

My 'Jesus Camp' Fond memories: Fond memories

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [November 28, 2006](#) issue

From second to 12th grade I spent at least one week each summer at a Baptist camp in rural North Carolina. One summer I spent all three months working as a dishwasher and junior counselor. Camp was where I learned to swim when I was eight and where I learned to slalom ski when I was 18. I can't tell a joke or a story today without reflecting some of the cadences I learned there. Without the camp, I wouldn't have learned how to find a Bible verse. I had my first kiss at camp (and some of my friends had a lot more).

It was at camp that I tearfully accepted Jesus into my heart after what must have been an emotionally manipulative altar call. The summer after I worked there, I charged back to my public school, determined to "take it for Christ." I prayed at the school flagpole, led an evangelical fellowship group and evangelized all who would listen. I have some reservations now about the faith the camp instilled in me—but I wouldn't trade that camp experience for the world. I might even send my kids there.

These memories came back when I viewed *Jesus Camp*, the documentary about a zealously run fundamentalist summer camp in North Dakota (reviewed in the *Century*, October 31). It's a camp where crying children are made to repent of their sins. The emotion-soaked revival meetings, silly songs and skits, and earnest adults—all that was familiar to me.

What is missing from the camp portrayed in *Jesus Camp*, or at least from the film account of it, is the fun. I enticed non-Christian friends to go to my camp by telling them how much fun it would be—and it was. My counselors taught me how to canoe, how to fake fart, how to belay up a rope and how to flirt with girls. The counselors were college kids who were, indeed, "on fire for Jesus," but they loved me for myself—not as a future foot soldier in the jihad for America (kids can tell the difference). That's why I accepted their faith. If it was faith in Jesus that made them love me and others and allowed—no, encouraged—an unbridled pursuit of fun, I

wanted in and I wanted to tell others about it. I still do.

Sure, the gospel presented there was incomplete. It was impatient with critical questions, belittling of modern science and history, more emotive than intellectual. I'm not sure scaring kids with hell is the best way to send them toward Jesus. But even that might do some good. How many mainline Christians were once saved at an altar call before going off to college? A good, teary-eyed conversion can make someone into a better person. I like to think it did that to me. When I told a Methodist friend about my Baptist camp experience, he said, "Be glad you went with the Baptists. We Methodists would've taught you to smoke pot and have sex in the woods."

Contrary to some stereotypes, my camp friends gave me my first encounter with a black church. When love for Jesus is the most important thing, some other differences fall away. They also were the first to make me wonder whether our "freedom" in Christ conflicts at all with our "freedom" as Americans.

Viewers are meant to find *Jesus Camp* terrifying. The camp's director, Becky Fischer, is a loud, tongues-speaking Pentecostal who shouts her beliefs. She says Jesus would deny Satan power over things great and small, from American politics to camp sound equipment. She openly admires the zeal with which Muslims train their children for jihad—"and, hello! We have the truth, people!"

The film focuses on a homeschooled ten-year-old boy who laughs at the stupidity of evolution and can already preach up a storm and an eight-year-old girl who approaches strangers with tracts and evangelistic zeal ("Maybe they're already Christians?" she wonders hopefully when her overture is rebuffed). We hear the children chant calls for "righteous judges," and we see them dance in camouflage to martial music, pray over miniature replicas of fetuses, clamor for the rapture and the end of this "sick ole world," and lament the absence of prayer in public schools (which they do not attend).

But you can preach life in Jesus and salvation from sin without the American nativism and jingoism and narrow-mindedness on display in *Jesus Camp*. I've seen it done. There's a glimpse of something gentler even in the film, when Fischer asks two campers if they're coming back to camp. When they say they are, she is so excited she hugs them. They smile back.

That scene recalled for me the dozens of camp counselors who hugged me and loved me—with nothing fake about it. Sure, they were Jesus freaks, trying to get people to believe in some pretty volatile stuff. But these same people taught me how to comfort a homesick child, how to stick a jump shot over an opponent and joke with him afterward, how to raid a fridge at midnight and how to love people in their particularity, even ones who are pretty strange by worldly standards. My hunch is that there is a lot more of that going on at Jesus camps than this film lets on.