

# Boomer Church: *Saved!* and *Jesus Camp*

T.E. Wilder

Two films *Saved!* (2004), a fictional drama, and the documentary *Jesus Camp* (2006) examine a type of evangelicalism that is widespread in America and the films discover remarkably similar characteristics in it. Both find an experience centred, voluntarist and spectacle oriented religion with intense focus on group participation and moralistic commitment. This type of religion sees itself at odds with the culture around it, even in combat with it, and it is this trait that particularly offends the liberals who made these films. Yet at a deeper level this evangelicalism is a capitulation to that culture.

*Saved!* is the second film directed and co-written by Brian Dannelly and also his second teen film with a homosexual theme. In *He Bop*, a short made four years earlier, the plot is “Sixteen year old Ryan Walker struggles to find his gay identity guided by the spirit of his dead grandmother.” Drawing on his own experience in a Baptist high school and using a cast of Hollywood brats he has now made a satire on boomer evangelicalism, set in a suburban Christian high school.

One would expect this sort of film seriously to misfire. It is very hard to capture the feeling

of a religious subculture, its cant phrases and the peculiar ways its members interact. Much of a sect’s behaviour is based on codes and conventions accepted and understood only by the members, and even if it is reproduced by the actors it remains mysterious to a film audience. Furthermore, someone with an axe to grind, as is evidently the case here, is usually driven to exaggerate, distort and vilify. This also would be picked up by the actors, producing many false notes. But this movie works, and except for the moralizing liberal closing, offering the audience some sense of a happy ending through acceptance by the characters of the conventional “liberating” attitudes, the movie manages to keep its target group reasonably in focus. What made this unlikely success possible?

The verisimilitude is not to be credited to the cast, although they are competent enough. The principal character of high school student Mary is played by Jena Malone in her 23<sup>rd</sup> acting credit, having 13 years in television and feature films behind her. Mandy Moore plays Mary's best friend turned adversary, and this is her 12<sup>th</sup> credit. Other major characters are played by child actor and sometime Michael Jackson toyboy Macaulay

Culkin, and Eva Amurri (daughter of Susan Sarandon and director Franco Amurri) as the school's sole Jew. The only cast member who seems to come from the real world is one of the boyfriend characters played by Patrick Fugit of Salt Lake. He is also the one actor that does not seem to belong to the ensemble, appearing reserved and more mature than the others. This group at best has only heard vague rumours of Christianity and certainly cannot be contributing personal knowledge to their performance. The fact is that this movie could just as well have been made using the cast from any teen movie or television series.

The explanation is simple. This is not a film about fundamentalism (n.b. the filmmakers think it is), or pentecostalism, or confessional Christian communities, or ethnic Roman Catholics but about Boomer Evangelicalism. Boomer Evangelicalism is to Christianity what a rock song with some lyric changes is to a psalm. All the film makers had to do to capture it was to add to their moralizing plot the typical teen movie characters and cliches and include numerous references to Jesus in the dialogue. Once again, one might suppose that this would be a scenario for failure. But the funny thing, and the point of much of the satire, is that behind the mouthing of religious sentiments these characters are no different (no better) than anyone else. The motivations and the rationalization for underhanded behaviour are common and comprehensible to human nature in general. Nor are the specific religious beliefs any sort of barrier between the action and the audience. Christianity, in its theological evangelical meaning, does not exist in this movie. There is no grace; everything is good works and merit. Even repentance and conversion come across as a form of effort and work—that is, moralism—which is at the heart of liberalism as well.

The plot is about students at a Christian high school and a couple of adults included for a small amount of inter-generational interaction and as examples of adult hypocrisy. The type of religion is mildly charismatic Arminianism (the only “tongues” is a put on performance by the lone Jew) with an emphasis on emotional group worship, manipulated “decisions” to recommit or to get saved, with the understanding that this commitment has to be sustained by will power to avoid loss of salvation. This is backed up by youth organizations, small group meetings and plenty of peer pressure. We never see a church or church service, however, nor at any point do we see a complete family. The religious activity takes place in school assemblies, unsupervised youth group meetings and individually. The one para-clerical individual is “Pastor Skip” a sort of school chaplain, parent of one of the supporting characters and a failed husband who is engaged in a flirtation with the widowed mother of Mary. This seems headed for a full-blown affair despite the moral qualms he has about what he is doing. Outside his role the religious practice is dominated by teenage girls and the peer pressure that they can bring to bear.

Other than Pastor Skip the male characters are: Mary's boyfriend who discovers he is “gay” and is sent off to an institution for a cure, where in the company of similar cases he makes a full commitment to a lifetime of homosexuality and rebels against the authority of the group home; the son of Pastor Skip and would-be boyfriend of Mary who believes that his father's religion is a self-destructive mistake; and the crippled brother of the principal believer/hypocrite at the school who is sure that he is not a Christian and is principally interested in smoking and sex with the Jewish girl at the school.

Inside the school students move through an estrogen cloud. All the teachers shown are woman, the girls dominate activities and do all the planning and the only male authority is the chaplain, Pastor Skip, played by Martin Donovan, who clowns and tries to play the part of cool teenager to be accepted, to the embarrassment of his son. (The film may not intend this as a criticism. Brian Dannelly's next project is said to be about a wimp who goes to boot camp and is made into a man by a tough female drill sergeant.) Mary's mother, acted by Mary-Louise Parker, strives to look below her age and is incapable of taking adult responsibility (until this also is resolved in the happy ending).

The influential and dominating character at the school is a senior girl who goes about with a clique of supporters whom she bosses and who eventually turn on her, as is standard in teen movie and TV plots. She is also the most earnest Christian, always trying to get others saved or more committed, but eventually is revealed as a hypocrite, because from the point of view of the film this religion is dysfunctional and only hypocrisy can result from the attempt to maintain the level of commitment to distorted values that it demands.

The life of the students is shallow and fairly licentious. Most share with Bill Clinton the idea that anything short of intercourse is OK because it does not cross the technical sin boundary. The school assemblies are geared toward emotional experiences, with singing, swaying, arms waving in the air and dramas on stage. The extras botch these scenes as they look like metronomes tipping side to side. School sponsored entertainment includes Christian rock bands and dances. (The film pointedly makes them look like typical high school gym dances.) Here the film works against itself. The more the students are

shown to be like everyone else in their tastes, entertainment and socializing the more the phoniness of this subculture is underlined. But at the same time it shows that the students are not oppressed or restricted by their religion, but find it compatible with the usual suburban high school experience.

A significant element is the Christian rock music (for example that of the band hired for the prom). This music came into evangelical circles starting in the late sixties but much more in the 1970s as it was adopted by the 1960s generation. I first heard of rock in church in 1969 when a cousin showed me a youth publication of his United Methodist denomination with a rock band "liturgy". He thought that was very daring and said it certainly could not be done at his congregation. Only two years later I was performing with my electric guitar in a evangelical churches of a variety of denominations. By 1971 typical small towns had evangelical coffee houses or rock concerts with full bands in complete sixties dress and hair attended by similar audiences. Where this sixties youth culture with its dress and music was not accepted in existing churches the fans of the new practices simply started their own church and para church groups. Almost always there was a charismatic aspect to the doctrine which because of its historical origins meant Arminian theology as well.

Larry Norman was the breakthrough artist and icon of this change. He saw himself as part of the counter culture. In an interview with CCM Magazine he was asked to think back to 1969, and his first Capitol Records release:

Upon This Rock was written to stand outside the Christian culture. I tried to create songs for which there was no anticipated acceptance. I wanted to display the flexi-

bility of the gospel and that there was no limitation to how God could be presented...

I used abrasive humor and sarcasm as much as possible, which was also not a traditional aspect of Christian music. I chose negative imagery to attempt to deliver a positive message, like "I Don't Believe in Miracles" is actually about faith.

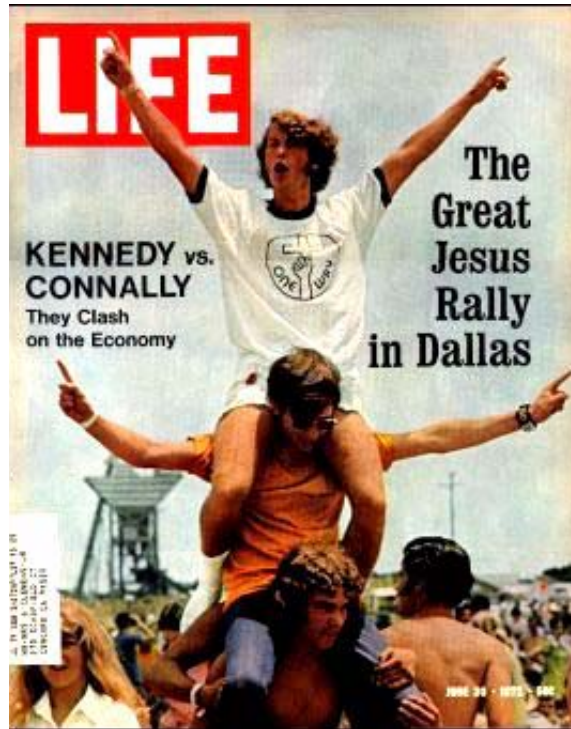
"I Wish We'd All Been Ready" talked about something I had never heard preached from a pulpit as I grew up. "The Last Supper" and "Ha Ha World" used very surreal imagery which drug users could assimilate. My songs weren't written for Christians..



**Larry Norman does his "One Way" gesture**

I was singing directly to the disenfranchised. People who hated church and doubted God's existence could get an emotional and intellectual buzz off of my songs. These songs were self-contained arguments. I felt that someone needed to fight for the dignity of the skeptic, to befriend him and recommend that he take a closer look at God. (<http://www.ccm-com.com/features/858.aspx>)

By around 1973 Larry Norman was touring under the sponsorship of InterVarsity, and the counter culture was part of the establishment. He still in 2005 was playing the rebel, sporting the same I am Curious girl hairdo and mocking the ways of his parents' generation.



**1972: The Jesus movement counter-culture is absorbed by the Evangelical mainstream.**

But today all manner of evangelical churches have a combo up front, often featuring some

old doofus hailing from the sixties. By the end of the seventies the new forms and music were entrenched internationally, even behind the Iron Curtain. I don't know when the dancing became accepted but it followed the music.

This new culture entered even more easily into the less organized types of Pentecostalism. The movie *Marjoe* (1972) documents the ease with which it could travel as long as certain stereotypical pentecostal behaviour was exhibited. .



**Christianity as '60s protest**

The youth culture that is presented in this film as the normative and oppressive Christian lifestyle was abhorrent to Evangelicals before the late sixties and still is where people cling to their fundamentalism. The religious culture of this film, then, presupposes an Arminian, experience centred religion, activated by emotion manipulation, maintaining the old evangelical stress on high commitment by all members, but with the addition of twentieth century regimentation (think how often the word "mobilize" comes up in the planning of church "campaigns") and its surface expression altered by the adoption of the sixties youth culture's music and attitudes

(even "protests" as moral commitment) as the medium of that experience

What was once the music of rebellion and for breaking restraints is now the music of the establishment, yet by its bacchanalian nature it continues to be subversive of restraint and embodies the inner contradiction of Boomer Evangelicalism. This is the religious milieu of no small number of people and the film's satire is on target for a substantial segment of American, even world, religion. Because this form of religion is essentially sixties youth culture set to Arminian lyrics it presents no problem for the actors to represent it convincingly. There is nothing the actors have to know except how suburban teenagers behave and then say their lines.



**Mandy Moore's character does the One Way gesture at a suburban Christian school prom dance.**

Mary, the principal character, gets pregnant while trying to cure her boyfriend's homosexuality. Though a senior in high school she has no idea where babies come from until the government forces the school to offer a sex

education course. In the movie the only place where she can go for help is the Planned Parenthood centre that she previously picketed. Of course the boyfriend is not cured by her ministrations and his parents send him to a group home for treatment. The inmates, including the boyfriend and his new male “life partner”, steal the institution's van and crash the school's prom. This, part of the film's happy ending, is represented as a liberation in an “I’m OK, You’re OK” moment. Mary, meanwhile, compares herself to the Biblical Mary whose excuse of a virgin birth is good but can't be used twice. Her belief evolves into a self-accepting liberalism: the world could not just be an accident, so there must be a god, or something, out there, or inside us. But it is the movie Mary's pregnancy and the resulting birth that is the saving event of the film. It brings Mary to outgrow her religion, her mother finally to grow up to adult responsibility and the homosexual boyfriend and father of the baby to complete his self-acceptance, while Pastor Skip's son reveals a wisdom and tolerance discovered apart from his father's religion. Liberalism is offered as salvation and this is especially focused on sex, where people learn to accept the need to indulge their natural urges, including homosexual ones, and make these, not Jesus, the force behind interpersonal bonds. This is portrayed as an easy salvation, however. All that the characters must do is to allow themselves what they want anyway and let others do the same. At the same time they can simply let go of their religious obsessions which only clouded their minds and brought them hypocrisy and pain anyway. They can continue their suburban lifestyle and even remain religious, as long as that religion is not taken to carry with it transcendent moral norms. Salvation comes to these Boomer Evangelicals when they move that last twenty percent of the distance to the full acceptance of the sixties youth culture.

The filmmakers profess puzzlement at the hostility toward their movie with its “faith affirming” message. But every affirmation of faith is a denial of another faith's affirmations. “I’m OK, You’re OK” is a denial of “One Way”. The real message of the movie to Christians is the one on the Jewish student's car bumper sticker: “Jesus loves you: Everyone else thinks you're an asshole.”

Brian Dannelly has put together the elements of commercial success: a proven teen movie formula with a new twist, and a moralizing message in no way offensive to the movie audience. In fact it allows the viewers to feel superior and justifies their gonad driven lifestyle as realistic and mature. On top of that Dannelly gets to advance his personal agenda. The production budget was \$5 million and it grossed \$9.6 million.

*Jesus Camp* has a broad resemblance in content to *Saved!* Once again there are the choreographed “spontaneous” group worship experiences, the rock music and stage productions, the intense moralism, public protests, female dominance and dysfunctional families. This time the subject is children not teenagers. Where it differs is the extensive filming of tongues and the tears and intense emotionalism that go with it. This would have been dramatically excessive for *Saved!* as well as uncomfortably out of tone for a teen entertainment. The effect on many views is outright shock.

*Jesus Camp* is a documentary. As such it has even greater potential for propaganda than a dramatic film while projecting objectivity. Watching documentaries, in fact, is a much better way to see how the camera chooses, judges and lies than is the viewing of dramatic films. *Jesus Camp* is no exception, with a very clear and underlined agenda, which the makers went out of their way to add to the movie.

They deny this. In a published response to Ted Haggard, who made some sort of criticism of the film, they say:

When we heard that Pastor Haggard has described us as having an “agenda” we were alarmed. Of course, there are plenty of filmmakers that do make films with a political or personal agenda, but our conscience is clear that we aren’t among them. We filmed with an open mind and with a beginner’s eye (neither of us are Evangelicals) that allowed the story to emerge in a natural way. ([http://www.jesuscampthemovie.com/haggard\\_response.html](http://www.jesuscampthemovie.com/haggard_response.html))

The film begins and ends with footage of the central plains landscape filmed from a car window and accompanied by excerpts from talk radio that focus especially on Bush’s nominations to the Supreme Court. These nominations are the ultimate battle ground for liberals, as for decades they have relied on an autocratic left-wing court to issue what are effectively decrees overthrowing the laws made by representative governments when these laws stand in the way of the leftist agenda. Loss of control of the Supreme Court means loss the left’s veto power over democracy. Beginning and ending with this, and not with the subject matter of the Jesus Camp is an obvious overlay of a political agenda on the film.

Not content with that, the film keeps injecting editorial comment from a liberal talk radio show, Ring of Fire, hosted by Mike Papantonio, the paradigm of the liberal bigot incapable of self-criticism or doubt. To him whatever he believes is therefore self-evidently true. He is particularly horrified in any breach of the liberal monopoly on the content of education. There are other “editorial moments” such as cutting from the pledge of

allegiance to the Christian flag to the pet dog’s response to this proceeding.

The filmmakers also love to film the eyes of the main subject, Becky Fischer, in the rear view mirror of her car as she drives through town. This is a movie cliché for fear and paranoia. What it does for this film is hard to say. It mainly struck me that she is a good driver, aware of her surroundings and carefully checking the traffic at intersections.

So when the directors say that they don’t have a political agenda, the claim is absurd; yet, ironically, probably sincere. As with Papantonio their own values seem self-evidently right and so could not be an “agenda”.

The people behind this are Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady. Their company, Loki Films, is New York based, but both have a background in British television. They say “Our collaboration is dedicated to making films that evoke a deeper understanding of the human experience with all its complexities, high stakes and humour.” New York City clings to the extreme southeast tip of the state of New York. It is far from typical of the state as a whole, let alone the United States as a whole. When a New Yorker ventures out into America his reaction is often shock followed by contempt or hatred of what he sees. Then he may return home to encapsulate his experience in some essay or work of “art”. Compared to the track record of their predecessors Ewing and Grady come much closer to their idea of themselves as open and unbiased.

The film is about the work of children’s minister Becky Fischer. The two distinctive things are her method and her beliefs. The method is that of activity focused through performance, illustrations, iconic objects, participation in a group context and emotionalism, all mixed with teaching.

I do not come to these two films as a neutral observer. Just I as was a participant in a small way (and without talent) in the Christian rock music scene of the early '70s, I also view children's ministry from an inside perspective. My mother was a specialist in this area, travelled internationally as a speaker at "spiritual emphasis" school events, wrote child evangelism materials, trained teachers and wrote a Bible curriculum for elementary schools. I underwent all the techniques before anyone else. It left me with a loathing for manipulation and pressure to achieve "spiritual" results, and for testimonies, forced witnessing and devotional regimens. I therefore tend to react strongly when viewing this post video-tape revolution updating of all the techniques.

"This generation particularly", Fischer explains, "is a sign and sound generation, and so it is very difficult for them to sit down with a book and a tablet and pencil and try to learn the way we learned. They learn visually; they learn by demonstration; they learn by modeling." When she speaks she will bring twenty visual object illustrations to use throughout the talk. When children are told to renounce some sin, it is painted on a porcelain object and they smash it with a hammer. Children are also urged into many weepy cathartic experiences of the Pentecostal type and tongues speaking.

I think that this last matter is new. Previous generations of Pentecostal had tongues in their church services, but they did not, as far as I know, include this as a activity for children's groups. There was a distinction between childhood and adult spirituality that is completely gone in the religion of *Jesus Camp*. The children also give testimonies, exhort and command in the name of God and preach sermons.

"I can go into a playground of kids that don't know anything about Christianity", Fischer explains, "lead them to the Lord in a matter of just no time at all, and just moments later they can be seeing visions and hearing the voice of God, because they are so open."

One girl, especially featured in the film, lists her spiritual gifts: "Discerning of spirits, definitely prophesy... I can speak in tongues, I can hear the Lord... I can talk to him and I can understand what he is saying to me." (from a Deleted Scene on the DVD).

She also explains her idea of a true church:

God is not in every church... Certain churches, they're called dead churches, and the people there, they sit there like this: [sits up straight and speaks in monotone] "We worship you God. We worship you God." They sing like three songs and then they listen to a sermon. Churches where God likes to go to are churches where they're jumpin' up and down, shoutin' his name, and just praising him.... They're not quiet, they're "Halleluya God"

Believing that they possess mature judgement, the children are confident and articulate.

There is also a new style, and it is the boomer style of rock music and performance. The rock is hard and high energy. Choreographed song and dance goes with it. In the performance in the film the boy dancers had a sort of war paint over their faces. I think that this was intended as combat camouflage, but having just seen Beresford's *Black Robe* it reminded me of Iroquois paganism. The girls were painted with a snake-like marking that perhaps was intended to represent lightning. One of the girls explains that her favourite music is



“Christian heavy metal rock and roll”. She distinguishes between dancing in the flesh and dancing for God. The difference seems to be a subjective one of how she feels about it. Pagan as so much of this seems, Fischer and her followers are adamantly opposed to the occultism of Harry Potter.



**Boomer church: stage and band instruments replace the pulpit and communion table. Performance displaces teaching.**

Method, obviously, is not separate from content. Here is a religion that builds on the long tradition of American revivalism. It is Arminian, emotionalistic and centred on moving the will. But in *Jesus Camp*, the whole adult boomer phase of this religion is reproduced at the childhood level, with the children filling as many roles as possible. Presiding over and managing the participation is Becky Fisher.

There are men at the Jesus Camp serving as cabin counsellors. They sit in the meetings, and jump up and down with the children, but otherwise seem passive. They are not like the

usual camp counsellors who are teenagers or college students working a summer job, but middle aged. They wear a tortured expression of emotional intensity. Exceptions include a pro-life organizer who makes a presentation, and later in the film takes some of the children on a protest trip to Washington, D.C., and someone, from South Africa, who leads the porcelain cup smashing.

The other adults in the film are mothers, who are engaged in home schooling, taking children to meetings or discussing how they make decisions for their children's education and training. No men are shown in the home discussions and they are scarcely mentioned in this decision making. One child admits that while his mother will not let him see Harry Potter films “I watch it at my Dad's”, so to some extent these families are the product of divorce. How common it is and to what extent this explains the female leadership is unexplored by the film.

We are left somewhat in the dark here. Maybe the husbands are active, but they are at work and that is why they are absent from the filming. In one case we learn from a Deleted Scene that the father is a marine in Iraq. The mother expresses the hope that the “Heavenly Father” will take the place of the the absent earthly father. But why do the women speak as though they alone are the decision makers? Female dominance is something that feminists are unlikely to challenge and that may be why the film makers neglect to investigate this area.

The pattern is familiar from American black culture. Women have all the responsibility and manage things. Men, when they show up, are performers, usually as musicians, or as pulpiteers or some combination. (Rocker Little Richard alternated between the two careers.) In this way this religious culture is also a break with the previous generation.

In contrast to *Saved!* the participants in *Jesus Camp* are racially integrated and international. The great irony of the film is that in the face of this triumph of diversity, avowedly their ultimate value these days, the liberals recoil in horror, demanding that only one view—theirs—have a voice. The more attentively the film is examined the more this liberal New Yorker shock at what is different and alien to their values emerges as the true subject of the film.

Reviewing the film for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, John Beifuss says:

Now, I sympathize with the directors' agenda; and I enjoy hooting at 9-year-old boys with killer mullets dancing to godly hip-hop ("Hey homey!/ We're kickin' it for Christ!") as much as the next kneejerk liberal. But even so, "Jesus Camp" is tainted by an ethnographic condescension that makes this Chicago-born Memphis resident want to say to the filmmakers: "Yankee, go home."

This is a movie in which shots of American flags and "God Bless the U.S.A." signs are supposed to be as ominous as hammer-and-sickle insignia in a "duck and cover" propaganda film; even the word "Missouri" seems expected to elicit knowing sniggers. This attitude does a disservice to the seriousness of the subject, which focuses on the phenomenon of "Jesus camps" (in particular, the "Kids on Fire" camp in Devil's Lake, N.D.), where young children are essentially indoctrinated into becoming right-wing warriors in the culture war.

The weirdest footage in the film is of now-disgraced Ted Haggard (extended in a "Deleted Scene" on the DVD), who constantly interrupts himself to address the camera and ask if

they are "getting good footage", attempts the interview the crew, or just chases them around the stage. He delivers such lines, apropos of nothing, as: "I think I know what you did last night. If you send me a thousand dollars I won't tell your wife."

While Haggard later tried to dissociate himself from the other people covered in the film, he is shown talking to the boy preacher, and he says "That's fabulous." and asks him what he thinks is the reason he gets good audience response. He advises the boy to "Use your cute kid thing." Whatever his differences with the Jesus Campers he is with them on their worst tendencies.

Ted Haggard's presidency of the National Association of Evangelicals is played up. What the NAE is and why it exists is not explained. The NAE grew out of the effort to defend against the campaign by the then Federal Council of Churches, now the National Council of Churches, to deny civil rights to evangelicals. The Federal Council had the power to call the State Department and have conservative missionaries denied visas and to deny evangelicals access to radio broadcasting. This was quite illegal of course, but only through the use of an organization capable of publicity and political pressure were the evangelicals able to stop this abuse of power by liberals.

An intense moralism, and indoctrination of children in their duties dominates Fischer's teaching. There is no gospel in the film. (This may be the fault of the film editing, and not entirely the teaching; we can't know. We see Fischer preparing a slide of the text "The wages of sin is death." but where is "The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"?) Rather there is focus on marshalling the will of the children to resist the blandishments of the devil, and to engage them in ac-

tivism, passing out tracks, “witnessing” and participating in pro-life demonstrations. This zeal for a path of obedience is a carry over from the earlier fundamentalism, not due to the antinomian Larry Norman, in spite of the dominance of his worship style and type of music.

This emphasis on dedication and duty is a consequence of the doctrine. As free-will Arminians, they must hold that every moral issue, and every possibility of defeat or victory turns in the end on the act of the will choosing for or against the good, and so everything that can impact the will to move it toward the good is legitimate and necessary. Put another way, they don't trust in a Sovereign God and wait on the freedom of the Spirit. Children cannot develop at their own pace and let responsible roles come with the arrival of maturity. Everything must be moulded to insure that the proper outcome is an engrained behaviour from a young age.

Norman Greenbaum's satiric “Spirit in the Sky” plays over the credits. Featured in a half-dozen other movie sound tracks, and many times on television, it obviously resonates with popular perceptions. It's point appears to be to portray Christians as arrogantly self-righteous: “Never been a sinner, I never sinned. I got a friend in Jesus. So you know that when I die. He's gonna set me up with the spirit in the sky.” (Actually Greenbaum is a Jew with only vague ideas about Christianity, and his reason for mentioning “Jesus” is that he thought it would sell better than anything Jewish.) While its inclusion belies the filmmakers claim to objectivity, the song's point applies to Boomer Evangelicalism. To a disturbing extent it is a religion of moralism, not grace.

Liberal response to the film was quick and strong. Vandal attacks and hate mail persuad-

ed Becky Fischer that she needed to close the camp for several years for the safety of the children.