



Levin Sorbo plays Ben Walker preaching

# Alternative lives

*What If... (2010)*

A new Christian DVD raises the question, what could have happened? It is unlikely that any of us have failed to wonder what would life have been like if we had followed a different career, been brought up in a different family, or as in this case, not caught that bus out of that small town?

The film is well worth seeing, with consistent acting and several reasonably well-known Hollywood actors (I will leave it to you to see if you know some of their major roles), and the male and female leads (Kevin Sorbo playing the businessman/preacher Ben Walker), and Kristy Swanson (Wendy) provide a strong foundation. It could however do with a bit more editing to make it tighter and not labour some scenes. For Christian movies I especially recommend a 90-100 minute time-frame.

The theme of what could have been if... has been a central theme for many films over the years including one of my favourites (I am a Jimmy Stewart fan), *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *The Family Man* (2000). In this film, we meet Ben Walker, established in a business career, financially well-off, living a great consumer life and on the way to a seemingly suitable marriage. However, 15 years earlier he looked set to marry his childhood sweetheart and become a minister. The call of consumerism was stronger than his love for either Wendy or the Lord.

After a car accident, Ben wakes up and is taken by what one could describe as a 'semi-friendly angel' to the life he could have had. He is now a minister, about to start a new ministry in the small town, and has

two daughters with Wendy. There are some quite witty, perhaps mildly satirical scenes. Worth mentioning are:

- His first sermon in the church he has just been called to. After this, people are wondering if they have the right preacher. I found this to be a wonderful critique of some American style prosperity religion as well.
- His attempts at relating to his teenage daughter. There are some tips here how not to help your children.

The director, Dallas Jenkins has stated "The most consistent feedback we get is that even though the film is about a preacher, it doesn't feel preachy, and that the faith aspect feels organic and real."

Yes, it is helpful that they do not try to 'protect' the preacher image. His fallibility clearly comes out, and yet you also see him responding to the grace of God that he experiences and finally accepts for himself.

How does the movie end, and draw the themes together? Now, a comment here could reveal too much, but I want to refer to the dedication in the film to Bonnie Jenkins as this deeply relates to the theme of following God's will. The producer Dallas Jenkins answered a question from one viewer outlining: "Bonnie is my grandmother, my dad's mother, who passed away late last year. She left a legacy of faith and was an incredible wife and mother, dedicated to Christ and sold out for the faith. No one ever questioned that she was acting within God's Will."

*What If...* is available from Heritage HM Film Distribution for purchase at [www.movieschangepeople.com](http://www.movieschangepeople.com) and nationally through all Christian retail outlets.

*The Tree of Life* (2011, PG)

I review this film with some hesitation, since it may not be an easy film for some members to watch, but I encourage you to stick with it. The film won the major award at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival (the Palme d'Or)

The director Terrence Malick is actually well-known for not directing many films, but each film has had an impact on film development. The *Tree of Life* stars Brad Pitt, Sean Penn and Jessica Chastain, and they all give wonderful performances.

This is a film about life and death within the Christian understanding of living in God's world. Many reviewers have failed to see the Christian underpinning, and have looked merely at cultural or sometimes church ideas. Woven throughout the film are biblical references and verses, which only one familiar with the bible will be able to pick up.

The setting is primarily Texas in the 1950s and centres around a typical American family, the O'Briens. The second setting is modern-day and focuses on one of the now adult children Jack (Sean Penn). The adult Jack has not coped well with his father, played by Brad Pitt.

He is perhaps a typical 1950s man, wanting to be a loving father, but caught in the web of distance, pride and his need to train his boys. They are church-goers, as many were in the 1950s, but only his wife has taken on the faith. The challenge to their beliefs and their faith comes, and how they respond illustrates a personal excursion into the foundation of their faith.

For the adult Jack, it is only as he experiences God's grace, that he is able to see and understand the world God has provided now and glimpse the new heaven that will be. For now, he is enabled to forgive and experience a new life.

There is such beauty, joy and also sorrow in this film, including some very illustrative film-work. It shows the broken and fallen world, but also the grace and the hope of the redemption of creation. The love that bursts forth at times in this film is the love of God that we know as the grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Sit back, enjoy the ride and reflect on this piece of philosophical filmmaking with a Christian centre.

Peter Bentley