. It could — and should — have been so easily avoided.

There is an even bigger and more important issue, of course. How will this film deal with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the message that took the missionaries to Ecuador and transformed the Waodani?

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