

A Family Review of *States of Grace*: Compassion, Community, and Redemption

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◆ *Editor's Note: When an analysis of Richard Dutcher's film States of Grace was originally commissioned from Bruce and Margaret Young, it quickly became apparent that, because of the film's profound effect on their entire family, such a review would benefit from individual accounts rather than being co-written. The review that follows is therefore divided into three sections in which Bruce, Margaret, and their son Robert each share their personal thoughts about the film.*

Loving *States of Grace*— and Wondering Why Some People Hate It

Bruce Young

When we learned that a new Richard Dutcher film would be coming out, my wife Margaret and I looked forward to its release with excitement and anticipation. On November 1, 2005, we attended the Salt Lake City premiere of what was then called *God's Army 2: States of Grace*. The film was even better than we had expected. We were eager to have our children see the film and soon took them to showings in Provo. Our oldest son, Rob (then nineteen), was so impressed that he called friends from the theater while the closing credits were rolling to tell them about the movie. I told my BYU students and even gave them extra credit for going to it.

But then we watched as the film was dropped from theaters as Thanksgiving and then Christmas approached (despite its being, in significant ways, a

Christmas movie), pushed aside by holiday blockbusters like *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. *States of Grace*, as Margaret and I preferred to call it, was one of the best films I had ever seen, by far the best LDS film I had seen, and yet it seemed to have run its course within a few weeks.

So I was grateful when the film had a second chance in 2006. I dropped in on a free showing at BYU on January 19. Now definitively titled *States of Grace*, it opened in theaters around Utah the following day. (The earlier title of *God's Army 2* erroneously suggested that it is a sequel—it is not—and also led some to think it was just “another Mormon movie.”) Again, I enthusiastically promoted *States of Grace* with my students and colleagues, and I took friends and family to see it. Shortly after its second opening, I took my then seventeen-year-old daughter Julie, for whom *States of Grace* had acquired profound personal meaning, to see it a second time. Later I took my parents and a brother-in-law—partly because I wanted others to see this film that I loved but also so that I could see it yet again. Since ads for the movie kept emphasizing its imminent departure, I was grateful that it continued playing at full-price theaters in Utah Valley until at least mid-March.

States of Grace was apparently not quite as successful in Salt Lake Valley, where it went to discount theaters a few weeks after its second release. And, though it was also released in California and elsewhere, it never became the nationwide phenomenon we had hoped it would. I hope its release on DVD (scheduled, as of this writing, for October 2006) will give many more a chance to see a truly stunning film and will allow those of us who love it to see it again and continue to be affected by its deeply spiritual and human power.

States of Grace is set in Santa Monica, California, and focuses on two missionaries—Elder Lozano, who is soon to return home, and Elder Farrell, his junior companion. The final weeks of Elder Lozano's mission are transformed as he and his companion stumble into an explosion of gang violence, save a gang member's life, begin teaching him the missionary discussions, and encounter other characters—a street preacher named Louis and an aspiring actress named Holly, who has been rejected by her family—who challenge and change the missionaries' understanding of themselves and the gospel.

“Breathtaking”—a word some reviewers have used in connection with *States of Grace*—does not seem to me an exaggeration. The film is beautifully crafted. One reason I've watched it so often is that it is a joy to savor the deft and sometimes surprising transitions and juxtapositions and the threads of symbolism,

which I have found an integral part of the film's power and meaning. Every major cast member seemed to me to fill his or her role with believable and appealing humanity. Some actors are exceptional, and almost all the acting is first-rate: honest, convincing, and often powerfully moving.

The film has its obviously and outwardly intense moments. The violent scenes are gripping and appropriately appalling. They are in no sense gratuitous. They ought to leave viewers with genuine heartache at the senseless destruction the cycle of revenge leaves in its wake. But the film's greatest power is in its quieter moments, when characters encounter moral dilemmas or engage in hard self-examination or reach out with empathy to others. Rather than rushing us from one action sequence to another, *States of Grace* allows us to spend time with characters, experiencing their perceptions, feelings, and struggles in a nuanced way. Their faces, as well as their feelings, are presented with warmth and sensitivity, so that as we listen to the characters and view their faces, we are invited again and again to respond with tenderness and compassion.

Some of the film's most memorable stretches are conversations or even, essentially, monologues, such as when Holly tells her story or Elder Lozano recounts his conversion. What makes these and other such moments memorable is the way they represent the honest opening of one person's heart to another. Each of these scenes is acted with subtlety and grace. There are also scenes—for instance, the rooftop dinner—that strike me as magical, like those luminous moments of convergence and harmony that occasionally come in real life.

At the same time *States of Grace* raises difficult questions: What does it really mean to be a Christian? How can I be wise and appropriately careful but at the same time show genuine compassion? When I make terrible mistakes, can I be truly forgiven?

The film is explicitly centered on Christ, not just because it refers to him directly but because it is filled with the spirit of his teachings and example. The film can be viewed as an extended commentary on the parables of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son. Like these, it contrasts goodness that arises from love with pseudo-righteous legalism based on self-protection and fear. It struck me while viewing the film for the fourth time that its message could be summed up in the phrase, "The greatest of these is charity." At the heart of the film are the atonement and the possibilities of change and redemption it provides. Can a gang member truly become a follower of Christ? The film's answer to that question is affirmative but not as simple and easy as we might

like. The effort to change one's life and character and be newly related to others and to one's past is shown to be excruciatingly difficult. And what do we do when others stumble? The film suggests that many of us, despite or perhaps in part because of our religious pretensions, too easily fall into the role of the older brother who resents and feels superior to the returning prodigal—or worse, that we pass by on the other side of the road, rejecting those who sin and burdening them with isolation and despair in addition to the self-contempt they already feel.

The film also suggests—rightly—that none of us is without sin (we are all prodigals) and that in him who refuses to forgive remains the greater sin. But along with those hard truths, *States of Grace* presents the glorious truth that the complete healing and redemption promised by the Savior is real, is truly available to those who open themselves to it.

States of Grace ends with a live nativity scene, rich in symbolism but for that very reason drawing varying responses from viewers. The first time I saw the film I thought the scene went on a bit long, was slightly confusing at moments (Why does Holly rush down from her apartment? What leads everyone to drift to the nativity scene?), and became so symbolic that the film's realistic mode was partly compromised. But as I watched the scene again—maybe because I knew it was coming and had already pondered its possible defects—I was almost completely taken by it, blown away even. On this second viewing, the realistic and symbolic elements of the scene merged and became one. And it struck me that the baby in the nativity scene not only represents Christ but also represents each of us, our original innocence and our potential cleansing. By the time I had seen the film a third or fourth time, I saw that this connection had been carefully prepared for. In fact, we are told explicitly that God loves each of us now “just as much as when we were babies.”

Like the similar scene in *Mr. Krueger's Christmas*, the nativity sequence can be taken as involving more than literally meets the eye: a nativity, whether a “live” one or one made up of figures sitting on a shelf, can prompt us to remember and even imaginatively take part in the holy time and place when the Redeemer “was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

Shortly after seeing *States of Grace* a second time, I interrupted the normally calm discussions in several of my classes with an explosion of excitement I felt unable to contain. I told my students how extraordinary this film was and encouraged them to see it as soon as possible. On reflection, I realized not all

of them would respond as positively as I had. So in the days that followed I put my assessment of the film in writing to share with my students. I did the same thing the following semester after the second release, as the film became for me almost an obsession. I knew it would be too much to hope, but I wanted everyone to appreciate and love *States of Grace*, and especially to be touched deeply by its message, which I believe is the gospel message of redemption and compassion.

Some students responded very much as I hoped; some did not. And then I took part in a somewhat heated exchange on the “Letters to the Editor” page of BYU’s *Daily Universe*, which continued privately as an opponent of the film and I exchanged e-mails.

Clearly this was a film that touched a chord, but not always a harmonious one.

One result of these exchanges is that I’ve thought long and hard about *States of Grace*. Having tried to understand criticisms of the film as generously and honestly as I can, I still believe this is one of the best films I’ve ever seen and that, at least for anyone with genuine spiritual maturity who approaches it with an open mind and heart, this film can provide a profoundly moving and potentially transformative experience.

I can perhaps best convey the film’s impact on me by sharing some of what I told my students.

“*States of Grace*,” I wrote, “is masterfully made and beautifully acted. I can’t help feeling it is ‘Best Picture’ material (if the Academy Awards really represented the best films); it is certainly many cuts above the average LDS movie. Most important, it is a profound depiction of the power of the atonement amidst the realities of life in our often dark and difficult world. The film’s message is relevant to every Latter-day Saint, every Christian, and ultimately every human being.

“At the same time, I need to acknowledge that not everyone will like everything in the film. Some viewers don’t like to see ordinances depicted in films, though I would point out that some Church-sponsored films do just that. (There is a confirmation in *States of Grace*, presented sensitively and even movingly.) The movie also depicts gang violence—but it also depicts the redeeming power of the gospel that can overcome violence and hatred. The missionaries in the film experience more highs and lows in a few days than many real-life missionaries experience in two years—but this is, after all, a movie, with a little over two hours to affect its viewers.”

Many of my students loved *States of Grace*. (Comments included, “This movie was amazing”; “My hope for LDS cinema has been rekindled”; “EVERYONE MUST SEE THIS FILM.”) But some viewers have reacted with harsh criticism, claiming the plot is unrealistic or predictable, that the dialogue is didactic, and, worst of all, that the film is morally corrupting. Obviously, opinions differ. But though the film depicts reality in heightened and condensed form, I have had no problem suspending disbelief and have found the dialogue by turns delightful, moving, and illuminating. Despite its imperfections (and there are a few), I find the film spiritually inspiring and morally compelling. In my opinion, the camera lingers a bit too long on the girl-watching moments. But apart from that, on what grounds could one make moral objections to the film?

Some viewers have seriously argued that no film should present anything “inappropriate”: that is, a moral film cannot portray sin and its consequences. Others have been more specific and discriminating, indicating that *States of Grace* is excessive, even sensationalistic, in its depiction of violence; that it is “too easy on sin” or indulges in “ cliché compassion”; and that it is dangerous in presenting some of the characters’ wrong choices with sympathy or even with approval.

As for the violence, its effect, as I’ve already noted, is morally sobering. The film does not glorify violence but shows its appalling and tragic consequences. But the film also offers hope that violence can be overcome and its effects redeemed.

The charge that *States of Grace* is “easy on sin” seems to have something to do with its sympathetic presentation of characters who have been involved in serious wrongdoing. I am tempted to say that the distaste some viewers have for sinful characters who are nevertheless presented as real and likable human beings reveals more about the viewers’ moral deficiencies than about the film’s. At least one viewer has referred to Holly as “the seductress,” a label that, among other things, grossly distorts the plot. Many have echoed the judgment that Mormons don’t want to see movies in which “a missionary has sex with a porn star.”¹ (By the way, in *States of Grace* the act is not portrayed, described, or even named.) Is it being forced to think about such a sin that bothers viewers? Or, as the labels “porn star” and “seductress” suggest, is it revulsion at people who commit such sins? What would such viewers say if confronted with a woman taken in adultery—in the very act? Would the response “Go thy way and sin no more” seem too indulgent? Would they be among those who pick up a stone?

I may be misjudging such viewers. This is, after all, only a film, and viewers who react harshly to fictional characters may be much kinder to real people. Yet the habit of dismissing anyone as a “porn star” or “seductress” seems to me a dangerous one. Anyone who has been involved in a Church disciplinary council knows that it is contrary to the spirit of such a meeting to label and dismiss the transgressor simply as an “adulterer” or “embezzler” or “pervert.” We are dealing with a complex human being; we seek to extend understanding and compassion; and we want to help redeem the sinner, as well as protect the innocent and the Church. In the play *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare’s character Angelo is incapable—until he himself has seriously transgressed—of seeing wrongdoers as anything other than objects of disgust who must be punished and, ideally, eliminated. He refers to a pregnant woman casually as “the fornicatress.” His failure to use her name or speak to her betrays a deeper failure to see her as a human being. This heartless character has as yet no appreciation of his own need for mercy or of the redemptive power of the atonement. He is unable to condemn the sin without also condemning and dehumanizing the sinner. As the play amply demonstrates and as the scriptures make clear, in him lies the greater sin.

There may be more justice in some of the subtler criticisms of the film. Perhaps *States of Grace* fails to show us how dangerous some seemingly innocent acts are. Perhaps it dismisses as straitlaced an approach to living the gospel that is entirely sincere in its attempt at constant and faithful obedience. Perhaps it is too complex or even unrealistic in the sorts of moral choices it asks us to consider. My own experience with the film, however, has persuaded me that it has struck just about the right balance between sympathy and judgment and between complexity and clarity.

For me, one of the film’s strengths is how effectively it presents challenging moral dilemmas and invites us to worry over the choices the characters make. Some viewers, it is true, find disturbing the very possibility that characters, especially missionaries, could struggle over some of these choices and end up making wrong ones. Yet as it admits this possibility, and as it invites us into the experience of moral struggle and shows us the consequences of characters’ decisions, I believe *States of Grace* becomes *more* deeply moral, not less. Art that avoids such struggles is not moral; in fact it is arguably immoral in indulging a fantasy of victories won without real effort or thought. As Milton long ago pointed out, true virtue is not “fugitive and cloistered” but must be won through “dust and heat” (728). But some critics go further and suggest that

States of Grace presents some of the wrong choices with approval—for instance, Elder Lozano’s insistence on breaking the rules by taking in a stranger, his failure to prevent his companion from committing fornication, perhaps even the fornication itself.

These various “wrong choices” must be treated separately. The last one, for instance—the fornication—clearly does *not* have the film’s approval. The sin comes after a series of more ambiguous actions. But I would argue that, though the film is more interested in showing the characters’ struggles than in judging their actions, it does not promote all the choices it depicts. For instance, the film leaves us free to judge Elder Farrell as mistaken if he thinks that holding Holly’s hand is the only way he can show compassion. He could in fact have found another way of making it clear he is not hardening his heart to her pain. But in his inexperience and immaturity, he blows it, as many of us do, daily. Certainly, the film shows the danger of confusing compassion and attraction. And it is absolutely clear in its assumption that the fornication itself is wrong. Elder Farrell is being sent home. The mission president expresses both judgment and compassion, embracing him while saying, “Stupid, stupid kid.” The erring elder is in despair and doesn’t know how his life can go on. Though many of the characters extend compassion, some don’t—or don’t know how to, perhaps because their pain is too great. The film’s response to sin is clearly something other than “cliché compassion.”

Elder Lozano’s failure to prevent the act is more complicated. To begin with, it’s entirely possible he doesn’t wake up and notice his companion missing until the deed is done. Once he wakes up, he tries to rescue his companion, knocking on Holly’s door. Perhaps he should have done more, perhaps breaking down the door and dragging his companion out. But I’m not sure violent, coercive, and, in this case, illegal intervention would have been the right choice.

Some have suggested that Elder Lozano’s wrong choices begin much earlier when he invites Louis into the apartment and asks a neighbor (Holly) to check on him. This, presumably, is what sets in motion the events leading to Elder Farrell’s downfall. This seems to me a spurious, or at least impractical, criticism. It condemns Elder Lozano for facilitating several friendships and not predicting what some of the people involved will choose to do. On this argument, to be safe from evil we would have to avoid all encounters that could potentially lead to danger—which would make mortal experience in general, let alone missionary work, impossible.

Perhaps I am letting Elder Lozano off too easily. Maybe he should have insisted that none of the dinners with their neighbors take place, though these

seemed to me reasonably innocent. The real danger begins after dinner when Elder Farrell and Holly begin conversing unattended while Elder Lozano is talking with Louis. (This could also be viewed as Elder Farrell’s own first immature slip, as he too would know the mission rules forbade being alone with a girl.) I agree: an ideal senior companion would notice the danger and intervene sooner. In fact, *States of Grace* can be read as a cautionary tale with precisely that moral, underlined by the fact that Elder Lozano is quite ready to blame himself. But I believe the film conveys an even more important moral: All of us, even senior companions, are imperfect. Even with the best of intentions, we miss clues and fail to see where we could have made a difference, sometimes until it’s too late. Part of our anguish is seeing the results of our inadvertent, ignorant, or careless actions. That anguish can lead us to greater compassion and a deeper sense of our dependence on a perfect and perfectly loving Savior.

Still, given the premise that missionaries are not to give shelter to strangers, Elder Lozano does break the rules—something that, if I were ever a mission president, I wouldn’t want missionaries to do unless they checked with me first, if only because I would be responsible for their safety. The film’s opposition of the “rules” to the “commandments” perhaps provides dangerous grounds for rationalizing easy, foolish, or self-indulgent choices. Yet I don’t see how I could be a genuine Christian if I always gave the rules, set institutionally (and wisely) for particular situations, an absolute authority above Christ’s commandments, especially when a crisis seems to cry out for a different response. For instance, the grave dangers of infidelity or even perceived impropriety have led to strong cautions that married Church leaders should avoid ever being alone with anyone of the opposite sex. But does that mean I must leave a woman stranded on a dark and dangerous street when there seems to be no alternative except giving her a ride? I hope I can act with inspiration when faced with such challenges.

It seems to me the problems *States of Grace* confronts us with are genuine ones. What are we to do as followers of Christ when there seems to be a conflict between temporary rules and enduring commandments? Maybe even more important, since we’ll face it more often, is another problem: How do we choose between self-protection and caring for others (a theme Dutcher also treats in *Brigham City*)? It’s true, as Elder Farrell puts it, that “There’s a difference between being a good Christian and just being a fool.” But it’s also true, as his companion responds, that “It’s a fine line sometimes.”

Apparently—whatever the rules are and whatever prudent self-protection may generally dictate—real-life missionaries sometimes shelter nonmissionaries.

After I took my brother-in-law to see *States of Grace*, he told me that, during his mission, he and his companion had taken in a recent convert to protect him from a violent father. Later, the father succeeded in killing his son. Such a real-life incident, supplemented by others, could exonerate *States of Grace* of the charge of lack of realism. But it does something more important: it shows that missionaries inevitably face dilemmas like the ones portrayed in the film; for instance, they have to balance wise self-interest with Christlike responses to the urgent needs of others. It's only fair to add that they may sometimes choose wrong, erring in either direction, and that disasters may result. Any follower of Christ is going to face such dilemmas and such dangers.

When a student wrote a letter to the *Daily Universe* claiming that both *States of Grace* and *The Work and the Glory 2* are worldly and degrading, I responded that "we must all be careful and honest in our choices. But because our sensitivities and experiences differ, we should avoid judging each other for how we respond to challenging works." I pointed out that the scriptures too depict violence and illicit romance, as anyone keeping up on the Old Testament knows. In fact, the purpose of the scriptures requires them to include such material. If nothing else, the scriptures demonstrate that all, including those who know and are seeking to follow God, are subject to sin and in need of salvation. In particular, the message of redemption in the Book of Mormon would not be nearly so effective if it were not for the horrors presented (for instance in Ether and in Moroni 9), which make clear how desperately Christ's atonement is needed. The crucial question is how the hard things are presented.

My view of how evil and violence should be depicted has been shaped both by the scriptures and by over twenty years of teaching literature. I am easily distressed by gratuitous violence and sensuality, yet I've found that works dealing with sin, even in its most horrific forms—*King Lear* and *The Brothers Karamazov* are examples of such works—can, if they do it right, be powerfully moral. For me, *States of Grace* does it right: it shows the evil of sin but also conveys in an exceptionally effective way the redeeming power that can overcome violence, hatred, and despair.

It's true that the film leaves some of the moral problems it raises unresolved. As it ends, for instance, Carl (the repentant gang member) still faces serious legal problems. He rejects violence at the last moment, yet he is still an accessory to murder and must face the consequences, something the film doesn't mention. But, though that loose thread bothered me the first time I saw the film, on a second viewing it faded in importance compared to the larger truth

that even serious sin does not put us beyond the pale of redemption. I take as literally true and as of the essence of the gospel Elder Boyd K. Packer's statement that, "Save for those few who defect to perdition after having known a fulness, there is no habit, no addiction, no rebellion, no transgression, no offense exempted from the promise of complete forgiveness" (19).

States of Grace is explicit about the need for repentance. The missionaries and the street preacher repeatedly offer the invitation to repent. The film closes with several characters committed to the challenging and at times excruciating process of changing their lives. Yet along with repentance, the film emphasizes the need for trust in God's love and in his power and desire to redeem. This theme begins with Carl's fear of damnation and with scriptures referring to forgiveness ("though your sins be as scarlet" and "I, the Lord, remember them no more") and ends with the nativity scene. *States of Grace* shows its characters struggling in the messiness of human life. It says, in essence: "Humans sin. Sin produces anguish and darkness. There is hope through the atonement of Christ. If we hope to partake of the power of the atonement ourselves, we need not only to repent of our transgressions but to have compassion for and seek to help those who transgress." Its message includes the profound truth stated by Elder John H. Groberg, among others, that "there is always hope; there is always hope; there is always hope."

States of Grace remains for me not only one of the best-crafted films I know but also one that can, used carefully, serve as an instrument for softening and expanding our hearts. It's true that the horror, grief, compassion, and hope we experience in watching the film are in a sense *virtual* emotions, prompted by imaginary characters and events. Yet these characters and events are presented with such skill—with realism, humanity, humor, warmth, and compassion—that responding to them allows us to learn and to practice ways we ought to respond to those we encounter in the course of our non-cinematic lives. *States of Grace* has affected how I view and treat my children, my friends, and others, including myself. And it has impressed strongly on my thoughts and feelings the power and reality of Christ's teachings and saving work, so strongly that I find it impossible to think of the film without thinking of them.

Note

1. This phrase is from Dave Hunter of HaleStorm Entertainment, as quoted by McKee.

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States of Grace and Community

Robert Young

Generally when I have written reviews, I have tried to find a single word that describes the feeling or message of the film. With *States of Grace*, however, I find I am unable to do so. Compassion, Community, Faith, Love, Humanity, Redemption—all of these words could be used. But instead of trying to write an elaborate review that hits on all points, I would instead like to focus on one aspect which has been very important to me, that of community.

The idea of "Mormon culture" has been the main focus of many recent comedic LDS-themed movies. Though they all attempt to include a spiritual lesson, these messages have felt to me more like a tag-on or insert than the main focus of the films. *States of Grace*, by contrast, is the polar reverse of this. Instead of focusing on our "silly" culture, *States of Grace* focuses on the community we build, both inside and outside of the Church.

There are many prominent characters in the movie. Some are LDS and some are not. It made me very happy when I found that the LDS characters were never disguised as perfect—never even as purely good—but rather as people who, despite their mistakes and inadequacies, were trying very hard to be as good as they could be. The fact that complemented and completed this, however, was that the non-LDS characters were presented in the same way.

The Pentecostal preacher, the actress, the gangster. The ex-gangster who becomes a missionary. The missionary who falls in love. The stories of all these characters are interwoven to create the main plot of this film. Each character

is good at heart but flawed, as every human is. The beauty, however, lies not in the individual narrative strands but in the way their stories come into contact and affect each other. For me, this story was about the community they formed—not because they were LDS, but because they were humans, all on the same journey, all striving for the same things. As the characters form a community through their friendships, they find ways in which they help each other experience the realities of love, compassion, faith, and redemption.

Throughout the movie, you can see different tools being used to help build this sense of community, both for the audience and for the characters. During the times when one character is struggling, shots of other characters watching and being affected are often used. One thing that I feel greatly aided this sense of community was the inclusion of a second religious character, a Pentecostal preacher, not to be converted, but to show the sort of community we may form with other faiths. In fact, during the closing credits the movie presents a very lively sermon from the Pentecostal preacher.

No aspect of the movie was perfect. There were some actors who didn't measure up to others, some parts where the writing felt lackluster, some parts where the film lacked technical consistency or realism. But, through it all, the message still came across loud and clear. There were even points where there was a blatant choice to set aside consistency or realism in exchange for meaning and power. To me it was clear the filmmakers had made the right choices for the film.

I loved *States of Grace* because it was not the sort of narrow-minded movie aimed at conversion or comedy that I have come to expect from Mormon cinema. Instead, it was a film that opened doors. This film reached out to its audience. It was not a film I felt I could never invite nonmember friends to. In fact, when I finished watching it, there were several friends I knew I had to call. Some of them were struggling with faith, or just with life in general. I knew this movie would have a profound effect on each of them. I feel that almost anyone would experience the same thing. No matter who you are, what faith you belong to, or what you hope for in life, you'll take something powerful with you from *States of Grace*.

A Truly Christian Film

Margaret Blair Young

Years ago, Richard Dutcher expressed a concern that LDS movies were becoming cultural burlesque routines, based on a series of inside jokes gently mocking home teaching, singles wards, and other peculiarities of Mormonism. He was concerned that we were not focusing on the real power of our faith: the atonement of Jesus Christ. I knew that his film *States of Grace* would be Dutcher's answer to this concern.

It is a masterpiece.

My husband has summarized the film in his review. I will merely add that scriptures ran through my mind throughout my viewing of *States of Grace*, and tears ran down my cheeks.

When Holly talks to Elder Farrell as though she were at a confessional and reveals her tragic choices and their consequences, I could imagine the Savior saying, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much" (Luke 7:47). As Elder Farrell confronts his own potential for sin and realizes his dependence on the love of God, I could again imagine the Savior whispering, "He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). For me, one of the most moving moments was Carl's baptismal interview, conducted by Elder Banks (played by Desean Terry, one of the few returning cast members from *God's Army*). Carl is concerned about his past, and Banks recounts the story of the people of Ammon, who buried their weapons in the ground. When Carl asks what happened to those people, Banks responds, "Somewhere, deep in the earth, those weapons are buried still." Though he takes this to heart, Carl's further complications with gangs *after* his baptism and his own renunciation of violence lead to one of the most thoughtful and poignant commentaries ever created on any portion of the Book of Mormon.

There are moments of brilliant, deeply symbolic filmmaking, the most obvious being the stylized juxtaposition of Carl's confirmation with the gang murder of a young teen. We see one group of men circling with outstretched knives, and another circle of men surrounding this new convert to lay their hands on his head. The gang's victim closes his eyes; Carl opens his. We see the victim abandoned by his murderers, and immediately move to the priesthood circle, where the men are embracing each other and Carl. It is a one-minute microcosm of what the gospel does: invites all who would partake to open their

eyes and see the potential of each person around them, to bury their weapons and be reborn into a new life of love and inclusion.

The world that Dutcher presents is full of temptation, sin, violence, and despair—but also, because of its focus, full of redemption, renewal, and hope. He offers no easy answers to the hard questions we encounter in these seductive times, but portrays the need for a Savior and the power of the atonement better than I have ever seen it portrayed before.

I am extremely selective about the movies I see and even more about the DVDs I'll have in my home. I did something very rare with *States of Grace*. Not only did I see the premiere with my husband, but I took my children to it three days later and paid full price (we generally wait until movies come to the dollar theaters), and we have already pre-ordered the DVD. After seeing the movie, my daughter wrote Dutcher a personal note, thanking him for making a “Mormon movie” which went so far beyond stereotype. My oldest son, whose review is included here, was deeply moved. And my youngest son (then fourteen years old) gave it the best compliment he could produce: “Wow. That was really good.”

This is one movie which speaks to the essential concerns of all Christians, and Dutcher makes an effort to include a variety of religions in his characters—Baptist, Pentecostal, Lutheran, and Catholic. Ministers of other faiths have, by and large, responded enthusiastically to it, though, sadly, movie ticket sellers outside of Utah were often instructed to tell potential buyers that *States of Grace* was a *MORMON*, not a *Christian*, film (apparently in response to complaints from moviegoers who didn't realize the Christian experience would be framed in a Mormon setting).

States of Grace is in fact one of the best and most faith-affirming Christian films you could see. It is consciously geared to the great gift of the Son of God, and ends with a nativity scene as a fitting climax to all “the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to” (*Hamlet* 3.1.61–62). This film left me and my family with a renewed commitment to live more lovingly and more forgivingly in our own varying states of grace, facing our challenges with gratitude for the possibilities the Savior opened the night the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14).