



The young Billy Graham played by Armie Hammer

# Pastors on film

## **Billy: The Early Years** (2008, M)

While made a few years back, this film has only recently made it to DVD in Australia. I should note (as the credits also record), this film was not made by the Billy Graham Organisation and is not endorsed by it, though one of Billy's daughters, Virginia, has spoken fondly about it.

It is nostalgic in a good way for a different era, though sometimes the abundant sentimentality may not allow deep critical reflection. It is also a romantic drama with a key focus on the development of the relationship between Billy and Ruth Bell.

Billy is brought to life by Armie Hammer, who had a significant role as the Winklevoss twins in the recent film about Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg *The Social Network*. He is perhaps sometimes a little too 'nerdy' or earnest, but that may be an attempt to reflect the idea that this was a gentler and idealistic American Christian period. The film helpfully illustrates some of the important characteristics of Billy Graham and the ministry he founded, and contrasts the call on his life as an evangelist with that of his former colleague Charles Templeton, an evangelist who eventually left his calling after having co-founded Youth for Christ International with Torrey Johnston. Templeton continued to speak highly of Billy though he viewed his faith as too simple. The film ends with a striking scene illustrating the important setting of the Los Angeles Crusade in

1949 and leaving a foundation for the significant growth in the 1950s, with Billy Graham continuing to preach the 'simple' message of faith in Christ.

## **The Holy Roller** (2010 PG)

This romantic Christian comedy with a touch of drama has many homage elements. It is based on a story by Australian actor Angus Benfield, who plays the lead role and was made in New Zealand before the Christchurch earthquake. The story revolves around struggling Pastor Luke who heads for the big city, and finds a range of sinners and temptation, and yet also miracles. He inadvertently helps the owner of a nightclub aptly named Temple and then sets up a church. Issues abound as he attracts many similar people Christ did in his ministry. Some scenes are reminiscent of the well-used discussion film *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) and also *Pray TV*, the 1982 John Ritter film, which contrasts the personal style of pastoral connection with the tele-evangelist role so often seen in the USA, and in this movie through the appropriately named Reverend Shoebeck. The Da Vinci Last Supper image is also worth considering. A strength in the film is the music, led by the other major character Kate (Victoria Abbott), and also promoted as a key element in the development of the church. While the 'nerdy' pastor is sometimes a little perhaps too deliberately cringe-worthy, this is mostly a warm-hearted film exploring

some of the essentials of the Christian faith in belief and practice and helps Christians to consider their motives and actions.

## **The Sessions** (2012, MA)

This film doing the rounds in some religious and secular religious circles is one to consider with caution. Most of its interest has been because of the priest character and his seeming liberal attitudes regarding sexual practice. I found it less than heart-warming and mystifying as to why many film critics have lauded it, except for the way it tries to tug the heart-strings and promotes our individualistic culture. The film centres around the true story of American writer and poet Mark O'Brien, who due to polio breathed with an iron lung for most of his life. Mark has a desire to lose his virginity before his life (his life is remarkably precarious) and seeks a "sexual surrogate". One of the main persons he consults about this is a priest Father Brendan (played by William H. Macy) who portrays one of the most ridiculous figures I have seen in films. Many critics have praised his seeming humanness and accessible character, while I saw him simply as a blithering idiot who seemingly has no idea of the faith of the church and a theology of the body, let alone common sensibilities. Even if there are physical limitations his confidential counselling with Mark in common areas of the church where other people are listening in and in one case comment via their looks is truly stupid. The film needed a more robust depiction or perhaps cutting the character out completely.

Two other aspects stood out for me. Its contemporary focus on the idea that the sex act is a pinnacle of achievement, and central to being (not withstanding this person is disabled and the issues this has raises for sexual expression), and secondly the intriguing bonding that occurs in a very short space of time with Mark's sexual surrogate, played by Oscar winning actress Helen Hunt. What does this actually say about the theology of the body—the bonding provided by sex and what was the film trying to say? Anyway, one to note when you see reference, but also to avoid viewing.

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