

Jennifer Klitzke

Colleen Abel

Writing II

Research Paper

13 December 2008

Seeing Jesus

Ah, summer. It's a lazy time of year when children look forward to going to camp; unless they're sent to the 'Jesus [Boot] Camp.' That's where kids as young as eight years old become acquainted with Becky Fischer, a third-generation Pentecostal pastor, "who openly regards her campers as a future army for God, adapted from a model patented by Islamic extremists" (Robinson).

After handing each child a phonebook-sized *Manual of Evangelism*, Fischer indoctrinates the children to carry heavy mantels meant for adults to bear, where "impressionable children are 'saved' by being bombarded with the rhetoric of holy war and commanded to blow up that wall between church and state" (Edelstein). During camp, children make war in camouflage and face paint to militant music and hold miniature fetus replicas while being trained in pro-life initiatives. They "clamor for the rapture" to bring an end to "this 'sick ole world,' and lament the absence of prayer in public schools [which they do not attend]" (Byassee). Then the children travel to Washington D.C., not for a tour, but to take a silent stand against abortion with the word "LIFE" taped over their mouths.

The children who attend *Jesus Camp* are repetitiously fed what to believe by the parents that homeschool them, the church they attend, and the summer camp they are sent to. The result are mini-clones of the preceding generation who view the world through the lens of “us vs. them”; the “righteous judges” who hold the “truth” and believe other Christians are “dead” and the world is “lost.”

These are scenes from *Jesus Camp*, an Oscar-nominated documentary that Chicago Tribune reviewer Jessica Reaves praises as an “enlightening and frank look at what the force known as Evangelical America believes, preaches and teaches their children” (Reaves).

If this is a “frank look” at evangelical Christians, I thought I was one, but after experiencing *Jesus Camp*, I’m left wondering. If I didn’t see Jesus in this documentary, does that mean I’m a “dead” Christian? Or is it possible that the documentary displays a “frank look” at one small sect of Christ-followers, and then makes sweeping generalizations that all Christians are coercive and judgmental, and indoctrinate children into militant faith practices before they turn 13 years old? Is it possible that the views portrayed in *Jesus Camp* are not widely held by other evangelicals? Is it possible that we were manipulated by the filmmakers’ bias against Christians? Just how do we know when we see Jesus?

The players behind *Jesus Camp*

Marie Claire magazine published an interview with the directors of *Jesus Camp*, Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, who set out “to make a film about children’s faith” (Oakley). Ewing grew up Catholic and has since left the church and dabbles with Wicca,

and Grady is a secular Jew. Both filmmakers experienced church camp during adolescence and both emphatically replied that their experiences had “nothing in common” with *Jesus Camp*. It’s unfortunate that they didn’t present these experiences or the wide range of other children’s Christian camp experiences in the documentary. Rather, the duo opted to present one extreme view of Christianity where adults indoctrinate children to see life in absolutes with an unwavering answer for everything (Oakley).

Time magazine touted *Jesus Camp* as “coolly objective and well-made”. The article indicates that it wasn’t until Ewing and Grady, were in the cutting room that “the inherent power of their film” resurrected. While I agree that the documentary records “a crime—the theft of childhood by possibly well-intended but narrowly ideological adults” (Schickel), I disagree that it was coolly objective; rather disturbingly slanted. The statistics shown throughout the film implied that the large following of evangelicals in America embrace these beliefs and applications of the faith.

Steven Isaac also reviewed *Jesus Camp* and made these insights about the editing and mixing of audio overlays by the film makers:

Because of what we’re watching while [Fischer] says it, and because we’ve just seen the children wearing camouflage and other warlike face paint, and acting out a militant-themed dance, there’s little else viewers can conclude other than what musician David Byrne (of Talking Heads fame) concluded after seeing the film at the AFI/Discovery Silver Docs Film Festival: “OK, these are the Christian version of the Madrassas ... so both sides are pretty much equally sick.” Fischer may want to see young people just as committed to Christ as terror-minded Islamic children

are to their jihad. But the filmmakers, David Byrne and many others see the two as synonymous. And it's a theme that continues to resonate throughout the rest of the film. (Isaac).

A review in the Chicago Reader wrote: "Filmmakers Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady lump all evangelicals together, failing to distinguish the more fundamentalist Pentecostals, and they've clumsily inserted some unnecessary editorializing from talk-radio host Mike Papantonio, shown holding forth on his Air America show *Ring of Fire*" (Jones).

Ron Ren of *Focus on the Family* made this statement about the documentary:

The directors' claims that they were simply trying to create an 'objective' film about children and faith ring hollow. I don't question the motives of the Christians shown in the film. Indeed, the earnestness and zeal with which the young people pictured attempt to live out their faith are admirable. Unfortunately, however, it appears that they were unknowingly being manipulated by the directors in their effort to cast evangelical Christianity in an unflattering light. (Isaac).

Bottom line, I guess I wasn't the only one who didn't see Jesus in *Jesus Camp*. I think He was edited out of the film!

Didn't see Jesus

Langston Hughes, in his autobiographical essay, *Salvation*, learned about Jesus from his aunt. She told him that when you see Jesus, you see "a light, and something

[happens] to you inside! And Jesus [comes] into your life! And God [is] with you from then on! ...you [can] see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul” (Hughes 639).

He was looking forward to seeing Jesus too. At the revival meeting held at his aunt’s church, he was the last one to come to the altar. While the church members rejoiced over one more “sinner” coming to Jesus, Langston cried because he had lied. Although he wanted to see Jesus, he didn’t, so he gave into the pressures of the revival crowd. He didn’t see Jesus the way his aunt did, so he gave up his search (Hughes 639-641).

Seeing but not recognizing Him

Mary Magdalene knew Jesus very well. He freed her from the clutches of demonic forces. Now it seemed that Jesus was dead; he was crucified three days before. Grief stricken, she walked to the tomb where the body of Jesus was placed. When she arrived, the stone was rolled away from the entrance and Jesus wasn’t there. Hearing someone nearby “Mary turned around and *saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was him*” (John 20:1-14).

Later that day Jesus caught up with two of his disciples as they walked along the road to Emmaus. *They didn’t recognize him either*. Jesus asked the disciples what they were talking about, so they filled him in about the riveting events that had taken place; that Jesus was crucified (Luke 24:13-16).

In both of these stories from the Bible, the people who knew Jesus best didn’t recognize him when they saw him. I wonder how many times in my life

Jesus was standing beside me and I didn't recognize him. *Just how do we know when we see Jesus?*

Leaving the church to find Jesus

I was raised in a Traditional Scandinavian Evangelical Lutheran church where Jesus was blonde with blue eyes. I experienced a different kind of "us vs. them"; Lutherans vs. Catholics. (At the time, I was miffed because all the cute boys were Catholics.)

Meeting us head on were the reverberations of the pipe organ, like the Great and Powerful Oz, filling the sanctuary with haunting harmonious chords. In a silent pause seeped in a familiar stale scent of moth balls like grandma's attic. We dressed in our Sunday best alongside the Jones's and were sincere for that hour. We sang the same rote liturgy week after week for as long as I could remember. I knew the words by heart, but I didn't understand this veiled language.

I wanted to make sense of it, like these simplistic lyrics: "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong." This language was easy enough a five-year-old to grasp. I think that's when I saw Jesus for the first time; kind of like Langston's aunt, I felt his presence in my heart: kind, loving, accepting, forgiving, and gracious.

Growing up Lutheran, at least we had one hour a week with no opportunity to screw up. We returned to our life of hypocrisy only to be cleansed again the next week after bread and wine. When the pastor began his sermon, I doodled on the bulletin all through high school. Then when I turned 18, I earned back my free will and dropped out.

Eighteen years of a Lutheran upbringing: Sunday school, children's church camp, first communion, confirmation. It wasn't God I was walking away from. I was tired of the plastic smiles, hypocrisy and cliques. I didn't fit, and I didn't want to fit. So I left the church, because I didn't see Jesus. I wanted to though, so I left the church to find him.

I wonder if Langston picked up his search for Jesus before he died in 1967.

Not the only one

I'm not the only one who left the church to find Jesus. In the 1500's Martin Luther didn't see Jesus in the Catholic Church. It was pretty much the only option back then. The people were locked into a lifestyle that was passed down from the previous generation. Before the days of the printing press, illiteracy ran rampant. Communication was limited to word of mouth and whatever the corrupt Church told them the Bible meant. When they went as far as replacing Jesus for their personal gain, sold indulgences for the forgiveness of sins, and instilled fear to anyone who thought differently, that's when a fearless and indignant Martin Luther took a stand against the evil that infiltrated the church.

Martin Luther was a doctorate, theologian and debater. He utilized printing press technology to produce the Ninety Five Thesis and distribute his ideas to his friends. This undermined the Catholic Church that regulated the printing press, but it exposed the corruption and gave birth to the Protestant movement. It reinstated Jesus as the foundation of the Christian church (Brown).

Ironically, the very movement that liberated the common folk from religious oppression stirred many to leave the church to find Jesus. According to Mark A. Noll who wrote the book, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction*:

The evangelical movement began in the late 17th and early 18th centuries when Christians, especially in the English-speaking world, rebelled against the Protestant formalism that had replaced Catholicism following the Reformation launched by Martin Luther in the early 16th century. They longed for a more personal, heartfelt form of Christianity that stressed a personal relationship with God. By the first decades of the 18th century, preachers throughout Britain and America were spreading the new, informal Christian doctrine. (Noll).

It didn't stop there. People like me didn't see Jesus and left the church to find him. Some found him in the many denominations that formed while others created new ones. Among them were Lutherans, Anabaptists, Anglicans, Puritans, Baptists, Calvinists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Adventists, Pentecostals, and Charismatics to name a few.

Over 39,000 denominations

Today approximately 33% of the world's population identifies with being Christian. That's 2.2 billion Christians worldwide (Barrett). In all 70% of Americans identify with being Christian; 26% of the American population identifies with being Evangelical (Noll).

Of the 2.2 billion Christians, there are about 39,000 Christian denominations according to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Thousands of these denominations are affiliated with evangelical Christianity; one of these branches is Pentecostal. There are about 11,000 Pentecostal denominations that hold 20 million Pentecostals in America alone (Wikipedia). These statistics put into perspective that Becky Fischer is just one miniscule fraction of the whole, compared to the sweeping assumptions made in *Jesus Camp* that all Christians are the same.

When I recognized Jesus

Being out of the church for 15 years wasn't working for me either. I was pursuing the insatiable: love, acceptance, recognition, status, and stuff. Then one day I had a meltdown and wondered what was I living for. In tears, I cried out to God and asked Him to give me a purpose, something worth living for, and to help me see Jesus.

Ever since I was a five-year-old child, I knew that "Jesus loves me", but I stopped seeing Him. I was like Mary in the way that I didn't recognize Him when He stood before me knocking on the door of my heart. Instead, I tried harder on my own to overcome my faults and trials, and I strived twice as hard to be noticed and accepted by God and others. Then one day, I gave up trying; and that's when I saw Jesus.

I let go and let Jesus transformed my despair to hope; my anxiety to inner peace; my harbored pain to forgiveness; my self-protective reclusion to loving others; my need to control my circumstances to trusting Him; my striving to be somebody of worth to resting in who God created me to be; my search for meaning and purpose to finding it in Him. I saw Jesus, not with my eyes, but with my heart.

One body, many parts

I, like Becky Fischer, am just one of the 2.2 billion Christians worldwide. We all have a unique story to tell. The Bible describes the Christian church in a metaphor of a body with many parts:

...there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (I Corinthians 12:25-27).

With over 39,000 parts in the Christian body, each has a specific function.

Perhaps the reason we don't see eye-to-eye is because we are not all eyes: some are feet and others are hands. While Becky Fischer's model of Christianity isn't the way I see Jesus, one thing is for certain, we can agree that Jesus is the head of the body. Without Jesus, the Christian church would cease to be: He is the way, the truth and the life and the only way to the God of the Bible.

To me, the Christian faith is a day-to-day pursuit to see Jesus with my heart. God is love and without love our thoughts, actions, words and reactions are meaningless; even if I'm right, without love it is nothing (Corinthians 13). When I stumble and fall down, Jesus extends His hand to help me back up and uses the other parts of the body to aid in my healing. Jesus mends my brokenness, and He fills me with a new kind of life. It isn't something I can buy or earn by trying hard or being "good". His grace is offered whenever I'm humble enough to receive it. And as I let His Spirit empower me each day, perhaps someone else might catch a glimpse and see Jesus too.

* * *

I wondered what good could possibly come from a disturbingly slanted documentary like *Jesus Camp*. Then I realized that it provided the opportunity to research my Christian faith and discover that there are over 39,000 parts of the body and 2.2 billion Christians worldwide. Each one has a story to tell, including mine about how I see Jesus.

Works Cited

- Barrett, David B. & Johnson, Todd M. International Bulletin of Missionary Research, January 2008.
- Brown, Perry. "Preaching from the printshop." Christian History 11.2 (May 1992): 33. Religion and Philosophy Collection. EBSCO. [Library name], [City], [State abbreviation]. 9 Dec. 2008
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rlh&AN=9604291029&site=ehost-live>>.
- Edelstein, David. "Wake-up fall: in The Science of Sleep, Michel Gondry's magic-carpet ride almost makes it through the night.('All the King's Men')('Jesus Camp')('Old Joy')(Movie review)." New York 39.33 (Sept 25, 2006): 70(3). General Reference Center Gold. Gale. Metropolitan State University. 7 Dec. 2008
<<http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.metrostate.edu/itx/start.do?prodId=GRGM>>.
- Hughes, Langston. "Salvation" The Blaire Reader. Ed. Laurie G. Kirsznner. Pearson: Upper Saddle River NJ, 2008. 639-41.
- Knoll, Mark E. *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001.
- Oakley, Colleen. "At church with the directors of Jesus Camp." Marie Claire 13.11 (Nov 2006): 60(1). General Reference Center Gold. Gale. Metropolitan State University. 7 Dec. 2008
<<http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.metrostate.edu/itx/start.do?prodId=GRGM>>.
- Pew Charitable Trust, July 10, 2001
- Isaac, Steven. Website of *Focus on the Family*. 7 Dec. 2008
<http://www.pluggedinonline.com/movies/movies/a0002908.cfm>

Jones, J.R. Chicago Reader. 29 Sept. 2006

<http://www.chicagoreader.com/features/stories/moviereviews/060929/> 9 Dec. 2008.

Jost, K. (1998, December 11). Searching for Jesus. *CQ Researcher*, 8, 1073-1087.

Retrieved December 9, 2008, from CQ Researcher Online,

<http://library.cqpress.com.ezproxy.metrostate.edu/cqresearcher/cqresrre1998121100>.

Reaves, Jessica. The Chicago Tribune. 28 Aug. 2007

<http://chicago.metromix.com/movies/review/movie-review-jesus-camp/162255/content> 7 Dec. 2008

Schickel, Richard, and Richard Corliss. "From Fact To Friction." Time 168.19

(Nov 6, 2006): 67. General Reference Center Gold. Gale. Metropolitan State University. 7 Dec. 2008

<<http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.metrostate.edu/itx/start.do?prodId=GRGM>>.

"True Religion Genes"

http://www.sfbg.com/blogs/pixel_vision/2006/09/true_religion_genes.html#more
7 Dec. 2008