

## Jesus Camp

(2006, 1 hour 24 minutes)

Directed by: Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady

Starring: Mike Papantonio, Lou Engle, Becky Fischer

I just finished watching the documentary *Jesus Camp*. The documentary itself was an award winning documentary upon its release, even garnering an Oscar nomination for Best Documentary Features. It is not surprising to me that the movie would be recognized because it does have a liberal slant to its presentation (more on that in a moment).

The documentary sets out to describe the camp experience of a number of young children. The camp experience is set in an evangelical, Pentecostal environment and presents a religious fundamentalism which seeks to inculcate children into the evangelical Christian movement.

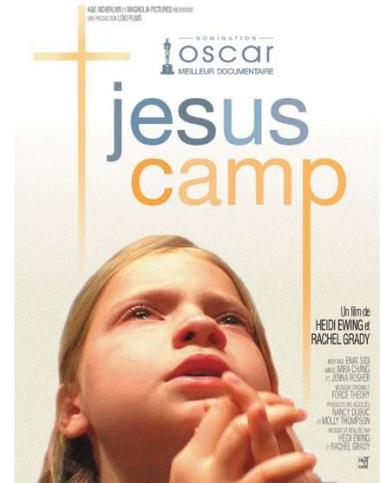
As a traditional Baptist, there are a couple of things that I note about the movie before I share my comments:

- (1) The church leaders profiled are from a charismatic tradition that practices speaking in tongues as part of their worship services and their camp experience. If you are not familiar with this practice this could be a little off putting.
- (2) The church leaders who lead the camp are definitely of a conservative bent, believing that believers should be politically involved in bringing America “back to Christ”.
- (3) The children involved in the camp experience appear to cross the age spectrum from early childhood (children as young as 6 or 7) to the early teen years. There is even a moment when a young man of 12 years assumes the preaching responsibility in one of the camp services.

It seems clear that the movie makers are critical of the approach of the founders of this children’s camp because of how they cut and edit the movie around sound bites of a more “liberal” Christian radio commentator (Papantonio) who criticizes the movement. Additionally, they set a cultural background to the training of these children in the context of pursuing conservative, religious right nominees to the Supreme Court.

Some thoughts on the movie itself: I thought that the movie was captivating – I was enthralled watching the children and their reactions to the messages they were receiving and the emotional responses to the services they were participating in. I was captured by the apparent sincerity of the children (and many of their parents) in their approach to their faith. I was also surprised at the strength of their passion in hearing, listening to and responding to the movement of the Spirit that they sensed in the moment.

Now for my thoughts on the content of the documentary: It seems to me that the evangelical message of hope in Christ and the love of God for a lost humanity has been replaced by a militant, cultural assault by Christian leaders, who are seeking to raise up a cultural army to take “back” our



government and our society. While I understand those with that conviction, this is not my understanding of the Christian gospel in today's world.

I do not believe that Christian (or Christian children) should be trained and taught to be engaged in a cultural battle to defeat the "Enemy". I believe that the message of Jesus Christ is simple and cannot be engaged on a societal level, assaulting the forms of government to enforce faith in God.

I believe the gospel message is summed up simply in Jesus call to love God with all of our heart, all of our mind, soul and strength and to love others as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-38). I believe that we must teach our children about the person of Christ and his salvation to the world. I do not believe that we should indoctrinate our children in political activism, replacing social justice and personal faith in Christ.

This is an interesting documentary. You may find yourself agreeing at different points with all the evangelical viewpoints presented in the movie. It will cause you to think, contemplate and consider your own understanding of the Christian's role in the world.

The best thing this documentary can do is force you to ask the question: How do I see myself engaging my world for Jesus?

May we respond not as soldiers trying to take over the world, not as militants trying to force people to our position, not as aggressors in taking other people captive. May we respond with grace, mercy, conviction and love!