



Pinehurst Post

We exist to love Jesus and live for Him.

Volume 5, Issue 7
July/August 2013

We envision a congregation whose love for Jesus and one another leaves a clear and compelling witness for Christ.

Superheroes and the Savior by Brian Watson

Indulge me for a moment. Imagine it's the year 3,000. At some point between now and then, there is a major data crash, the result of a worldwide computer virus. That means there are no more electronic records of the past. Historians in the year 3,000 who want to know about life a thousand years earlier will have to sort through the ruins to understand the past. They will rely on archaeologists to dig through then-ancient cities. Perhaps they will find tools or long-dead electronic gadgets. Perhaps they will find ancient writings or DVDs, which they will learn to restore and play. As the historians of the future make sense of our present, they will want to know how we lived and what we believed.

Still with me? Good. I wonder what these hypothetical historians and archaeologists will think when they unearth plastic figures, fragments of writings, and perhaps the archaeological find of the thirty-first century: a DVD collection of movies. I wonder what they would think of the ubiquity of masked figures, often wearing capes and brightly colored outfits. Would they understand that these superheroes were fictitious or would they think that we actually worshipped these extraordinary beings? I could understand it if they thought we worshiped these masked men (and the occasional masked woman). After all, these figures are like little idols, and we sacrifice hundreds of millions of dollars to them every summer at the box office. Their mythical stories seem to inspire hope among the masses, giving us a reason to face another day in an uncertain world.

It's summer again, which means at least one superhero movie is at the local movie theaters. The big superhero move out now is the latest incarnation of the Superman story, *Man of Steel*. Last year, it

was the last episode of the recent trilogy of Batman movies, *The Dark Knight Rises*. I saw both of these movies in the theater, and with each movie, I started to think about why superhero movies are popular and why they speak to our culture. Perhaps their popularity is due to their universal themes, including battles between good and evil and a need for salvation.

Superheroes are a relatively new phenomenon. Though there were some mythical heroes in the past (such as the heroes of Greek dramas, or Robin Hood), there was nothing quite like the modern superhero. Most of the heroes of the past were real-life heroes, like kings, generals, and religious figures. That changed quite suddenly in the twentieth century. In 1938, the first modern superhero, Superman, emerged from the imagination of Jerry Siegel. We all know Superman's powers: super strength, the ability to fly, x-ray vision and other heightened senses. We also know he's bulletproof, faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. There's a reason why he has some of these powers. In 1932, Siegel's father died of a heart attack when armed robbers entered his clothing store. Shortly thereafter, Siegel wrote his first Superman story. The only artwork that survived that early Superman incarnation was of our hero rescuing a middle-aged man during a robbery. Siegel wanted to create a superhero who could have saved his father. Who better to stop armed robbers than an incorruptible, bullet-proof man?

The very existence of superheroes reveals something important: our knowledge of our need for salvation. The fact that people have invented superheroes shows that we realize there is evil in our world. The fact that superhero stories are popular reflects our deeply rooted desire for someone—one who is like us and can relate to us, but who has powers far beyond our own—to take care of this evil for us. The similarities between the superhero stories and the greatest story ever told, what C. S. Lewis referred to as a "true myth," are striking.

Man of Steel lays on the similarities between Superman and Jesus quite heavily. In addition to religious language ("salvation," "damnation," etc.) that appears throughout the movie, consider some basic plot points: Superman is sent by his true father to earth, where he is raised by an adoptive father; as a young Clark Kent, he is hated yet he refuses to retaliate; at the age of 33, he realizes and embraces his calling and his mission. These details can hardly be coincidence. It should also be noted that in the comics, Superman eventually dies and has his own resurrection. Even in the recent Batman movies, there were themes of sacrifice and resurrection. Even people who reject Christianity can't escape themes of evil, sacrifice, and salvation.

Here are some of the things that superheroes can teach us about our need for a savior:

One, there is real evil in the world. Siegel's father may never have had that heart attack if his store wasn't robbed, but in the real world,

continued

The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves.

Zechariah 3:17a

Superheroes and the Savior (*continued*)

there is such a thing as crime. Perhaps it's no surprise that superheroes emerged in the twentieth century, a time of two world wars, a protracted cold war, and a great depression. World War I was supposed to be the war to end all wars. Apparently someone didn't get the memo, because twenty-five years later, even worse destruction was wrought in World War II. During that war, the Superman comics had the Man of Steel fighting against the real evil of the Nazis as well as the Japanese. A real villain like Hitler needs a real hero to stop him. Even though those world wars are behind us, there is still great evil among us. This truth was underscored by last year's shooting in Aurora, Colorado at the opening of *The Dark Knight Rises*. Furthermore, there is evil within all of us, which is something that superhero stories don't examine in detail. In real life, not only are the villains evil, but all of us are capable of monstrous acts. And because of sin, we will all die, whether at the hands of a super villain or a common disease.

Two, superhero stories show that we long for a savior. It would be easy to say that Batman, Superman, Spiderman, and all the rest of the superheroes are just fictional characters. It would be easy to write off the superhero movies as mere entertainment and distraction. But the fact that these stories exist means something. The fact that Jerry Siegel created Superman meant something to him. It expressed a desire for someone to come along and make things right. We all wish for that. Who wouldn't want someone to stop the terrorists on 9/11? Who wouldn't want someone to stop crime and "the bad guy," whoever that currently is? We all know that things in the world are not right, and we want someone who can come along and fix it.

Three, we need a superhero who is like us, someone we can relate to, but someone who is not a normal human being. All the superheroes are human

or look to be human. Technically, Superman is not human, because he's from another planet, Krypton, but he sure fooled Lois Lane. The fact that superheroes are human (or appear to be human) means they can relate to us and represent us. Yet they are different. They are not merely human. They have tremendous powers that no ordinary human has. Some are from different planets (Superman), some acquired their powers from freak accidents (Spiderman, the Incredible Hulk), and others are mutants (the X-Men). We all know that a mere human couldn't save us from the evils of this world. We need an extraordinarily super hero, who also happens to have an extraordinarily moral character that allows him to be courageous and to sacrifice himself by stepping into harm's way.

This all seems familiar to Christians. Everyone knows there is evil in this world. But Christians know that there is a super villain far more evil than General Zod or Bane or any of the other archenemies of our masked heroes. Satan is the true villain, and he has many children who carry out his work in this world. However, the true story shows that we have evil inside. We are all born with evil hearts and we struggle with evil desires. No superhero can fix our hearts. We need the Savior to do that.

Superhero stories tell us something about the need for salvation, but these fictitious stories fall short of providing the answer. In the stories, the superhero may defeat the villain, but crime continues on, injustice abounds, and our everyday sins, such as covetousness and pride, live on. In the real world, Jerry Siegel's father actually died. Hitler actually killed millions. Those planes actually flew into those buildings. We need a superhero that is real, one who can permanently solve the problem of evil in the world and inside of us.

Of course, the real superhero is Jesus. And there are some significant differences between him and Superman and the rest of the superhero pantheon. Jesus is not just fully man (like us), but he is also fully God. He was able to be our substitute on the cross because he is fully human. He is also fully God, not sinful like we are, so that we can be credited with his righteousness. He makes us not guilty in God's eyes. This is what we all need so badly, because all of us have acted the villain toward God.

Additionally, at his first advent, Jesus won against evil through weakness, not strength. After watching *Man of Steel*, I thought about how Superman conquers through physical and moral strength. He can't win when he's weak. Jesus, however, became "poor" for our sake, so that our sin could be put to death, nailed to the cross. Of course, Jesus is morally perfect, and in that way Superman is a shadow of him, yet he is the one who temporarily laid aside some of his "super powers" in order to win our redemption. At his sequel—I mean, second advent—he will return in power and glory, making Superman look puny in comparison.

And Jesus does much more: he gives us the Holy Spirit to transform us from the inside out, changing who we are and how we act. When he returns, he will destroy all evil. He will complete the job of removing our inner villain. He will transform the world into a new creation in which there is no sin, no war, no terrorism, no disease, no famines, no earthquakes, no tornadoes.

Our Hero is beyond super. He is God. We must remember that we are part of the greatest story ever, one not limited to comic book pages, movie theaters, and hot summer days. No, this epic saga is being played out across the world and it will never end (Jesus will be known in the year 3,000, even if Superman is not). And, best of all, it's true.