

search

 enter here

GO

### the best of the best

- Our Top Rated Movies
- Most Redeeming of '06
- Critics' Choice 2006
- Readers' Choice 2006
- Other Best-Of Lists
- Our Top 10 Lists

### now showing

#### New This Week

- Amazing Grace
- The Astronaut Farmer
- The Number 23

#### Also in Theaters

- Babel
- Because I Said So
- Blood Diamond
- Breach
- Bridge to Terabithia
- Dreamgirls
- Epic Movie
- Eragon
- Factory Girl
- Ghost Rider
- God Grew Tired of Us
- Hannibal Rising
- The Last King of Scotland
- The Last Sin Eater
- Letters from Iwo Jima
- The Messengers
- Music and Lyrics
- Night at the Museum
- Norbit
- Notes on a Scandal
- Pan's Labyrinth
- The Pursuit of Happyness
- The Queen
- Smokin' Aces
- Stomp the Yard
- Tyler Perry's Daddy's Little Girls
- [More](#)

### new on video

- Babel
- Broken Sky
- Cave of the Yellow Dog
- The Departed

[Home](#) > [Movies](#) > [Commentaries](#)

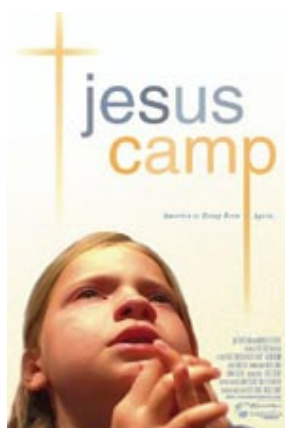
## Brainwashed in the Blood?

*As a Pentecostal, I'm not too thrilled with the way kids from my denomination are depicted in Jesus Camp. Matter of fact, this new documentary ticks me off—for a number of reasons.*

By Rich Tatum | posted 09/20/06

*Jesus Camp*, what an experience. Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady's investigation into the hidden world of one Pentecostal kids' camp simultaneously delighted me, fascinated me, and embarrassed me. As a Pentecostal myself, I love this film. And I hate it.

It angers me.



The premise for the documentary, now playing in [limited theaters](#), is simple: follow three pre-teens from Missouri heading to a summer camp in Devils Lake, North Dakota. Document their experiences there, and follow up on the aftermath. Simple enough.

But the devil, as they say, is in the details. Or, in this case, the future Evangelical Army of God is in the details.

### Liberals don't get us

While Ewing and Grady admit they honestly *liked* the people they were documenting, there's no denying they don't *get* them. Ewing and Grady—recently [interviewed](#) by CT Movies—are outsiders to the culture they depict.

While this alone isn't bad—documentary filmmakers set out to learn and teach simultaneously—it can lead to gross errors of representation and interpretation. The risk of bias and misrepresentation is no less real for liberal New York democrats filming Pentecostals than it would be for a Pentecostal documenting a convention of Darwinists.

Early in the film we are introduced to our angry guide for this tour of the evangelical underworld: Mike Papantonio, liberal Methodist, top-flight lawyer, host of Air America's *Ring of Fire* talk show, and one of Air America's board members. He informed a caller to his program—and us by the way—about "some new brand of religion out

#### Related:

- [Our interview with the filmmakers](#)

 E-mail this page

 Bookmark this page

 Printer version

 RSS Feeds

### MOVIE DISCUSSION GUIDES



#### Amazing Grace

Only \$5.95  
Download Now

- [More Discussion Guides](#)
- [More Movie Courses](#)


 Search by Name

 enter name


Or use:

[Advanced Search](#) to search by major, region, cost, affiliation, enrollment, more!

- Facing the Giants
- Flags of Our Fathers
- Flicka
- Flushed Away
- Flyboys
- For Your
- Consideration
- Gridiron Gang
- Half Nelson
- Hollywoodland
- The Illusionist
- Jesus Camp
- Man of the Year
- Marie Antoinette
- The Night Listener
- One Night With the King
- Open Season
- The Protector
- Running With Scissors
- The Science of Sleep
- Shut Up and Sing
- Strawberry Shortcake: The Sweet Dreams Movie
- The U.S. vs. John Lennon
- [More](#)

### special sections

- Amazing Grace
- Filmmakers of Faith
- The Nativity Story
- The Da Vinci Code
- End of the Spear
- The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe
- The Passion of The Christ
- The Lord of the Rings

### community

- Your Feedback
- Free Movies Newsletter

### Poll

Who do you think will win the Academy Award for Best Actor?

- Leonardo DiCaprio (*Blood Diamond*)
- Ryan Gosling (*Half Nelson*)
- Peter O'Toole (*Venus*)
- Will Smith (*The Pursuit of Happyness*)
- Forrest Whitaker (*The Last King of Scotland*)

[Take the poll](#)  
[View Results](#)

there. ... And right now everything they do they say they do in the name of God: that we need to go to war in the name of God; we're being told that George Bush, of all people, is a holy man who's been anointed with the job of creating a Christian society—not just in America but all over the world. ... There's this entanglement of politics with religion. What kind of lesson is that for our children?"

If you're wondering what this has to do with a religious children's camp documentary, join the crowd. The truth is, there is no *real* connection. But, hey, we need conflict to tell a story, right? So Ewing and Grady have found their navigator through the murky swamp of evangelical warmongering, and "Pap" is his name.

Does it matter that evangelicalism or Pentecostalism is not new? Does it matter that no evangelical preacher I've heard of denies the relevance of the Sermon on the Mount? Does it matter that "peace-making" is not incompatible with defending the weak and oppressed? Does it matter that I've never once heard of George Bush being referred to as a "holy man" either in church, in private conversation, or in all the pages of *Christianity Today*? No, no, no, and no. Yet, Papantonio says it, thus it must be, he begins and ever remains unchallenged in the context of this film.



Radio host Mike Papantonio

Again, this has nothing to do with kids' camps. Ewing and Grady may have *started out* making a documentary about kids camps, faith, and childhood, but along the way it became simply *camp* itself. Their film has inadvertently become just another repeat of Hillary Clinton's "vast right wing conspiracy" theory.

A screen title in *Jesus Camp* notes that "75% of the home schooled kids in the United States are evangelical Christians," somehow underscoring the academic trouble untold millions of youth have coming to them because they don't believe in, say, global warming. What the film doesn't note, however, is that this small number of kids "out-performed their counterparts in the public schools by 30 to 37 percentile points in all subjects" (Dr. Brian Ray, *Strengths of Their Own: Home Schoolers Across America*, Natl Home Education Research Inst, Salem: 1997). Global warming notwithstanding, perhaps we'd be better off with more home schooling, not less, because the number of home-schooled kids is still relatively low. Whereas 3-in-10 Americans are evangelical, only 1-in-50 kids is home schooled (just over one million kids in 2003, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#)).

Without Mike Papantonio's straw man and *ad hominem* arguments misrepresenting evangelical Christianity, this film would be bad enough. But with Papantonio's bias

**HOLIDAYS & EVENTS**

- [CTI Celebrates 50 Years!](#)

**HOT ISSUES:**

- [Israel-Lebanon Conflict](#)

**movie posters**

- Life of Christ - Passion Store
- Lord of the Rings
- Finding Nemo
- Pirates of the Caribbean
- Classic Movies
- The Matrix
- Star Wars

**related channels**

- Christianity Today
- Books & Culture
- Christian Music Today
- Parenting
- Teens
- Men
- Women
- Singles
- Fun & Games
- Today's Christian

paving the way, secular and liberal viewers are given permission to gasp in shock at what follows, to nod their heads in agreement with Papantonio's angry callers (one caller: "There's nothing gentle, and nothing compassionate—to me there's nothing Christian about 'em.")

A view from below: when did kids become spokespersons for grownups?

### Children reflecting their culture

But if liberals don't get evangelicals, surely the portions of the film that focuses on children won't misrepresent anybody, right? Children reflect their culture in surprisingly honest ways—just ask any elementary school teacher: she can paint an accurate portrait of her students' family lives just by what the children unthinkingly and honestly reveal in class. Or can she?

Consider one example. Twelve minutes into the film, when Becky Fischer—a Pentecostal children's ministry leader who runs the camp—meets 12-year old Levi for the first time, she asks Levi how long he's been a Christian. His answer is stunning. He says he "got saved" at the age of five "because I just wanted more of life—'cause there was just nothing that I thought was fun."

Fischer responds, "You thought at five years old there's nothing fun?" Levi, nodding, says, "Yeah."



Pentecostal children's minister  
Becky Fischer

Come on, it beggars my belief that any kid at *five years of age* is sufficiently world-weary and disengaged to believe that there was "just nothing fun" to do? And that this drove him to Christ? No, this is either the learned language of disillusioned, middle-aged, grown-ups, or it's a reflection of adolescent

clinical depression. I have, in my household, a bona-fide copy of five-and-a-half year-old testosterone and exuberance in the form of a little boy on loan from God. In all my experience with my son and other five-year-olds of a similar make and model, I have never once heard the words sighed, "I just want more from life."

From his preschool disenchantment, to his preaching to the collected youth at camp, to his bold self-introduction to Ted Haggard as a fellow preacher (his favorite sermon topic is faith), there is no way the words "typical," "representative," or "average" can be applied to Levi.

These children's lives, and the bits including other kids at the camp, are not representative of the whole of Christianity, the whole of evangelical-dom, or even the whole of Pentecostalism. Their lives may prove interesting, entertaining, inspiring or sobering. But it's a

category mistake to assume that the characteristics of the individuals or even a small group of individuals resembles in any significant way the whole. It's a category mistake to think that all, most, or even *many* of our kids are being trained to be fervent preachers, to eagerly anticipate martyrdom, encouraged to speak in tongues and prophesy, or to march in protest against abortion in Washington, D.C. The sample set is vanishingly small and its relevance for understanding evangelical pre-teen culture is nearly worthless. Entertaining and provocative, yes. But three kids do not make *Jesus Camp* a sociological study.

### Not my Pentecostal church

While Becky Fischer is a fourth-generation Pentecostal, her more immediate roots are in the Word of Faith movement, a subset of the wider Pentecostal and charismatic movement (her ministry started as a children's pastor at Word of Faith Church and Outreach Center in Bismarck, North Dakota). While there are many commonalities between Word of Faith doctrine and classical Pentecostalism (such as the A/G, Foursquare, Church of God [Cleveland, Tenn.], etc.), there is a difference in emphasis, and a difference in culture.

One way Fischer's camp culture doesn't reflect wider Pentecostal culture is the easy-going, public use of tongues while on the microphone. Classical Pentecostals point to [1 Corinthians 12-14](#) as Paul's guidelines for how *charismata*—spiritual gifts—ought to operate in the church. In particular, Paul says that tongues without an interpretation are to be kept private, just between "[himself and God.](#)" Otherwise, Paul says, the listener will hear it and conclude the speaker is out of his mind.

Which is precisely the reaction many non-Pentecostal and secular bloggers are having to this film.

### Babes in the pulpit

I conclude with my greatest concern over Fischer's approach and that of this particular subculture. In the film, Levi—remember, he's just 12—was given an opportunity to preach in one of the evening chapel services. As we watch him prepare his message, it becomes clear this isn't the first time he's preached—it's just, "I never really preached to a whole bunch of kids that I didn't know."

Then in another service later in the week, a guest anti-abortion speaker singles out Levi for attention, calling him up to the front before launching into a speech.

"Here's the deal," the speaker says. "Before you were born, God knew you. *Extraordinary*. ... He said he formed you in your mother's womb. You're not just a



Levi, the 12-year-old preacher

piece of protoplasm—whatever *that* is—not just a piece of tissue in your mother's womb. You were created intimately by God. Is that incredible?

"God wrote a book about your life and he wrote: 'Levi would be a God-seeker from an early age, and he would become a voice that touched America, and he would not sell out in his teenage years. He would go for God in all those days, and he'd be a man of prayer. And in his twenties he'd begin to shake things real strong for God in the nation. *God's Dream: the Novel of Levi's Life*. Signed, God."

The speaker thumps Levi on the chest and says, "Whaddaya think of that?" Levi, beaming, says, "That's pretty cool!" The speaker replies, "Pretty cool, eh? *You're* pretty cool."

There's applause, and Levi sits down.

While this segment of the video is disturbing on a level I cannot articulate, what I *can* say is this: "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands" ([1 Timothy 5:22](#)). There's a reason for Paul's injunction. It's a mistake to urge and goad young men and women into the public spotlight at an early age.

Pentecostal and charismatic history is littered with the broken careers and shattered integrity of preachers who "got an anointing" at a precocious age. We don't send new converts out into the pulpit for the same reason we don't send babes into the pulpit: they are spiritually unformed. Children's characters are unformed and chaotic. Children simply don't have the spiritual, moral, and intellectual resources to withstand the pressures of public ministry, the stress of being held up as moral examples in the midst of childhood hormonal hurricanes, the pressure of feeding their elders spiritual sustenance without the moral and spiritual *history* that informs wisdom.

This film, its point of view, and what it sometimes depicts angers me. But I'll get over it. I just hope, in the end, that Levi and the other two children who are spotlighted—Victoria and Rachael, both 9—move past it, because the effects of this film will still be real for them long after the rest of us have forgotten all about it.

*Rich Tatum is online media manager for CTCourses.com and former webmaster for the General Council of the Assemblies of God. An [incessant blogger](#), he lives in the Chicago suburbs with his wife and two kids.*

© Rich Tatum 2006, subject to licensing agreement with Christianity Today International. All rights reserved. [Click](#) for reprint information.

## Browse More Movies

[CT Movies Home Page](#) | [Now Showing](#) | [New on Video](#) | [All Reviews](#)  
[Coming Soon](#) | [Discussion Guides](#) | [Film Forum](#) | [Interviews](#) |  
[Commentary](#)  
[News & Misc.](#) | [Special Sections](#) | [About Us](#)  
[Your Feedback](#) | [About Us](#) | [CT Mag Home Page](#)

 [E-mail this page](#)

[Bookmark this page](#)

 [RSS Feeds](#)

 [Back to top](#)

# CHRISTIANITYTODAY.COM

[Home](#) | [CT Mag](#) | [Church/Ministry](#) | [Bible/Life](#) | [Communities](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Schools/Eds](#) | [Shopping](#) | [Travel](#) | [Help](#)

### Magazines/Periodicals:

Books & Culture	Marriage Partnership
Christian History & Biography	Men of Integrity
Christianity Today	MOMsense
Church Law Today	Today's Christian
Church Treasurer Alert	Today's Christian Woman
Ignite Your Faith	Your Church
Leadership Journal	ChristianityTodayLibrary.com

### Resources:

BuildingChurchLeaders.com	Church Products & Services
ChristianBibleStudies.com	Church Safety
Christian College Guide	ChurchSiteCreator.com
Christian History Back Issues	PreachingToday.com
Christian Music Today	PreachingTodaySermons.com
Christianity Today Movies	Seminary/Grad School Guide

**Ministry Partners:** [Christianbook.com](#): Books, Music, Gifts | [eHarmony.com](#): Christian Dating | [MOPS](#): Mothers of Preschoolers



THE LAST  
SIN EATER

NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

A little girl's quest for redemption uncovers  
a dark secret... but the truth shall set her free.

READ THE BOOK BEFORE YOU SEE THE MOVIE....

  
**CHRISTIANITYTODAY**  
 INTERNATIONAL  
*A Communications Ministry*

[www.ChristianityToday.com](#)  
 Copyright © 1994–2007 Christianity Today International  
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Job Openings](#)