

Children and film

a theological reflection

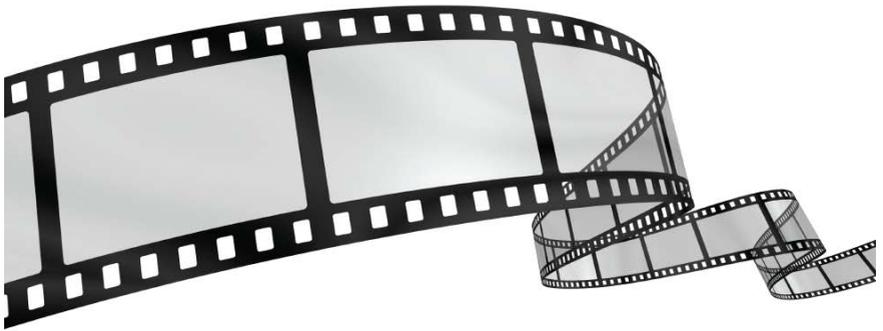
by Colin Udall



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Introduction

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This booklet is one in a series of reflections written from a desire to offer the United Reformed Church some materials to allow greater engagement in theological reflection in all aspects of our ministry with children: as part of our worshipping communities, as part of our families, as part of our communities.

For the purposes of these reflections we are using the definition of a child as a person under the age of 18. In doing so, we recognise the huge variety of experiences that children and young people have in these formative years.

This reflection looks at how we can find theological, moral and ethical viewpoints in secular films and how we can engage children in discussing Christian faith issues using films and film clips as discussion starters.

Why Use Films?

The average cinema attendance in this country is above 3 million per week according to the UK Film Council in 2010 (www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk) and whilst the complaint is always that there is too much sex and violence in films, the fact is that the top ten films for 2009 are all family films (source: UK Film Council) and the top ten films of all time with only one exception are also all family films. (Source: Box Office Mojo). Children who are conspicuous by their absence in our churches are frequenting the cinema in their millions each year.

One of the words used in putting a film story together is the word *fabula*. It is a Latin word meaning 'play' or, more literally 'talk' or 'narrative'. It is from this word that we get our English word fable. Fables and parables are similar in that they are stories with a moral message and many films have a moral message, both explicit and implicit. It should also be remembered that the Biblical parables found in the New Testament as told by Jesus do not mention God and rarely have religious settings. Thus we can follow his example and look to contemporary stories that are relevant to the current society and contain our spiritual fingerprints.



Schools Film Club, sponsored by The Guardian newspaper and the Government has been taken up by schools across the UK, primary and secondary, and many are using themes through their film showings across a period of time. There are now websites such as ministryandmedia.com based in America and Reel Issues (www.biblesociety.org.uk/reel-issues) based in the UK which are providing resources, Bible notes and referenced film clips for preachers and leaders of school assemblies, discussion groups and youth clubs. Youthwork magazine, a monthly magazine for Christian youth leaders has a film clip for discussion starters each month.

So not only do we have a source of material in films that we and children can readily access and engage with, but there is a growing library of resource and reference material that can enable us to get more out of the films we are watching. For example, let us take the recent Pixar film *Up* (Pete Docter & Bob Petersen, 2009). On the face of it, it is a film about an old man, Carl and his small friend going on a wild adventure to Paradise Falls where they meet with Carl's childhood hero who turns out not to be the hero Carl always looked up to. Look a little deeper into the film and a number of themes emerge such as keeping promises, heroes and villains, friendship and loyalty, any number of which we can relate to the Bible and its teaching.

“We are fortunate to live in a time when music, film and literature are more accessible to the general public than ever before. Thankfully some of the books, records, and movies out there have something valuable to say about spirituality. The messages may not be explicit, they may even take a little bit of digging to find, but they are there if we are attentive.”

(Higgins, 2003, p254)

Why use Hollywood (or Pinewood) films rather than Christian films? With few exceptions, religious films and films about religion are generally so tied to Biblical study and teaching and doctrine that they are too literal to be of use other than as a straight Bible Study. There are a wide range of resources available for studying films such as: *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) at one end of the spectrum to *The Miracle Maker* (2000) at the other which, could enable a deep discussion of a biblical theme. On the other hand a Bible study, house or youth cell group embarking on a discussion using clips from *Chicken Run* (2000) usually makes for a much more fun evening where people don't have to feel they need to be a Biblical expert to contribute but can enjoy an equally challenging discussion.

There are commercially available Lent courses studying films such as *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005) and *Chocolat* (2000) and I have personally contributed to the United Reformed Church's Vision4Life process with Lent Group studies related to *The Terminal* (Steven Spielberg 2004) and *Pay It Forward* (Mimi Leder 2000).

Jesus, in his command to us to 'love one another' challenged us to consider how the world might be a better place if we just treated people differently, with love, tolerance and respect instead of suspicion and hatred. Our opportunity to make the world a better place is well illustrated in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) or just about any Christmas film. Christian themes such as justice, acceptance, redemption, sacrifice and sacrificial death can be found in countless films and we can even challenge ourselves about a church's commitment to 'welcoming all' by watching films such as *The Mission* (Roland Joffé 1986) for examples of how barriers to God are all human-made and how the church is often not the place to turn to when you are in need of compassion and empathy.

In the same way that we can sit in church and feel that the preacher is talking directly to us, when we watch films, we can believe that they are speaking directly into our lives because something that is said and/or done in the film resonates with something that we recognise from our own experiences. It is the same with the children and young people that we work with. Why has the *Toy Story* trilogy been hailed by many critics as the best trilogy ever made if it is not because we can all empathise with the characters in the film and the friendships and loyalties that are tested throughout the continuing storyline?

“The Bible itself is mostly story...One of the things about life is where we can connect our story with the story of others. That's what goes on when we watch movies, for example. When you can build a relationship with somebody based on your story and their story looking for those areas where they intersect, that can be a pretty powerful thing. And I think what the Bible is all about is connecting your life story with God's story.”

(David Bruce at www.hollywoodjesus.com/radio_spiritual.htm)

Of course it doesn't always work and sometimes, as is suggested by Higgins, quoted above, the spiritual message takes a little digging to find. Once, when leading a weekend for young leaders we watched the film *Erin Brockovitch* to look for the leadership qualities that are displayed within the film. One young person commented that to be a good leader "you obviously have to swear a lot".

The study of films is subjective and one person's interpretation of what is seen may be very different to another's. We only have to study the disciples' reaction to some of Jesus' parables and the fact that on occasion he had to draw them to one side and explain in more detail to them the message he was trying to get across to see that this is not a new phenomenon. It is still the case that one film critic can hail a film as the best of the year whilst you wonder if another critic was watching the same material such is the panning he or she gives it.



Summary

If we are to counter the popular complaint from young people that the Bible is boring and irrelevant, then we should be seeking to engage our young people with the Bible in relevant and radical ways and using films and film clips offers another way of doing this. There are a number of books and websites that can aid us in our choice of film clips and also provide discussion questions and accompanying Bible passages. How differently might young people view a film if they are given a couple of key questions about it before they settle down to watch it? Using the example of the film *Up* quoted above, it no longer becomes a simple adventure story if, before viewing the film, people are asked to look out for how many times Carl is asked to keep a promise or when he realises that heroes are not all that they seem to be. Even for those who have not seen the film before, this will not detract from the film or spoil the plot for them without also highlighting the themes that can be found within. In the same way that book clubs are enabling people to view a book in a different way, so we can use questions to shed a different, spiritual or Biblical viewpoint on a film.

We are asked to be counter-cultural. What better way to do this than at the same time also being culturally relevant? We can talk to individuals or groups of young people, not just agreeing that a film was a great film, but exploring the storyline in relation to a parable or Biblical character's story.

Most of us can remember going to the cinema for the first time and what that film was. Not only can I remember my first film at the cinema – *Jungle Book* – but due to the circumstances of travelling there, I can also remember that was the day I learnt my left from my right! How many of us so clearly remember the first sermon we heard?

We all have opinions about what makes a good film and we can all say what our favourite film is, even if that changes almost daily. Take *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont, 1994), starring Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. It was hardly known after its first cinema release in 1994, but is now regularly quoted as people's favourite film and tops the International Movie Database (www.imdb.com) Top 250 Movie Chart. This was largely due to the power of word-of-mouth. The British Film Institute has published a book on the film where, amongst other things, the images of Christ portrayed in the film are discussed.

Have you ever thought about having a church film club? Hiring or buying films is fairly inexpensive, particularly if they are not the latest releases on DVD. You can get advice about the need for licences from Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) for congregations and church film clubs. You don't have to study a film every time, but use the opportunity to show older films just to enjoy being together and socialise. Our own Pilots group occasionally holds a "Black and White" night where everyone dresses up in black and white clothes and watches Laurel and Hardy, Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd films. Laughter is great for the soul, too.



Discussion Questions

For individuals:

- What was the first film that you saw at a cinema and what can you remember about that film or going to see it?
- What film has had a significant impact on you and why?

For children/youth workers:

- How might you best be able to study a film in relation to a theme you are following?
- What films can you think of that you can use with your young people that illustrate a Biblical theme such as love for one another, acceptance, promises, forgiveness or redemption?

For churches:

- How might you explore the Bible with young people using more culturally relevant material such as film clips?
- How might you set up a film club in your church as an all-age activity for studying the Bible and our Christian faith in action?



Further Reading

Barsotti, C and Johnston, Robert K (2004) *Finding God in the Movies – 33 Films of Reel Faith*. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

Higgins, Gareth, (2003) *How Movies Helped Save My Soul – Finding spiritual fingerprints in culturally significant films* Relevant Books, Lake Mary, USA

Kermode, Mark (2003) *The Shawshank Redemption* British Film Institute, London

Leonard (S), Richard (2006) *Movies that Matter, Reading Film through the Lens of Faith*. Loyola Press, Chicago

There are also a number of more academic books studying film and theology. The books authored or part-authored by Clive Marsh are a good place to start.

Youthwork a monthly magazine for Christian youth workers contains resources each month to help with planning your youth work activities, including a film-related discussion or activity. See the website for more details: www.youthwork-magazine.co.uk



Selected Websites

(Please note that some of these websites are only available on payment of a subscription)

www.biblesociety.org.uk/reel-issues

www.bfi.org.uk

www.ccli.co.uk

www.filmclub.org

www.hollywoodjesus.com

www.imdb.com

www.ministryandmedia.com

www.optimus-education.com

www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/2009statsrelease

Film-related resources on the Vision4Life website:

www.vision4life.org.uk/index.php/bible-year/main-courses/film-for-lent/

www.vision4life.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/pay-it-forward.pdf

www.vision4life.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/big_screen_theology.pdf

Filmography

Chicken Run (Peter Lord & Nick Park, 2000)

Chocolat (Lasse Hallström, 2000)

Erin Brockovitch (Steven Soderberg, 2000)

It's A Wonderful Life (Frank Capra, 1946)

Jungle Book (Wolfgang Reitherman, 1967)

Pay it Forward (Mimi Leder, 2000)

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe (Andrew Adamson, 2005)

The Miracle Maker (Derek W. Hayes & Stanislav Sokolov)

The Mission (Roland Joffé, 1986)

The Passion of the Christ (Mel Gibson, 2004)

The Shawshank Redemption (Frank Darabont, 1994)

The Terminal (Steven Spielberg, 2004)

Toy Story Trilogy (John Lasseter, Ash Brannon, Lee Unkrich, 1995 – 2010)

Up (Pete Docter & Bob Petersen, 2009)

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