

CHRIST ON SCREEN: THE BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF CHRISTIAN-BASED
VISUAL MEDIA IN EVANGELISM AND ENTERTAINMENT

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

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WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

MEQUON, WI

FEBRUARY 25, 2020

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ABSTRACT

Christian-based media has tended to be a one-or-the-other kind of situation or scenario. Either a production will be doctrinally sound but have distractingly poor production values, or it will have a large budget but suffer from sacrificing sound Biblical interpretation for showy displays. This thesis seeks to analyze four WELS productions (here referred to as the Outreach Series), particularly in comparison to a contemporary Biblical adaptation, *The Chosen* series. In doing so, the thesis will examine what kind of work gets put into media productions. It will look into what is necessary to keep them Biblically sound, and ultimately determine whether or not it is worth the time, effort, and resources for the WELS as a whole or for individual groups to continue producing more films, be they for education or entertainment.

INTRODUCTION

At the tail end of the book of Matthew, Jesus gave his disciples a mission: to make disciples of all nations. How were they supposed to do this? Jesus explained they were to “baptize” and to “teach” and “instruct” concerning everything he had commanded them. The “what,” the means of Grace, was clear. The “how,” on the other hand, Jesus did not specify. Our Savior himself used a variety of tactics to bring God’s Word to his people. He preached in the synagogues, reading the words of Moses and Isaiah aloud for all to hear. He told parables, putting the mysteries of salvation into everyday terms the people could understand. He taught in boats, on mountains, at meals, and on the road. He even performed miracles when he deemed it necessary to do so. Jesus’ entire life was a walking ministry, and he used every tool and opportunity at his disposal for the sake of the Gospel. His disciples did the same. Through the use of epistles, sermons, songs, and speeches, the reach of the Gospel continued to grow.

As generations passed, the Word endured and saw the world change and develop. New technology made it easier for the Apostles to spread their message. In time, cumbersome papyrus scrolls were replaced by the codex, which was easier to navigate, store, and share. Copying the written Word for mass production was still a chore until the age of Martin Luther and the advent of Johannes Gutenberg’s printing press in the mid-1400s.

Suddenly, Bibles, pamphlets, and lectures could be quickly published and spread across the populace at a rate never seen before. Five centuries later, radio and television peppered the airwaves with information and entertainment in a way that must have seemed almost magical. Now humanity is well into the digital age. Everything, including the church and her teachings, is connected to the internet and is immediately accessible.

God’s hand is apparent throughout the history of technology as he continuously opened up new avenues for believers to fulfill the Great Commission. Using this wealth of resources,

Christians can streamline older methods of outreach as well as make use of more modern methods. Preaching in public areas is still done today, as it was in the days of the Apostles. However, the Apostles did not have microphones to aid in making their voices heard in wider settings or podcast platforms to spread their voices even farther. They could not print out hundreds of worship folders to assist lay people participating in the order of service or make use of PowerPoint screens to provide visual aids. Why is this all significant? The mediums have changed; the message has not. Are new mediums a gift from God himself or a needless novelty?

Paul wrote or had his epistles written and delivered by hand, Pastors today use email and Skype to keep in contact with people all across the globe. God's people have always sung songs of praise, but now they are enhanced with electric instruments, recording devices, and digitally copied sheet music. Bible classes can be enhanced with the use of shared online lessons. Believers may lament the fact that they could not be there at Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit broke down the language barrier, the disciples witnessed to 3000 assorted people, and they baptized them in one fell swoop. However, translation software exists that allows missionaries to spread the Gospel globally from a single location. This approach may lack the tongues of fire and epic winds of Pentecost, but it is miraculous in its own right.

The evangelistic methods of the past have, in some ways, become easier and more effective with advances in technology, but they are by no means the only way to get the job done. Peter, James, and John never had the use of television and the internet like the modern Christian does, and yet they shared the Word clearly and faithfully.

The modern Christian has many amazing tools at his disposal. One can share God's Word through music played on the radio, streamed online, and mass-produced as CDs or DVDs. A pastor or laypersons can produce Christian YouTube videos, upload blogs, develop video games, and so much more.

One of the most popular and enduring methods of technological outreach is film and television. Whether it is *Veggie Tales* videos for younger children or more mature fare like *The Passion of the Christ*, there is no shortage of material based on God's Word for an increasingly screen-oriented audience. As far back as 1902, there was a film adaptation of the story of Samson and Delilah.¹ For

Christian material has been adapted for mainstream media consumption time and time again. From the Charlton Heston classic *The Ten Commandments* to the History Channel's widely commended *The Bible Miniseries*,² Biblical media has fostered great interest and critical and popular acclaim.

Of course, Christian-based media has its drawbacks. The truths of Scripture can often become mangled for the sake of entertainment value, as is the case for the big-budget *Noah* and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* films. In other cases, it is not the content but the presentation that is the problem. Christian movies and shows have developed a reputation for being awkwardly written and poorly produced, regardless of the messages they present. With false doctrine and improper representation of God's Word on one end of the row of DVDs, and laughable and sometimes forgettable production value on the other, an important question to explore is: Do the benefits of Christian-based visual media outweigh the drawbacks?

1. French director Ferdinand Zecca's film was a silent, six-minute piece that nonetheless covers the famous Biblical judge's dealings with the Philistines and his own deceptive wife. The film, while historic, is not of the highest quality. At the time of writing, it sits at a 5.6/10 on IMDB.com.

2. The Los Angeles Times reports that, "The Bible was more watched than anything on the broadcast networks Sunday, including the two-hour season premiere of Donald Trump's "Celebrity Apprentice" on NBC (5 million during the 9 p.m. hour). With its premiere, it had 13.1 viewers.

As these questions are examined, because of the wide variety and vault of Christian based visual media available, only two series of videos will be summarized and analyzed. The first of these is a set of four short films aiming to evangelize. The second is an ongoing series that emphasizes entertainment.

From 2009-2018 The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) Commission on Evangelism produced four short films that have been used for both foreign and domestic outreach as well as inreach in the form of church Bible studies. *Road to Emmaus* (2010), *Come Follow Me* (2013), *My Son, My Savior* (2015), and *To the Ends of the Earth* (2018) all use visual media to present the Gospel. Nevertheless, the four films (which will be referred to as the “Outreach Series” going forward) are far from the only church-originating adaptations of Biblical narratives.

In 2017 Dallas Jenkins partnered with production company VidAngel to release the produced a short film adapting the story of the thief on the cross for his church. However, unlike the Commission on Evangelism, Jenkins was no stranger to the world of film and Christian-based media in general. His father is Jerry B. Jenkins, author of the *Left Behind* series of books, which have been adapted to film both in 2000 and 2014. As for Dallas himself, his directing credits include *What If...* (2010), *The Ride* (2012), and *The Resurrection of Gavin Stone* (2016). Jenkins’ first foray into biblical adaption was a 2014 short film focusing on one of the two thieves on the crosses beside Jesus. His project grew into something entirely different. Jenkins is now undertaking the task of creating a multi-season, big-budget series that portrays the life of Christ through the eyes of the people whose lives he touched, titled *The Chosen*. One of the first reviewers on PluggedIn.com, a Focus on the Family product, enthusiastically described *The Chosen* as more than a mere passion play. “For viewers who approach Christian entertainment with a jaundiced eye, *The Chosen* gives us something different: a gritty, grimy, problematic

Palestine filled with the unwashed and impure, giving the production a flavor of authenticity.”

³Jenkins, at this time, has only released nine episodes of his show with the promise of more to come. Due to the timing of their release and the scope and sequence of this study, only the first five episodes will be discussed.

The Chosen and *Outreach Series* come from two very different worlds, yet both seek to bring the cherished stories of Scripture to life through the use of film. The former primarily for the sake of entertainment and “telling the old, old story, in an impossibly fresh way,” ⁴the latter for education and evangelism. It is well worth examining how such drastically different end goals impact the overall storytelling and presentation of both projects.

Each episode of *The Chosen* and outreach film was analyzed and reviewed for this thesis before interviews with producers Mike Hintz, Steve Boettcher, and Dallas Jenkins took place. With this in mind, each review will provide initial thoughts that will be inspected more closely in light of the subsequent interviews.

Through these two offerings, the benefits and blessings that come from Christian media will be explored and the drawbacks and issues that come with producing them critically considered to answer the question: Is it worth the time and resources of the WELS as a whole or an individual group to produce more films, either in their current format or styled more akin to *The Chosen*?

3. <https://www.pluggedin.com/tv-reviews/the-chosen/> accessed when and date

4. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/interview-dallas-jenkins-first-multi-season-drama-life-christ/>

ANALYSIS OF THE OUTREACH SERIES

The four films of the *Outreach Series* were created through the hard work and dedication of Pastor Mike Hintz, Steve Boettcher, Mike Trinklein, and many others. The (initially planned three-film) series was an ambitious undertaking that had not yet been attempted by the Wisconsin Synod. So many waters needed to be tested and lessons learned along the way.

Back in 2006, the WELS Commission on Evangelism had worked out the rights with Northwestern Publishing House for ownership of a series of Bible stories illustrations produced first for Sunday school classrooms. The initial idea for films came from Paul Hartman, former director of the WEL's Multi-language Publications, and it was to transform this artwork into animated features for kids. These Biblical cartoons would have been used for children's Bible study much in the same way the basic illustrations were intended to be, but two concerns arose from this idea. First, animation was (and still is) an expensive and challenging endeavor. Even if the skillset and equipment were all present, the cost would remain an issue for such an untested venture. Second, there was the fear that producing animated films would be deemed childish. The idea of using film for evangelism was met with enthusiasm, with the caveat being that animation would not be as impactful as live-action.

Thus, the Commission on Evangelism decided on a live-action project. Pastor Hintz was then serving as director for Commission on Evangelism, but he was not directly involved with the beginning of the *Outreach Series*. The idea of managing a movie was foreign to him until the task fell into his lap with the production of *Come Follow Me*. Suddenly, Hintz found himself with the responsibility of making the call whether or not a production would be financially feasible. He began working closely with Steve Boettcher,⁵ and at times money became tight.

5. Steve Boettcher has gained acclaim working as director and producer for many projects with PBS. Among his works include *Mary Tyler Moore: A Celebration* (2015), *A Return to Grace: Luther's Life and Legacy* (2007), and *Betty White: First Lady of Television* (2018).

Hintz was not only in charge of determining what the budget for each of the three successive films would be, but he also tasked with procuring those funds and deciding if entering into a film contract would be a good idea or not.

Finances aside, there was much work to be done concerning the content of each film and how to best present it on screen. The producers noted that, while the WELS' Commission of Evangelism's initial offering of *Road to Emmaus* was a little rough around the edges, the proceeding films display a gradual improvement in dialogue, acting, and production quality.⁶ The creators were learning as they continued to produce these films. The human factor should not be forgotten as shortcomings are criticized and merits are praised. These movies were the product of months of preparation and planning by a dedicated group who genuinely wanted to use God's gift of visual media to share the Gospel with others.

Road to Emmaus

The first of the Outreach Series, *Road to Emmaus* (2010),⁷ focuses on just that, sharing the Gospel. After a brief opening montage that recaps the life and death of Jesus, the story properly opens with two mournful disciples traveling on the titular road. A stranger, secretly Jesus, joins them and asks what has them so downtrodden. The disciples explain how they had believed that the man they called Messiah would liberate the Israelite people from their sorry state. They remark on how powerful of a teacher he was, and how his great influence attracted great hatred. Jesus then explains that the recent events were all according to the prophecies of Scripture. He walks them through the story of Moses and the Egyptian captivity, the Flood, and the Passover, and the prophecies of Isaiah. Slowly, the two disciples begin to understand their mysterious

⁶ Mike Hintz, interview with Tyler Swiderski, November 15, 2019.

⁷ Boettcher, Steve, dir. *Road to Emmaus*. Boettcher/Trinklein Television Inc. 2010

friend's words. As they stop to eat, Jesus speaks a blessing and reveals his identity to the two men before suddenly disappearing. The initially stunned pair rush to tell the other disciples of their experience, only to be met once again by Jesus and his loving words, "peace be with you."

Road to Emmaus presents the story solidly and accurately. Some flourishes are added to the disciple's conversation to fill out the dialogue. Still, it is overall very true to the source material, segueing smoothly into the account of Jesus appearing to his disciples, as found in Luke 24.

Great care went into making sure that what was presented was accessible enough to the viewer, anticipating and answering the potential questions of viewers and breaking down simple aspects of our faith in a way that a new believer or unbeliever could follow. The films recount basic biblical history in a way that lays out how God fulfilled his promise of a Messiah, in Christ. Who the Christ is, what he accomplished, and why this is relevant, are all covered. In other words, *Road to Emmaus* makes it a point to walk through the core tenants of the Christian faith at an even pace.

With all of this being said, the film suffers at times from stilted dialogue and slightly awkward acting. As the trio make their way down the road, they make odd pauses in their steps to talk to one another, frequently touching one another's shoulders in a way that is meant to convey comfort and familiarity but is nonetheless overused. The pacing is thrown off by a repetitive question and answer format that eventually transitions into a very thinly veiled dramatization of a "God's Great Exchange" conversation.

The dialogue was not written in such a way as to portray a captivating drama. Instead, *Road to Emmaus* has a firm emphasis on outreach and education. This emphasis in itself is not a bad thing, but the fact that the dialogue suffers for it can be a turn off for some viewers. This first film could be likened to a generous gift wrapped in homely packaging. What is evident on the

surface may serve as a turn-off for someone who might otherwise dig deeper to see the treasure within. This first film represents well one of the dangers that film risks falling into, that the presentation of the message can overshadow the message itself.

On the positive side, *Road to Emmaus*, as well as the following films, comes with helpful study guides. Each installment in the *Outreach Series* has easy to find study questions and discussion starters on the WELS website.⁸ The provided questions encourage viewers not merely to watch a film, but to dive deeper into the text. Many Bible stories are referenced and discussed in only thirty minutes, and there is a lot to unpack and dissect. One might view *Road to Emmaus* as a better resource for believers doing a Bible Study. In regards to its use in outreach, there were still a few awkward wrinkles to iron out. While it may be considered decent overall for what it is, some flaws must be recognized. As a reviewer for BoxOfficeRevolution described it, “As this rendition is, it mainly just feels like a tack-on where it could have been the main thing. Perhaps another filmmaker will remake it in the future.”⁹ Not the worst for an initial outing, but in need of improvement.

Come Follow Me

Released in 2013, *Come Follow Me*¹⁰ serves as an immediate follow-up to the events covered in *Road to Emmaus*. It opens with the events of Holy Thursday. Jesus displays a servant’s heart to Peter by washing his feet, institutes Holy Communion, and makes the shocking announcement that he would be betrayed, denied, and abandoned all in short order.

8. For the sake of reference, the discussion guide and a series of reflective questions from the WELS website for *Road to Emmaus* have been included in the Appendix.

9. <https://boxofficerevolution.wordpress.com/2018/02/12/road-to-emmaus-2010-movie-review/>

10. Boettcher, Steve, dir. *Come Follow Me*. Boettcher/Trinklein Television Inc. 2013

As the sequence opens, it is immediately noticeable that the acting has improved since *Road to Emmaus*. The disciples look rightly horrified at Jesus' warning. Peter is intense in his determination to follow Jesus even to death. The pacing is more precise, moving through the weighty events of that Thursday in a matter that feels neither rushed nor stilted. Events flow naturally from one to another.

The focus of this film is Peter, through whose eyes the viewer next observes Jesus' pained prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Actor Bruce Marchiano, who plays Jesus, portrays Jesus' fear and his determination to do his Father's will, quite effectively in this scene. When Jesus is arrested, his calm and controlled demeanor clash with Peter's panic, fear, and anger as the disciple brashly slices off Malchus' ear. In Scripture, Peter's colorful personality is often vividly on display, and actor Emilio Doorgasingh presents it well. His panic is evident as he continuously denies his Savior, and the regret he bears afterward is a clear burden on him.

Here more is added to Peter's character than what is specifically recorded in the Passion accounts, as Doorgasingh creates a sullen Peter who is unsure if he even wants to see Jesus after the resurrection. This unworthiness culminates in Jesus' gentle conversation with Peter, where it is made abundantly clear that not only is Peter forgiven, but that Jesus also still desires for Peter to preach the Gospel for him. He likens Peter to the Prodigal Son, whose forgiveness was not earned but freely given by his loving father. Peter, in the same way, feels unworthy. Jesus loves him still.

Doctrine and drama are blended more smoothly in this installment, and the added artistic touches prove themselves impactful. In one scene, for example, the disciples are discussing how the Messiah would bring Israel into an era of glory. This discussion contrasts with the image of a bloodied Jesus hanging on the cross.

Greater work also went toward presenting the character's personalities in a way that feels more personal and relevant. Peter's internal struggles not only match what we know of the real historical figure, but they also mirror the viewer's spiritual struggles. John reminds Peter that all of the disciples ran at Jesus' arrest, but Peter shot back that he was the only one who solemnly vowed never to abandon his Lord. How easy is it for modern-day disciples to fall into the same trap of self-assurance, only to give in to temptation and no longer consider oneself worthy?

There is still some odd physical contact and the occasionally stilted delivery of a line, but overall, *Come Follow Me* is a good step in the right direction. It becomes a tad self-indulgent at the very end as Jesus looks directly into the camera and urges the viewers to follow him as Peter did, but the message is otherwise clear and well presented. This second installment still works better as a tool for Bible study than for evangelism, but it is at least more substantive than the "walk and talk" approach of *Road to Emmaus*.

It is never good to focus so much on drama and storytelling that the truths of Scripture get washed out. It can also be distracting and counterproductive to present Bible stories in a cheesy and ridiculous way. *Come Follow Me* is evidence that the Commission on Evangelism and production team were starting to learn how to develop a proper middle ground between the two. The storytelling is more involved compared to that of *Road to Emmaus*, but the central Gospel message remains at the forefront.

My Son, My Savior

My Son, My Savior (2015),¹¹ sees the attention shift from Peter to Jesus' Mother, Mary.

Interestingly enough, the film starts with a flashback to Mary's younger years, showing her as she partakes of the Passover. She questions the purpose of this practice, and her father explains

11. Boettcher, Steve, dir. *My Son, My Savior*. Boettcher/Trinklein Television Inc. 2015

to her the importance of the meal. It serves to point the Israelites back to God's deliverance of his people from Egypt and to point forward to the greater sacrificial Lamb of God. This extra scene does a solid job of establishing Mary's faith as well as her understanding of her son's role in salvation.

Following this is Mary's meeting with Gabriel and her conversation with Elizabeth. Interestingly, the production team chose to skip over the story of Zachariah losing and regaining his voice with the birth of his son, John. The focus of this film is clearly Mary, and her son. Mary's conversation with Elizabeth is a joyful one, but her talk with Joseph does not have the same excitement. Joseph is fearful, both for his reputation and for the reputation of his fiancée. As Scripture lays out, he had planned to divorce her quietly until Gabriel encouraged him to keep Mary as his wife, and that her son indeed would be the Savior of humankind. Joseph's internal strife is well-acted, and his wishes to do right by Mary are evident.

What follows then is a reasonably accurate dramatization of oft-recited Luke 2. The story jumps to Jesus' presentation at the temple, where a joyful and relieved Simeon sings his praises to the newborn king. Also noteworthy is the fact that the film includes the prophetess Anna, who is otherwise a frequently forgotten character in this account. After this, the story jumps ahead further and provides a glimpse at the ministry of an adult John the Baptizer. He points to Jesus as the Lamb of God, serving as an excellent parallel to the film's introductory scene. The account does not include Jesus' baptism itself. Instead, it skips ahead to the Wedding at Cana and other moments in Jesus' ministry. Throughout these scenes, Mary is watching her Son and pondering his words in her heart.

Out of the four installments of the *Outreach Series*, this entry covers the most material in the quickest amount of time. Rather than detailing Jesus' various miracles, the focus is instead placed upon Mary's thoughts and feelings as her son goes about his ministry. All of this naturally

leads to Jesus' death on the cross and his concern for his mother's well-being. He entrusts a visibly shaken Mary to John's care.

Finally, the film bookends with Mary, having seen her son rise from the grave, glorifying God for her son, her savior. She fully sees that her Jesus was the sacrificial Lamb of God, and she praises God for allowing her to be his mother.

Noteworthy in this film is that much of the footage of Jesus on the cross (as well as the footage of women announcing his subsequent resurrection) is reused from *Road to Emmaus*.

The themes of *My Son, My Savior* are clear. As Mary's Magnificat punctuates various scenes throughout the film, we get to see Jesus not only as the Savior of the world but as the son of a humble and loving mother who needed salvation. One could easily see this film piquing the interests of people outside the church.

Although the film provides a decent overview of Jesus' life on the earth it does not spell everything out for the viewer. Instead, it encourages the viewer to look deeper into the stories they are watching, with the added lesson of appreciating God bringing the Savior to the world through such humble means. *My Son, My Savior*, continues the upward trend of *Come Follow Me*. The WELS Commission on Evangelism was hitting its stride as the team continued to produce these films. Curiously, this is not a universal opinion. BoxOfficeRevolution ranks *Road to Emmaus* at a 5/10, *Come Follow Me* at a 4/10, and *My Son, My Savior* at 3.5. IMDB.com similarly has this downward trend, with the respective films sitting at 8/10, 7.2/10, and 7.1/10. These numbers show that, like any other film, opinions may vary depending on what the viewer expects to get out of it.

To the Ends of the Earth

To the Ends of the Earth (2018)¹² is the final installment of the *Outreach Series*, and is also the least connected. Rather than focusing on Jesus and the immediate people in his life, focus shifts to Paul and his ministry in Philippi. As such, the movie avoids the use of recycled footage that the previous two installments had. It is also worth noting that the setting feels much more fleshed out, with large crowd scenes and set pieces peppering the stories of Acts 16. The film also has the most dramatic approach to Biblical presentation so far, referencing various details and events of Scripture without overtly showing them, and intertwining Biblical narratives, so that the events are seen as though they are unfolding in real-time.

As the film begins, the once zealous Saul is lying face-down in the dirt as the voice of Jesus asks why Saul is persecuting him. There is an intriguing perspective shot from Saul's blind point of view, but the viewer sadly sees neither Ananias nor the scales fall from Saul/Paul's eyes. Instead, the timeline jumps right into the events at Philippi. The film introduces shady people who peddle false gods and fortune-tellers, and one peddler, in particular, advertises a "snake god" who can predict the future. Also seen is Paul, briefly interacting with a woman named Lydia in the marketplace. Much of this movie cleverly sets up the events known from Scripture—the healing of the possessed woman, Lydia's baptism, and the jailer at Philippi.

Paul occasionally adds in bits of his backstory, informing Lydia that he serves as a tentmaker and that he was once a zealous follower of the Laws of Moses as she is. It is during this conversation that a much smoother approach at dramatizing God's Great Exchange is evident. Lydia and her friends were so devoted to following the Law, believing that they needed to keep being pious and obedient to earn God's favor.

12. Boettcher, Steve, dir. *To the Ends of the Earth*. Boettcher/Trinklein Television Inc. 2018

When Paul points them away from zealous Law-following and towards Jesus, one man angrily demands to know how a man put to death on the cross could save the world. Here, Paul explains Jesus' active and passive obedience on our behalf in a very eloquent and composed manner. News of Paul spreads, and the equilibrium of the town becomes upset over him. Eventually, the snake god girl approaches him, announcing him to be a servant of the Most High God. Paul, distraught, casts the demon out of the girl and he is immediately chastised for hurting business. Paul and his companion, Silas, are thrown into prison under unjust pretenses until an earthquake frees them. From here, the viewer is introduced to the jailer to whom Paul had witnessed and baptized. The jailer receives further development as he listens to Paul preach to his family in his house.

The stories presented are accurate, the acting the most convincing so far, and the messages taught come across loud and clear. By this fourth production, the Commission on Evangelism found its footing with Biblical films.

The Outreach Series—The Process

The *Outreach Series* is far from an obscure project with no presence in the public consciousness. Copies of the films were routinely purchased and given away by congregations in large stacks in the weeks building up to Christmas and Easter. Each installment received attention in the synod's monthly *WELS Connection* videos. Christian day schools and even Martin Luther College held screenings of the films after chapels and during school assemblies. Laypeople were not merely made aware of these films. They were encouraged to view and share them.

Pastor Mike Hintz and Steve Boettcher each revealed a better picture of the desired audience and use of these films. They also shared the obstacles that naturally come with this sort of project. For Pastor Hintz, this was a welcome task, but one that nonetheless came with a few surprises and difficulties. If funds were lacking, for example, it was on Pastor Hintz to make the decision that the production would be a no-go. Thankfully, he spoke with many generous donors who were passionate about the idea of evangelism through film. Sometimes, these donations would come as a tremendous surprise.

God be praised, all of a sudden, something would happen. I would make an appeal at a group meeting in Milwaukee, and a mission counselor came out after the appeal, and I had said I needed I don't know how many hundreds of close to a thousand dollars or something. He came out later and said I have been in contact with an individual, and he said you've got the \$100,000 we need.¹³

While Pastor Hintz did not become involved at the outset of these films, his background with outreach made him a good fit for this work. He was enthusiastic about his task and believed that the films would serve a useful purpose. However, this did not mean it would be an easy job. Pastor Hintz saw firsthand the kind of financial stress putting together a movie could bring. *Road*

13. Mike Hintz, *Ibid.*

to *Emmaus* was not an expensive film to make, but improvements on the set, costumes, scriptwriting, and many other things lead to a substantial increase in spending.

The *Outreach Series* ended on a high note with *To the Ends of the Earth*. Further films of equal quality could prove themselves to be beneficial, but the Commission on Evangelism sadly does not have an unlimited budget. It was blessed to receive the donations necessary to produce the four films, but such generosity cannot always be assumed. To produce further films would be to risk having them canceled due to insufficient funds. As Pastor Hintz said, “God be praised that enough people believed in these films to want to support them financially.”¹⁴

Aside from finances, other considerations are necessary when making a movie, especially when that movie intends to share the Word of God. Such a movie needs to have a clear idea of not only what it would want to present, but also how it would be presented. Then, once the proper medium is chosen, a fitting story is still needed.

Whatever this first attempt at a film was going to be, the intent was to present the foundational doctrines of Christianity succinctly. The story of the Emmaus disciples was decided as the best option since it tied together nicely the events of Easter with the promises of the Old Testament.

Let's put real people in the roles to make it seem like it's real people. You have to understand the educational level of who we're serving overseas is sometimes a lower level of education. So if you show them an animated (movie), maybe it doesn't quite seem as real as what the philosophy was. But if we show real people and Jesus was a real man. Oh, now I can, as a pastor or missionary I can pivot more to that. So that was the idea, and the reason the *Road to Emmaus* as the first project was that it allows the opportunity of connecting the Old Testament and the New Testament.¹⁵

If a production is going to reach out to a broad audience, those producing it will want to make sure it resonates with that audience in the proper way. Steve Boettcher's comments about

14. Mike Hintz, Ibid.

15. Steve Boettcher, interview with Tyler Swiderski, December 7, 2019.

animation are interesting in this regard. Animation is not an inherently childish medium. Many films and shows have even utilized animation for adult audiences. However, animation does set the presented story outside of reality, to some extent. Keeping *Road to Emmaus* in live-action grounded it in reality. This mentality is essential for any project that aims to be the “opening salvo,” the introduction to further Biblical teachings. It needs to be clear from the start for any witnessing prospect that the stories and ideas shown to them are fact, not fiction. Jesus, Peter, Mary, and Paul were all real, historical figures, but introducing them via animation could have clouded that fact.

Road to Emmaus, at its core, is a simple story of two men joined by a third as they conversed down a road. It involved very few set changes or supporting actors, as the meat of the film is what these men were discussing. Boettcher remarked that it intertwined the promises of the Old Testament with the fulfillment of the New Testament.¹⁶ Scripture needs to come alive for the viewers, and the actors need to play their roles not as fictitious characters, but as real people who looked forward to Christ’s coming and sought to serve him. Pastor Hintz spoke to the process of developing the primary characters used and how their narratives weave together to present the Gospel in a coherent, accurate, and attention-keeping way. There was, after all, a narrative to be told.¹⁷

There were originally only meant to be three films produced, not four. These three at first were a trilogy that presented both the message of salvation and its effect on the believer. *Road to Emmaus*, while placed in the New Testament, is actually about the fulfillment of Old Testament promises. The Messiah is coming, but how is that relevant to me?

16. Steve Boettcher, Ibid.

17. Mike Hintz, Ibid.

With this core message in mind, *Road to Emmaus* features a stylized form of the “God’s Great Exchange” approach to evangelism. Why should the prophecies of people who lived generations ago apply to a person living today? Because those prophecies were fulfilled in Christ, the one who died to take your sins away.

The midpoint of the trilogy *Come Follow Me* assumes that a person already believes in Jesus as his Savior. Faith has been created, but what does that mean? *Come Follow Me* explores discipleship through the eyes of Peter, presenting what it means to not only have faith but to put that faith into action.

Concluding the trilogy was *To the Ends of the Earth*, which addresses the life of a disciple. The disciple goes forth to share with others this message of the Gospel that he has come to cherish. Notably, this final installment does not portray a Christian’s life as carefree and comfortable. Paul’s suffering is made clear, but so is the hope of the Gospel. Paul meets with broken people whose lives are turned around by the very same message that had turned his own life around not so long ago.

The overarching narrative of the three films was not the only thing that took careful crafting, of course. Developing the main characters for each film was a unique process, Pastor Hintz wrote character profiles for each principal role.¹⁸ For *To the Ends of the Earth*, this included Paul, Lydia, the demon-possessed girl, and the jailer at Philippi. These four characters needed to be both Biblically accurate in their depictions and relatable to the audience.

Lydia sought out righteousness but did not yet know Jesus. She served to reflect humankind’s search for something greater—a higher power, a definitive morality, an absolute

¹⁸ Pastor Hintz was able to locate his original documents for *My Son, My Savior* and *To the Ends of the Earth*, and both character profile lists have been added to the appendix.

truth. Lydia found this truth in Jesus, revealing that he is where the audience can find it as well. The power of evil overcame the slave girl. Granted, today in America, demon possessions are far less prevalent, but they sadly still exist around the globe. However, even American audiences can see the oppressive hold that various addictions may hold over them in this little girl.

Alcohol, drugs, pornography—there is no shortage of oppressive evil in the world that can wear a person down and plague their conscience. Christ removes that burden. The jailer personifies despair at all the evil of the world. Pastor Hintz explained: *“He saw the worst side of humanity. And what hope was there? What hope was there? Instead, I’ll kill myself rather than face my own demise and shame—maybe even coming to my life being taken from me by the authorities because I let the prisoners go.”*

Paul, of course, would share the hope of the Gospel with this poor man and the gospel would turn his life around. Finally, Paul himself shows a Christian living in a world hostile to his faith. Surely this is an experience with which many people of faith can relate. Yet Paul persevered by the grace of God, showing that this is the case for all believers.

Audience Impact/Message

Evangelism is not just about grabbing someone’s attention, but about maintaining that interest and keeping the conversation going. These movies were not designed to be bland statement of the facts, they were to appeal to emotions and be relatable. When it comes to evangelism, one needs to meet people where they are in life. Both Hintz and Boettcher understood this well.

Come Follow Me uses Peter to reflect not only the harsh guilt believers feel when they fail to obey God but also the joy that comes with forgiveness. *To the Ends of the Earth*, as Hintz laid out, displays a whole spectrum of human emotions and experiences. Even *Road to Emmaus*

does a good job of portraying the hopelessness the disciples had at the loss of their friend and Savior grow into hope-filled joy and optimism.

My Son, My Savior effectively portrays the life of Jesus through the eyes of his caring mother, but it had a more specific target audience in mind than the other three films. The first two films coincided with Easter and focused primarily on the resurrection. *My Son, My Savior* was a Christmas outreach film. And yet, *My Son, My Savior* had another goal in mind with its production reaching Latin Americans According to Pastor Hintz:

We've got a lot of comments and a lot of feedback, mostly positive. And the pastors are saying we would like something that we could use for Christmas. We've had two movies for Easter. Can we have something that we could use for outreach at Christmas? And you can imagine the use that this could be in Latin America, for example predominantly Catholicism. Yes, predominantly Catholicism.¹⁹

My Son, My Savior was designed to serve as an outreach tool to Hispanic Catholics at its creation, and it continues to be used as such today. The Spanish translation was broadcast during the 2019 Christmas season in Venezuela and Argentina²⁰. The Commission on Evangelism utilized the largest broadcasting outlet possible, , to air *My Son, My Savior* six times over December. an audience of millions was expected²¹.

From this approach, it is clear to see that the Commission on Evangelism carefully examined how it could use *My Son, My Savior* in a way that would, from an earthly perspective, produce the maximum impact. The film was tailor-made for a Catholic audience, it was translated into Spanish, it was made to be shown on the broadest possible platform, and even the timing (Christmas) coincides with the overall subject matter of the film.

19. Mike Hintz, Ibid

20. Steve Boettcher, Ibid

21. Steve Boettcher, Ibid

Such considerations are always important with widespread outreach projects like this. In what language will it best be suited? What platform will be the most beneficial? Even the timing of an outreach effort makes a big difference. There is a reason, after all, that *Road to Emmaus* and *Come Follow Me* tend to receive a more significant push around Eastertime, while *My Son, My Savior* is seen more as a Christmas film.

The WELS, unfortunately, does not have specific productions to use in witnessing to Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, or other religions. Perhaps, if further films were to be made, this would be a worthwhile path to take. As it stands, the four films still approach universal experiences and emotions—fear, hopelessness, self-doubt, and so on—to present stories that are relatable regardless of religious background.

Script Writing

A WELS outreach film needs proper finances and relatable characters, but these become pointless if they are misused. The Bible is God's inerrant Word, written as he wanted it to be. However, this does not mean that Scripture was written in the same way a script would be. The Bible has the overarching story of Christ's merciful love for sinners. It contains beautifully written poetry and songs along with meticulous recordings of genealogies and populations. However, it was not written with dialogue, blocking, scene arrangement, and character arcs in mind.

Actors/Acting or Type of Presentation

Bruce Marchiano, the actor who played Jesus in three of the WELS films, had been cast in the role several times in the past. Most notably, he acted as Jesus in the 1993 film, *The Gospel According to Matthew*. This film dramatizes Scripture in a more direct way than the *Outreach Series* does, using a voiceover to read the words of the Bible dramatically. At the same time, the

actors recite their respective passages. The *Gospel According to Matthew* was part of the Visual Bible Project²², which also put out films that were verbatim dramatizations of the books of John and Acts. These films continue to provide useful visual aid in Bible studies.

Director David Batty similarly put out beat-by-beat reenactments of the four Gospels for the Lumo Project, all of which are readily available on Netflix.²³ Again, these shows are useful for those who are already aware of Scripture's teachings and follow along in their Bibles as part of a study. But they are far from dynamic and are unlikely to be watched for the sake of entertainment. Instead, they would be considered more as a visual aid—something supplementary to a sermon or Bible readthrough.

Films that merely recite the Word of God may even contain decent acting and emotions, but they are still handicapped by the fact that the Bible is not a screenplay. Dialogue becomes overly long, and scenes tend to break that all-important rule of filmmaking: show don't tell.

In some cases, liberties had to be taken to make the film more dynamic and engaging while remaining faithful to God's Word.²⁴ On one side was the issue of the films becoming too stilted and awkward, as the Visual Bible films tended to become. On the other side, finances would have to dictate how feasible the filming of certain scenes would be. Miracles could not always be a grand spectacle, set pieces could not necessarily always be teeming with extras, and

22. The Visual Bible Project had three releases: *Matthew* in 1993, *Acts* in 1994, and *The Gospel of John* in 2003. The first two projects featured Bruce Marchiano as Jesus and were verbatim reenactments of the NIV Bible. *John*, however, features Henry Ian Cusick as Jesus and is an adaptation of the American Bible Society's Good News Bible translation.

23. The Gospel of Matthew, The Gospel of Mark, The Gospel of Luke, and The Gospel of John on Netflix each have a roughly three-hour runtime. They are described as word-by-word reenactments, though they notably lack time markers or reference numbers, which can potentially make it difficult to locate specific areas of text within each long production.

24. Mike Hintz, *Ibid*

dialogue needed to be concise while still conveying all the necessary ideas. There was very little room for excess, and so every scene and every word had to pull its weight or else it would be cut.

Pastor Hintz worked with a team of other pastors on developing scripts that in the end were particularly dialogue-heavy and sermon-like. While the content itself was sound, it was not camera ready. Frequently, Pastor Hintz relied on Steve Boettcher or Mike Trinklein to point this out.²⁵ Cuts in narration and dialogue would need replacing with more nuanced acting. A character stating, “I’m sad,” for example, does not carry as much impact as seeing the sorrowful expression on his face would. Pastor Hintz learned the importance of such distinctions while working in a visual medium as opposed to only an auditory one.

Furthermore, even though there were plenty of script cuts done for the sake of smoothness, sometimes scenes needed to be truncated for the sake of the budget. Hintz and Boettcher would frequently need to determine the worth of keeping or axing a scene.

Steve was very quick to remind us every time you have a new scene, it’s \$10,000. That’s rough speaking, it could be more, and it could be less. Every time you have more actors, you have especially speaking parts, the more expensive it gets. And so, we always had this tension of what we wanted to say had to be crunched down and simplified and focused. And so, a lot of the scriptwriting started out real big here, and it just kept getting smaller and smaller and smaller and focused on the visual.²⁶

The movies needed to feel natural yet professional. Hintz readily admitted that he had some blind spots when it comes to the world of editing, scriptwriting, and filmmaking. It was crucial for him to seek out individuals who could offer talents that he would otherwise be lacking. To this end, professional scriptwriter Jas Lonquist came in to assist with *My Son, My Savior*.²⁷

25. Mike Hintz, Ibid

26. Mike Hintz, Ibid

27. Mike Hintz, Ibid

Lonnquist was instrumental both in script treatments and in providing a woman's point of view for a film that used Mary as its focus character. Hintz, Boettcher, or any other man would be incapable of writing from a woman's point of view for a script. Having that kind of perspective directly from a woman is another vital aspect of making a character more natural, more real. These movies aimed not to alienate but to draw a wide variety of people by having the audience seeing themselves in the characters whose lives Jesus impacted. Dialogue that is clunky, robotic, and otherwise unrelatable would distract from this goal tremendously.

It is difficult not to have a greater appreciation for *Road to Emmaus* and its successors after recognizing the amount of work Pastor Mike Hintz, Steve Boettcher, and so many others put into their creation. It was clear that they were continually working on finding a balance between what was financially feasible and what would be impactful and engaging not only for churchgoers and domestic outreach audiences but for foreign evangelism prospects as well. What helps is the fact that they do not end things with just the films. Bible studies go along with the films. The *Outreach Series* was created to get a foot-in-the-door and start a conversation.

Are these films entertaining? They are not epic action films or sprawling epics, but entertainment was not their primary goal.

THE CHOSEN

Although entertainment was not the chief concern of the Commission on Evangelism, what if the entertainment angle received further exploration in Biblical films? Would there be interest in binge-watching a doctrinally-sound retelling of the life of Jesus and his apostles? Director Dallas Jenkins believes the audience is there. His show, *The Chosen*, aims to present Jesus' life using a multi-season television format. Although, Jenkins focus is not on evangelism, he put a secondary emphasis on using the show to promote Bible studies. The question he always comes back to is, "What would make a good show?"²⁸

Jenkins believes the Bible makes for compelling television storytelling, but compelling characters and storylines need to be crafted to connect with a worldwide audience.

As the following episode reviews will make evident, one of the noteworthy things *The Chosen* series does is "fill in the gaps." There are many minor characters in biblical narratives that, from a storytelling standpoint, are simply not fleshed out characters. They are incidental. Jenkins takes many of these figures and tells the story of Jesus through their eyes, providing backstory that would be in line with what we know from culture and society at that time without contradicting Scripture. Simon Peter, Matthew the Tax Collector, and even Nicodemus are all given expanded character arcs not found in the Bible but nonetheless very in-line with culture and context of that day and time.

28. Dallas Jenkins, interview with Tyler Swiderski and Mark Parsons, November 6, 2019

Episode Summaries

Pilot-The Shepherd

Initially, *The Chosen's* pilot episode was produced as a short film for a Christmas service at creator Dallas Jenkins' church. As such, it is notably shorter at a little over 20 minutes runtime. Before the story begins, there is a brief note from Jenkins stating the purpose of the show, the historical background of the Israelites and Romans, and the fact that this particular episode adapts the events of Luke 2. This explanation is unique to this episode, and it is worth noting that this episode is a most faithful adaptation of Biblical accounts than the episodes that follow.

The Christmas story has been the subject of many adaptations. *The Shepherd* keeps things fresh by telling the story from the point of view of a lowly, disabled shepherd. Famous Christmas passages (Micah 5, Isaiah 7 and 9) are uttered aloud by rabbis in the synagogue as hopeful Jews listen to the promises of a Messiah to deliver them from the Romans. This leads the shepherd to ask the rabbi if the Messiah would indeed set the Israelites free from Roman occupation, to which the rabbi very tellingly responds, "Yes, he will be a great military leader."

The rabbi then chastises the shepherd for bringing a blemished lamb for sacrifice, since only a pure and unblemished one would do. Furious, he sends the shepherd away. The show vividly shows just how disrespected and looked down upon shepherds were.

The central shepherd rejoins his friends on a hill, where as the night goes on they begin cracking jokes, catching up, and talking about the Roman oppression. Suddenly, a blinding bright light shines in the shepherds' presence. The angels themselves do not appear on-screen, but the shepherds fall to their knees in reverence and fear before this magnificent sight. After the light goes away, the fear of the shepherds quickly turns to joy, laughter, and dancing as they rejoice in what they just experienced. Then, no longer able to contain their excitement, the

shepherds begin running. The angels gave them the greatest announcement of all time, and the shepherds had to testify what they had heard and seen.

The shepherds are overjoyed as they finally come to the place where Mary has just given birth to the long-awaited Messiah, and one by one, they bow down to him. Each of them looked on in eager anticipation as Joseph cradled the newborn Savior, each hoping they would be the one chosen to hold the infant in their arms. The central shepherd, humble and quiet, is given the honor. Suddenly, he stands up with a sense of urgency, explaining that, “The people must know!” The episode is bookended with the same rabbi as before questioning the shepherd. “Have you found a spotless lamb for sacrifice?” he asks. Of course, the shepherd has.

Following the episode is a brief message from Jenkins—also included on *The Chosen’s* website. He explains his desires to create an in-depth show that not only shows Jesus’ life but also the lives of those around him. He designed a show with sinful, relatable people and their interactions with Christ. His main goal is to create a quality presentation of the greatest story ever told, away from the hands of Hollywood that created movies like *Noah* and *Exodus: Gods and Kings*. He is off to an excellent start.

Episode 1- I Have Called You by Name

The first true episode²⁹ begins with a troubled young girl whose father calms her with the words of Isaiah 43:1: “*Thus says the LORD who created you, oh Jacob, and he who formed you, oh Israel: Fear not. For I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine.*” These words not only give this episode the title, but they also provide the framework for the overarching story of this girl.

29. Jenkins, Dallas, dir. *I Have Called You by Name*. Loaves & Fishes Production. 2019

The setting is Magdala in the year 2 A.D., and this girl is implied to be Mary Magdalene. Flash forward and that that Mary, called Lilith, is dealing with the demon possession, which both Luke 8 and Mark 16 reference. There Jesus is said to have removed seven demons from her. Scriptures do not go into a large amount of detail concerning this, and it is in this respect that the show shines. The bulk of the episode features Mary struggling with her demon possession, even crossing paths with a frightened Nicodemus who is unable to help her. Mary's backstory, as presented in this episode, is not mentioned in Scripture, but it does not feel contradictory to Scripture either. As they do in future episodes, the directors/writers/producers of *The Chosen* do a adequately create reasonable storylines, logically filling in of gaps in the narrative that bring biblical characters more to life.

In addition to Mary, Nicodemus is another notable example of this. The man shows up three times in Scripture, all in the book of John. Initially, in John 3 he is revealed to be a man of high standing among the Jews. Then he briefly reappears speaking with other Pharisees in John 7 over the identity of Jesus and defending him. Nicodemus was finally there after Christ had been crucified, accompanying Joseph of Arimathea as he prepared Jesus' body for burial.

Interestingly, *The Chosen* opts to highlight such a minor recurring character to such an extent that he is one of the primary focuses of the show. As mentioned before, Nicodemus was summoned by the Romans to deal with the disruptive and demon-possessed Mary. Nicodemus found himself unable to be of assistance as the seven demons proved to be far too much for a mere man to cast out.

In a nice bit of foreshadowing, Nicodemus punctuates the moment by stating that only God himself could heal this woman. This incident is enough to send Nicodemus reeling, asking questions, and feeling uncertain. The show does an excellent job setting up why a well-respected Pharisee of all people would come to question Jesus in the dead of night as he does in John 3.

It is finally at the very end of the episode that we see something referenced explicitly in Scripture. An unknown man approaches Mary begins quoting the familiar words of Isaiah 43 to her, calls her by her name—not Lilith but Mary—and finally places his hands on her and relieves her of her demons. The man, of course, is none other than Jesus, who exudes a tremendous sense of gentleness, love, and power all at once as he heals Mary.

This first episode served as a fine introduction that gives the viewer a decent idea of what to expect in future episodes. The viewer will not find the account of Simon and Andrew cutting a deal with Quintus in the Bible, nor Nicodemus attempting to drive out Mary’s daemons. Despite this, however, they serve as logical prequels to the accounts found in Scripture.

Yet in this, there is a danger. The show is undoubtedly entertaining and “feels” very Biblical, but once again, much of what it presents is not mentioned Scripture. The show offers the disclaimer before the episode even begins saying as much, encouraging viewers to read what the Bible is for themselves and compare. This is good and even necessary because it would be very easy for one possibly not well-versed or new in the faith to view this show and wonder why the Bible left so many stories out. Yet when taken for what the show is *meant* to be, *The Chosen* proves itself as a beautiful depiction of these Biblical figures’ lives. It presents Biblical truths, makes the accounts feel a little bit more alive, piques interest in what the Bible says, and even looks very competently and professionally done.

Episode 2-Shabbat

The episode Shabbat³⁰ is possibly the best example of how the show presents biblical truths and familiar teachings in a fresh new way. After being healed by Jesus, Mary is excited to live life anew. Part of this for her includes hosting Shabbat. Meanwhile, Nicodemus hears the

30. Jenkins, Dallas, dir. *Shabbat*. Loaves & Fishes Production. 2019

word of Mary's healing and begins to wonder how it could have been possible. He is distracted and uneasy during Shabbat—a curious thing to see as he is a religious leader with divided attention on this holy celebration! The drama also continues to unfold with Simon and his deal with the Romans. He experiences disapproval from his brother and his wife, but he is nonetheless committed to upholding his part of the bargain with the Roman overseer, Quintus.

More characters interact with each other in ways not outlined in the Bible, but this does not detract from the connection the viewer starts to form with these real, historical people. One is hopeful for Mary as she eagerly yet nervously prepares her dinner. One shares in Nicodemus' unease and gains a sense of frustration against Simon as he misses and misuses Shabbat.

All the while, it is never lost on the viewer that this is a biblical show. Matthew's status as an odd outsider between the Romans and the Jews reveals itself through the fact that he not only eats his Shabbat dinner away from people, he eats it accompanied by *his dog*. Dogs were unclean street animals, which were best avoided by the Jews, but Matthew happily keeps the company of one.

The customs of Shabbat are also very much on display. Nicodemus invites friends into his home. One remarks pointedly to the others that they should get seats as close to the head of the table as they can—a clear allusion to Jesus' warning against choosing a place of honor for oneself, lest it leads to humiliation.

Across town, Jesus sits down and introduces himself to Mary's friends as a teacher from Nazareth of all places. Mary's friend, Barnaby, jokes about whether or not something good *can* come out of Nazareth. This jab references a conversation Jesus' disciples, Nathaniel and Philip, had in John 1. These various references appear to indicate that this show is for all audiences but specifically wants to give those "in the know" a little treat here and there.

Nothing mentioned explicitly in Scripture happens in this episode, only side references. Jesus makes it clear to Mary that it is not yet time for the world to know of him, and indeed, Jesus's official entrance into the public ministry with his baptism would not happen yet for another two episodes. Because of this, it makes sense to fill in more of that time before Jesus truly began making waves. Jesus is still a gentle, soft-spoken man. He does not feel "too perfect" but is instead quite humble and personable. Actor Jonathan Roumie does a beautiful job portraying Christ, making the viewer that much more eager to see how the show will cover some of the more famous accounts of Jesus.

Episode 3- Jesus Loves the Little Children

This out of sequence episode shows what Jesus was doing before coming to visit Mary.³¹ The story unfolds through the eyes of a young girl named Abigail. Abigail happens upon a remote campsite in the middle of the woods and becomes intrigued. She returns with her friend Jeshua, only to discover that the camp's occupant, Jesus, is praying there. He playfully welcomes the two children into his camp and shows gratitude to Abigail for not taking any of his food. Jesus has a gentle rapport with them and makes it clear that he is happy to have them visit, rather than angry to have them snooping around.

It is established that Jesus is a carpenter. As Abigail invites other children to Jesus' camp, he enlists them to help in his woodworking. The children become his students, asking him details about his personal life and his teachings. Jesus reveals to them that he travels around frequently and does not earn much money from his carpentry. "My Father provides everything I need," Jesus tells them. "Is your father rich?" one child replies, causing Jesus to crack a smile. He does mention how he occasionally works for wealthy families, crafting toys for their children. This

31. Jenkins, Dallas, dir. *Jesus Loves the Little Children*. Loaves & Fishes Production. 2019

remark causes Abigail to become a bit crestfallen as she mentions that her family is not wealthy at all, to which Jesus compassionately replies, “Sometimes, that is better.”

Jesus also teaches the children to entrust judgment to God rather than trying to claim it for themselves, and he walks them through various Hebraic hymns and Psalms. He encourages them to pray the Shema, the famous Hebrew prayer from Deuteronomy 6. Jesus leads his students through the Lord’s Prayer, long before famously teaching it on the mount in Matthew 6. Most importantly, Jesus makes it clear that as the Messiah, he did not come to be a political or military leader, but to free the spiritual captives and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. This portrayal of Jesus continues to be consistent with what we would expect him to be like from Scripture. The episode ends on a heartfelt note as Jesus packs up to continue his travels. He leaves Abigail a toy set along with a reminder that he came for all people, not just the wealthy.

It was interesting to see an episode set in between events already portrayed, further developing Jesus as a gentle teacher who cares for people of all kinds. It was a bit surprising that we did not get to see anything else from Simon, Mary, Nicodemus, or any of the other supporting characters in this episode. However, it was an effective way of building tension with Simon’s subplot with the Romans. All in all, this was a well-executed episode. However, the concern is still very much present that a viewer might wonder where this story is located in Scripture. Some of these fears may be lessened by the fact that Jenkins repeatedly says on his website that such a tactic may be used for the sake of the story. What Jesus preaches in this episode beautifully echoes his lessons throughout the actual words of Scripture.

This episode would undoubtedly be a case of Jenkins handing the reigns over to the pastor/teacher/presenter as far as discussion and explanation is concerned. Jenkins sees his job primarily to entertain, but episodes like *Jesus loves the little children* provide a powerful opportunity for pastors to teach as well.

Episode 4- The Rock on Which it is Built

After a brief interlude focusing only on Jesus, we return to the drama unfolding with Simon and the Romans.³² Quintus put Matthew, the tax collector, in charge of following the future disciple and gathering information on him. Simon is feeling the pressure mount as his wife and brothers-in-law begin questioning his actions and chiding him for missing Shabbat. Andrew can tell his brother is becoming desperate as the two of them head out onto the water to fish. Their efforts prove unfruitful, even after the sons of Zebedee join them to help. Zebedee had already shown displeasure at Simon's work with the Romans, but he nonetheless brings James and John to help him out of a bind. The fishermen work all night long with little to nothing to show for their efforts.

The scene is a familiar one, and episode 4 is the most Biblically based yet. After all of the character build-up, the viewer finally get to see Jesus, who was preaching on the shores of Gennesaret, call out to the dejected fishermen. He gently asks Simon for the use of his boat as he finishes a parable. Andrew, who had earlier witnessed Jesus' offscreen baptism by John the Baptizer, excitedly urged his brother to comply. After Jesus had finished his lesson, he asked Simon to let his net out into the water just one more time. A coy smile cracks on Jesus' face as Simon's boat suddenly rumbles, and the nets begin teeming with fish. Such a massive catch would be valuable enough to satiate the Romans, a fact that a dumbfounded Simon is sure to notice. Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James, and John, bidding that they follow him as fishers of men.

The Rock on Which it Is Built was the final episode available when the bulk of the research for this paper was conducted. All of the filled-in plot threads and bits of character development not found in Scripture culminate in the account of Jesus calling his first disciples,

32. Jenkins, Dallas, dir. *The Rock on Which it is Built*. Loaves & Fishes Production. 2019

expertly weaving in details given in Matthew 4, Mark 1, and Luke 5. This moment served as a tremendous payoff and was well received.

The Chosen specializes in such special moments, where recognition and anticipation meet in a satisfying way. One particular review found on Pastorunlikely.com described the moment this way:

I knew the Biblical account they were depicting, so I knew exactly what Jesus would do. I have read the passage many times. It was just so exciting to watch it play out perfectly on the screen. I couldn't take the waiting to see what I already knew would happen. *The Chosen* is just that good.³³

Everything presented here feels like it naturally flows from what came before—a testament to how carefully Jenkins worked to flesh out Biblical narrative with something that feels natural and true to what we already know. As these episodes progressed, Jesus began taking a larger and larger role. The stage is set, and *The Chosen* gives every indication that what is to follow will dive deeper into the ministry and miracles of Jesus, perhaps hedging closer to what is found in Scripture but still with plenty of appropriately dramatic flourishes.

33. <https://pastorunlikely.com/the-chosen-tv-is-amazing-a-pastors-review/?fbclid=IwAR0S470boJX9vt4hsAaaYHKgRpcEVq64apu-8GI07y6lO73uq4ephJjOmgY>

The Chosen Explored

In Isaiah 43:19, the prophet wrote, “Behold, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” Jenkins found special meaning in this passage as he developed his show, even going so far as to use it in his marketing. While there have been many, many attempts at putting the stories of the Bible on screen, none have approached it entirely in the same way Jenkins has.

The History Channel’s *Bible* Miniseries could be considered somewhat similar, using drama and intrigue to spice up these historical accounts. However, that series was meant to be more of a “greatest hits” telling of Scripture as opposed to a slower building series with a narrower focus. The *Bible Miniseries* shows Moses, Samson, David, Jesus, and others, covering the critical and most noteworthy moments in their lives and even fleshing them out more as characters. The series found good use in churches with Bible studies, and it was overall an entertaining series with higher production value than a typical small budget Bible film. *The Chosen* takes a different approach, however, in that it narrows down its focus to just the life of Jesus and those with whom he interacted. It also keeps Biblical accuracy as a high priority, even with its intense focus on interesting storytelling. Jenkins wanted *The Chosen* to be exciting yet personal for the viewer.

Stay in Your Lane

In his work to make *The Chosen* the success that it is today, he learned many of the same lessons that Pastor Hintz and Steve Boettcher did with their films. Regarding the financing for his films, his personal philosophy was, “Don’t drink wine on a beer salary.”³⁴ Jenkins notes the importance of starting off small since even low-budget, low-resource projects can produce meaningful stories.

34. Dallas Jenkins, *Ibid.*

For Jenkins, this meant doing short films for his church. “Stay in your lane,” he insists. “If you don’t have the budget to do special effects, don’t try to do them. If you don’t have the budget for a full-length feature, don’t do it. Embrace the simplicity, and you’ll earn the right to do more.”³⁵

Productions need to work their way up towards being larger-scaled projects.³⁶ To get ahead of oneself could even be to the detriment of smaller projects. Special effects, for example, can amplify a story when done well. However, they can also become distracting and even comical if not done adequately. Jenkins noted this in regards to his earlier projects:

The Shepherd, the short film based on the birth of Christ on our app, was done on my friend’s farm in Illinois. And we shot it in a way that looks great, doesn’t look like a cheap little film, but it would’ve looked cheap if we tried to make it bigger. If we tried to make it epic, it would’ve exposed that we had a limited budget. So I just say try to do it one step at a time and don’t bite off more than you can chew.³⁷

The Chosen does many things right. BoxOfficeRevolution.com praises it for how “the sets, locations, and props feel very realistic and authentic as the series creators demonstrate a clear commitment to looking at the characters in accurate cultural contexts.”³⁸

Nevertheless, such praise does not come automatically; it must be earned. Jenkins did not start with a multi-seasoned epic. In fact he is still building up to that and hoping for success beyond *The Chosen* season one. He has big plans for the future, but those plans needed to start small.

Build and Grow

35. Dallas Jenkins, Ibid.

36. This approach is evident when comparing *Road to Emmaus* with *To the Ends of the Earth*. The latter had a more extensive cast, an increased budget, a more intricate plot, and was even filmed in Morocco instead of Cedarburg, Wisconsin.

37. Dallas Jenkins, Ibid.

38. <https://boxofficerevolution.wordpress.com/2019/05/09/the-chosen-season-1-1-series-review/>

Jenkins' first foray into Biblical film making came with his Good Friday short film. The response to this led him to become more ambitious with his next project, and what would become the pilot episode of *The Chosen* titled *The Shepherd*. But even as the effort grew, it needed to do so proportionately to what Jenkins and his team could realistically do. For this reason, Jenkins was careful with the supernatural element of his show, weighing his options thoroughly before deciding which miracles of Jesus would be shown. His practice with this goes back to *The Shepherd*, as Jenkins needed to be careful how he went about portraying the appearance of the angels to the shepherds.

There's a scene where the angels appeared to the shepherds and A: We didn't have the budget and B: If you show something that supernatural for the audience, instead of enjoying the story and experiencing it viscerally, is now watching it voyeuristically. They're no longer experiencing the story; they're just analyzing the film, wondering if we did a good job or not.³⁹

Jenkins makes a fair point with this. The temptation is always present to overshoot one's abilities and "go big or go home." While the presentation of God's Word in any medium deserves the best of efforts, overzealousness can backfire. Attempts at being flashy and exciting can detract from the human element that needs to be present in outreach videos. Jenkins would argue that the same can be said of productions that even have that entertainment angle to them. There are plenty of big-budget films out right now that are all about spectacle at the expense of the story. While this may work for a summer blockbuster, Scripture requires a more delicate touch. An overfocus on special effects may also be dangerous if the budget cannot afford it. Green-screened backgrounds can look fake, angels can look like something out of a video game from the early 2000s, and the miracles can look so distractingly cheap that they steal focus away from the reason of the miracles' performances in the first place.

39. Dallas Jenkins, *Ibid.*

Character Development

A competent film or show will not use special effects as a crutch, but as an enhancement. Jenkins understands this well, which is why he also spent so much time developing the human element. A viewer will genuinely care about Simon's plight with the Romans, Nicodemus' spiritual struggle, and the joy Mary experiences with her new lease on life because that is where the focus of this show goes.

Additionally, they needed to be dynamic characters who had vivid personalities and compelling character arcs. Not every character could receive such development, which is why Jenkins determined that 5-6 primary roles were needed, much like an average ensemble cast show would have. Thus, Jenkins had his criteria: a cast that relatable and dynamic without being overlarge.

We went through the Gospels, and we were kinda picking out what we thought a person whose character arc was going to be the most "large." The most volatile. It's not interesting to just be introduced to a character who has a very simple arc. It's finding characters who you can find something interesting to talk about and explore over the course of multiple seasons.⁴⁰

In the end, he decided that Simon Peter, Mary Magdalene, Nicodemus, Matthew the Tax Collector, and of course, Jesus himself fit what he had in mind. The fact that more obscure figures are present in this cast deserves attention. The disciples James, John, and Andrew are present in supporting roles, but they do not receive the kind of screentime that Nicodemus has. Nicodemus is by no means a major player in the Biblical narrative, despite his relative importance in Jewish society at the time. Because of this, much of his provided backstory is not found in Scripture but remains in line with what Scripture shows. This is the approach Jenkins

40. Dallas Jenkins, *Ibid*

takes with all of his characters. He wants to use relatable people, but never at the expense of Biblical accuracy. Jenkins even makes it abundantly clear that this is his approach so as not to confuse. He instructs people to read the actual words of Scripture and warns them that some locations and events have been switched around for dramatic purposes.

Most importantly, he emphasizes that his show *is not Scripture*. It is a show based in Biblical history and its cultural and historical context, but it never claims to be the inerrant Word of God itself. Is such an approach necessary when one is making a Bible-based show with the purpose to entertain? While Jenkins believes so, he also makes a note of the fact that his show is to be about stories, not doctrine.

We're not getting into all these doctrinal issues that have divided the church for centuries. I want to protect the show from the clunkiness of religious discussions, but I want to protect the discussions from the show! I want them to be kept separate because I don't want the show to be treated like Scripture. I want to lead that to you, to pastors, to discipleship groups. I'll leave it to them. I'm making a show and providing extra material to allow them to dig further.⁴¹

Jenkins believes that the stories of the Bible can be told without getting into the doctrine involved with them. This is not to say that *The Chosen* is loose or careless with its material. On the contrary, Jenkins frequently refers to the roundtable discussions he holds for each episode, in which a Messianic rabbi, a priest, and an Evangelical scholar all discuss the accuracies and inaccuracies presented. Doctrinal truths are not a priority, but the unifying story of Jesus' life very much is.

Jenkins notes that, while he is an Evangelical and *The Chosen* is coming from such a perspective, he cares deeply about the potential for people across all denominations and religious backgrounds to enjoy his show. "I've found among Mormons, Catholics, Jews, all types of faith

41. Dallas Jenkins, *Ibid*

traditions that I know, they have loved the show because we're just telling you the stories of Jesus."

While the Word of God can be unifying, Jenkins' approach to unity stands in stark contrast to that of the *Outreach Series*. With *Road to Emmaus* and its successors, the doctrine is at the forefront, and each installation makes it a point to teach. This approach may feel more alienating than the methods Jenkins uses, but he would note that with *The Chosen*, the door is not entirely closed on doctrine. Pastors and teachers are not only free but encouraged to use the series as a teaching tool.

It is important to remember that Jenkins did not create *The Chosen* primarily in order to evangelize but to entertain. He wanted to produce a show that people of all denominations could get into the same way they would get into any other series. The *Outreach Series* was made to be shown to people of different faiths and even those with no faith at all. Opposite this, Jenkins has outright said that he does not put much thought towards naysayers and others outside his target audience. He tends to take such negativity in stride, knowing that his aim is not to win anyone over. "Well, why don't you just enjoy this like Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter or Game of Thrones or something like that?" he once responded to one particular poster in an online forum.⁴² His overall mindset is that he wants to produce a show people would be interested in watching for the sake of entertainment. Again, good storytelling is his primary goal, not outreach.

Now tying this together with his philosophy on CGI and miracles, Jenkins made it clear that he does still want to serve God with this show. It may not have a focus on outreach, but it does strive to portray Scripture in a way untainted by Hollywood, as he would put it.

The endgame for me, ultimately, is for (spoiler alert) people to love Scripture even more and love Jesus even more by seeing just how much Jesus loved you and the people

42. Dallas Jenkins, Ibid.

around him. It allows Christians and non-Christians to just enjoy it, and they get moved and impacted emotionally without being prepared for it! Because typically in Bible shows, you're not actually all that emotionally moved. You're just going from miracle to miracle, verse to verse. Here you're much more immersed.⁴³

Jenkins' Evangelical background, is evident here. For him, the emphasis is on having a personal, emotional experience with Scripture. As Lutherans, this is not the kind of approach upon which we would want to base our productions. The *Outreach Series* is not all about subjective experiences. Instead, its installments share the objective truths of the Bible as undebatable fact while avoiding being emotionless and impersonal. The emphasis on outreach and provided study guides attest to this as the point out connections between screen and Scripture. In contrast, *The Chosen* devotes more time to character interaction and intrigue. While this may be a more exciting approach, it also leaves more up to interpretation by not following Scripture quite as rigidly as the *Outreach Series* does.

The Chosen is rapidly gaining attention and acclaim, and it is not difficult to see why. It is, after all, the first-ever multi-seasoned show based on the life of Christ. It also provides a unique and successful model for going about this type of project.

"Behold, I am doing a new thing," Jenkins quotes all the time. Thanks to clever marketing strategies and an effective crowdfunding campaign, *The Chosen* has become the #1 highest crowdfunded media project of all time, raising over 10 million dollars from over 19,000 people, as *The Chosen* proudly testifies on VidAngel.com⁴⁴. This is a show that is not likely to be found on network TV or major streaming services like Netflix because it attempts to be completely independent of outside influence. It has its own source of income with its

43. Dallas Jenkins, Ibid

44. <https://studios.vidangel.com/the-chosen-reg-cf>

crowdfunding, and it has its own media platform, *The Chosen* app, with which one can watch the show.

Essentially, this app is compatible with Roku, Chromecast, Apple TV, and Samsung Smart TVs without needing a subscription. Jenkins excitedly describes it as, “Literally one of the most friction-free ways of watching a show ever, other than just turning on a TV and watching a channel, which again you have to own cable or a subscription for.” He admits that this approach is new and could be a turn off for some people, but this does not bother him. “This is something I think Christians should embrace. So let’s rewrite the rules a little bit instead of waiting for Hollywood to lower its scepter a little bit and allow us in the room on their terms.”⁴⁵

Jenkins went through great lengths to preserve his vision and keep it out from the influence of Hollywood. “He who has the gold makes the rules” he mentions again and again, and that sadly has a ring of truth to it. Jenkins believes that this independent sort of approach is something Christians should learn to be both familiar and comfortable with, and it is obviously a method that has worked out well for him. Pastor Hintz would even echo some of these sentiments, to a certain extent. While Jenkins saw this more independent approach as a boon for creative freedom, Pastor Hintz saw the need for independence as a potential obstacle. When asked about how worthwhile it could be to produce further outreach films, Hintz had this to say:

I think it would be a great idea to continue to use the medium of movies to teach and to use for outreach. But I don't see it to be something that would be coming from synod because of manpower and cost. I don't see it going forward with any kind of seriousness from a synod point of view because of just those two things.⁴⁶

What Jenkins is doing is working, and working well, at that. He has raised millions of dollars and hopes to raise millions more to continue producing his series. Is *The Chosen*

45. Dallas Jenkins, Ibid.

46. Pastor Mike Hintz, Ibid

entertaining? Does it treat Scripture with the proper respect? These two questions continue to hang in the air for Jenkins, knowing that an approach like his requires a careful touch.

There is certainly an interest present for more Christian based visual media. The success of the *Outreach Series* and the rapidly growing fanbase for *The Chosen* can attest to that. But with outreach, the task is so much more than telling prospects fun and engaging stories.

The Bible is history—salvation history—and it deserves to be treated as such when shared with others. Jenkins is careful as he deliberately makes entertainment his primary aim, and yet this still comes at the expense of doctrine. He is not looking to teach us specific doctrines, but he is open to pastors and teachers using his show as a teaching tool, accompanied by actual Scripture and proper study.

The WELS has been very blessed to have been able to produce four short films that maintain that doctrinal aspect, which makes them more effective teaching tools. But does this mean they cannot also have some artistic flair to them? Can they not be entertaining? *To the Ends of the Earth* shows that both can coexist within the same film.

Steve Boettcher would also go on to make the point that Biblically-based films and shows are perhaps better suited for Bible study, while outreach efforts require a little bit more creativity and thinking outside the box. He spoke about his involvement with 2017's *A Return to Grace*, a movie he had a hand in producing that focused on Martin Luther's life and the importance of the Reformation. Boettcher made a note of the fact that this film, while not an adaptation of a Biblical narrative, could still serve as a type of outreach.

Likewise, Boettcher is working on producing a film about church architecture and what it is about these magnificent buildings that make them stand out so much to laypeople, and how even something like a church's design can be a useful tool for outreach. He would support the

idea of using more Christian-based media for evangelism purposes, but such films and shows do not necessarily have to be limited to adapting Bible stories. This opens us up to a new world of possibilities, extending our ability to reach people where they are and show that the Word of God permeates all aspects of life.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Boettcher also posited that films like *Noah and Exodus: God's and Kings* could have their use as well. They provide Christians with the opportunity to explain what really happened in Scripture, as opposed to merely mocking the movies for their numerous inconsistencies. What kind of media is beneficial for evangelism? As it turns out, according to Boettcher, just about anything could be so long as the teachings of the Bible receive chief emphasis. How well did this adaptation portray this story? What can we learn from the movie's depiction of this miracle? What did this episode do well, and how could it be improved? The possibilities are there; they only require proper thought and preparation.⁴⁷

47. Steve Boettcher, *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

Does the WELS need to produce more Biblically accurate films to counter the onslaught of inaccurate depictions of Jesus and his Word? Although there may be interest in such ventures, a balance between competency, accuracy, and practicality is vital. Competent screenwriters, editors, and producers would be needed to give the film legitimacy. A film's message can easily be muddled if the production value is not up to par. The technical side of filmmaking cannot be ignored.

Careful Scriptural study and a proper understanding of the presented text is also necessary. This sort of job cannot fall to only one person. Blind spots, biases, and misinterpretations could occur for even the most seasoned of pastors, as they are fallible human beings. If the proper teaching of Scripture is to take the primary focus, then there must be a higher level of scrutiny. Pastor Hintz worked with a whole team of other pastors, and even they needed further editing work on the dialogues they would produce.

Finally, a worthwhile Biblical production needs enough practically-minded individuals who can sort out costuming and props, location scouting, financial feasibility, and any other logistical problem that might come up. As Pastor Hintz and Steve Boettcher have made clear, the more complicated a production is, the higher the likelihood of problems arising.

Faithful servants who can accomplish all of the above tasks also do not come cheap. Donors have graciously made *Road to Emmaus* and our other films a reality, but as Pastor Hintz laid out, workforce and cost can be severe detractors. It was a real blessing from God that the four existing films of the *Outreach Series* were able to be produced, but none of them were without difficulty. New films would undoubtedly bring new burdens. Would these burdens outweigh the potential benefits they could yield?

New outreach films are not an absolute necessity for outreach, especially when we already have four films that are effective in their own right. However, we have to make good use out of what we already have. If more films were to see production, they would benefit greatly from continuing in the quality of *To the Ends of the Earth*. With this, there must be creativity, passion, and the faith to hold to the reassuring words of Isaiah 55:

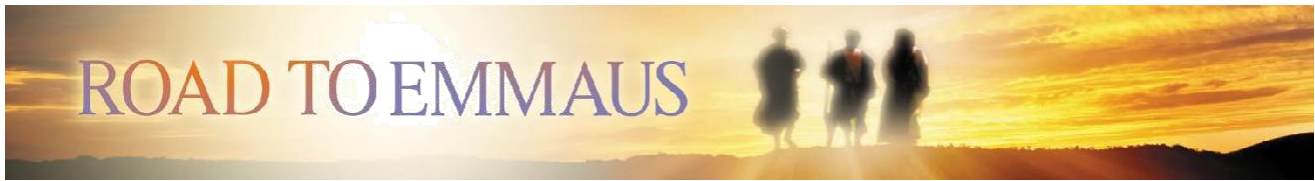
“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

God can bless the efforts of his people in the way that he knows is best, but he also encourages his servants to use the blessings he already gave them. The WELS Commission on Evangelism does not need to walk in the footsteps of *The Chosen*. It does need to continue to use the resources it already has for the advancement of the Gospel. This means *Road to Emmaus* and its successors are sufficient. If an opportunity should present itself to produce more movies, the Commission should feel encouraged to do so.

However, further projects could produce unnecessary strain when four perfectly useful films are already in existence. There is no need to actively pursue a fifth or sixth installment to the *Outreach Series*. While the visual medium has proven its worth several times over, those who seek to use film as an outreach tool already have a wealth of resources to use in such matters. Whether it is *Road to Emmaus*, *The Chosen*, or even less exact fare like the *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, the stories of Scripture’s presence on screen is far from lacking, and each film and show can be used as a tool to point to actual Scriptural teachings. Some just require a little more legwork and clarification.

The benefits of Christian based media do indeed outweigh the drawbacks, so long as those who use the media as outreach do so wisely. Movies and films should not be a crutch and ultimately cannot replace face-to-face evangelism, but they are a powerful tool when used correctly. God be praised that he can bless our efforts to spread his Word whatever our efforts may be. Let us continue to pray for those who seek to bring His Word to others in new and exciting ways, that they may never compromise the truthfulness of God's Word for the sake of showmanship, but may present God's beautiful message in as pure a way as possible.

APPENDIX

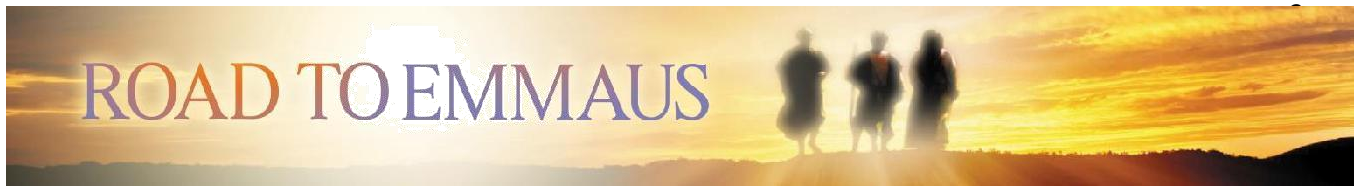


The Road to Emmaus movie follows the account of Luke 24:13-49. Two of Jesus' followers were leaving Jerusalem and solemnly walking back to their home village of Emmaus. Having witnessed the crucifixion and death of Jesus three days before, they were confused and distraught. Jesus' death had dashed their hopes that he was the Messiah, the Savior from sin that they needed. All at once, Jesus, who had risen from the dead that day, joins them but keeps his identity secret. As they walked along the road to Emmaus, Jesus "explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27), proving that he is the Savior that God sent to free people from the guilt of sin and the power of death. The movie portrays what the conversation between Jesus and the two disciples might have been. It builds the story from actual accounts and passages of the Bible.

Questions for Reflection

1. Events in our lives may leave us trying to answer the question, "Why?" Pretend that you were one of the two disciples talking over troubling events or dashed hopes in your life. What would you be talking about today that has thrown you into confusion?
2. What do you understand better about Jesus after watching the movie?
3. If you were asking people today what they would be looking for in a Messiah, what might you hear?
4. As you watched the movie, what did you learn about:
 - The evil in the world?
 - Your heart?
 - How God views sinners?
 - The key to our relationship with God?
5. After seeing the movie, how would you explain to someone why Jesus had to suffer and die?
6. If you were one of the disciples on the road talking with Jesus right now, what would you still want to ask him?
7. What does the conversation on the Road to Emmaus teach you about God and his involvement in your daily life? How does it help you view your life in the future?

For more information, please go to: www.WhatAboutJesus.com.



Discussion Guide

The Road to Emmaus movie follows the story of Luke 24:13-49 and imagines what the conversation between Jesus and the two disciples might have been. It builds the story from the actual stories and passages of the Bible (the writings of Moses and the Prophets as well as the further explanations in the New Testament).

Discuss in small grouping:

1. Describe the impact the movie had on you.
2. Events in our lives may leave us trying to answer the question, "Why?" Pretend that you were one of the two disciples talking over troubling events or dashed hopes in your life. What would you be talking about today that has thrown you into confusion?
3. What did you understand better about Jesus after watching the movie?

Return to larger group discussion (ask for any feedback from small group discussions, if time).

4. If you were asking people today what they would be looking for in a Messiah, what might you hear?
5. Jesus brought the conversation back to the writings of Moses and the Prophets to help unfold the mystery of his death. Determine what that reveals about the Bible.
6. As you watched the movie, what did you learn about:
 - The evil in the world?
 - Your heart?
 - How God views sinners?
 - The key to our relationship with God?

7. Choose the person or event mentioned in the movie that you most relate to and explain why.

8. After seeing the movie, how would you explain to someone why Jesus had to suffer and die?

9. If you were one of the disciples on the road talking with Jesus right now, what would you still want to ask him?

10. What does the conversation on the Road to Emmaus teach you about God and his involvement in your daily life? How does it help you view your life in the future?

Character Profiles

1) The Apostle Paul

(Primarily, Portrait of Paul, by Valleskey)

- a) 50 years old
 - i) Converted at 30
 - ii) Zealous – like Luther
 - iii) Leading something akin to the Reformation
- b) Diaspora
 - i) 3 to 7 million Jews living outside of Palestine (ca six times as many as in Palestine)
 - ii) About million in Alexandria, Egypt and another million in Syria (which comprised a somewhat greater percentage of the population)
 - (1) Strong presence in Persia and southern “Turkey”
 - (2) Present in most other cities of the empire
 - (3) Synagogues outside of Palestine
 - (a) Greek-speaking Jews
 1. Septuagint
 2. Lingua franca
 - (b) Greek-speaking proselytes
 - (c) Greek-speaking worshipers (σεβόμενοι τον θεον) – Term applied to pagans who accepted the ethical monotheism of Judaism and attended the synagogue, but who did not obligate themselves to keep the whole Jewish law; as particular, the males did not submit to circumcision), not to be confused with a proselyte (προσηλυτισ) who had ‘come over’...ben fully converted to Judaism (BAGD)
- c) Paul exhibits
 - i) Judaism
 - (a) spoke Hebrew and presumably Aramaic (because he lived in Jerusalem, possibly since his teenage years)
 - (b) Pharisee (possibly 3rd generation cf Acts 23:6 – Pharisee, son of Pharisees (plural form in Greek), studied under Gamaliel in Jerusalem “one of the greatest rabbis of the first century” (Valleskey, 26), who as part of the school of Hillel was apparently more open to outreach rather than the stringent and conservative school of Shammai (V, 26)
 - (c) Has a trade: visits and instructs by day, makes tents by night (V, 25)
 - ii) Greek – Hellenism
 - (a) From Tarsus—a center of Greek culture – Athens of the east
 - (b) “Greek may well have been Paul’s native tongue” (V, 22)
 - (c) “In about one-half of his OT quotes, he uses the exact wording of the Septuagint” (V, 3)
 - (d) He quotes 3 Greek authors (V, 22)
 - iii) Roman
 - (a) Pax Romana – during Paul’s entire lifetime
 - (b) Relative safety (Pirates removed, relatively safe travel)
 - (c) Roman roads – Much of Paul’s work followed two Roman roads in “Turkey” and across Macedonia from Byzantium to the Adriatic
 - (d) A Roman citizen (Acts 22:27,28)
 - (e) Did Paul speak Latin?
- c) Goes to synagogues – some converts, especially proselytes and God-fearers, leaves Synagogue, churches form

2) Lydia

- a) From Thyatira of Lydia (province)
- b) Widow? (husband not referenced)
- c) Unusual for women to have a business

- d) “Women’s market” – were there separate markets?
- e) “Lydia” not referenced in Philippians
- f) 40’s when Paul meets her at Philippi?
- g) Speaks Greek?
- h) A worshiper of God—not a proselyte; looking for morality (cf immorality and abuse in her Roman/Hellenistic world)
 - i) Mystery religions – did offer immortality but “their appeal was generally sensual and sexual” (V 9)
 - ii) “Epicureanism...tended to degenerate into a hedonistic quest for sensual pleasure” (V 7)
 - iii) Stoicism: “go with the flow,” “helpless pawn in preordained plan,” fatalism (V 8)
 - iv) Romans 1:21-32

3) Servant Girl

- a) “demon worship was really the operative religion of the vast mass of the people of the empire” (V, quoting Allen who quotes Dr. Bigg, p 10)
- b) Possessed by demons, used by profiteers – abused
- c) Paul confronts demonism head-on, cf. Ephesus, Acts 19:13-20, event in Philippi

4) Jailer

Dictionary of New Testament Background (Philippi, Prison)

- a) Philippi was a Roman colony
- b) Latin was the official language
- c) Greek would have been spoken in the market place
- d) Roman prisons
 - i) Caste system influenced the judicial process
 - ii) Corruption prevailed
 - iii) Imprisonment was a disgrace
 - iv) Prisons were awful – especially the “carcer,” some lighter levels of imprisonment (cf Paul under house arrest)
 - (1) Little food
 - (2) Hot or cold, dark
 - (3) Sleepless – no real beds
 - (4) Boredom
 - (5) Abandoned by many
 - (6) Chains, stocks

Mary

- Ages during the course of the movie: maybe about 5, 15, 30, 50
- Income: lived in a small village, wife of a tradesman. Not destitute, by no means wealthy.
- Social standing: a descendant of David, but from a small remote village in Galilee.
- Education: familiar with the Scriptures, likely taught as a child orally at home; her Magnificat indicates a deep knowledge of the Scripture and Israel’s history.
- During Jesus’ earthly life, she lived every day with the mystery of God made flesh.
- Personality: “Humble, but assertive in a motherly way...worrying, protective to the point of sinning...willing to serve, but not a pushover...sure of herself, sure of her role...not complaining...saw herself as a servant by grace.”

John the Baptist

- Age during the film: ca. 30-33

- Income: lived as a Nazarene
- Social Standing: a priest's son
- Education: knowledgeable of the Scriptures. Zechariah was a priest from the division of Abijah, and Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. That seems to imply that his house was a place of deep devotion to the Torah and Israel. Both father and mother may have been involved in diligently training John. (He would have gone to the synagogue for training too).
- Did he have personal insight into the abuses of the Sadducees and Pharisees, since he grew up in a village in Judea, perhaps close to Jerusalem—i.e., did he see some of the corruption among the religious leaders from the inside?
- Personality: courageous, bold, out-spoken, reformer, a leader/teacher who had disciples. Understood his role—humble servant. Tough enough to live in the wilderness. Apparently struggled with doubt on at least one occasion when he was in prison.

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