

Getting saved

By [David S. Cunningham](#) in the [July 27, 2004](#) issue

Though it has all the marks of an independent film—a film-school screenplay and production difficulties—*Saved!* is blessed with an intelligent script and a first-rate ensemble of actors whose characters—though slightly overdrawn—engage Christian faith in believable ways. The film follows Mary Cummings (Jena Malone) through her senior year at American Eagle Christian School, where she is perched atop the social ladder alongside the zealously evangelistic Hilary Faye (Mandy Moore).

When Mary learns that her “good Christian boyfriend,” Dean, might be gay, she decides to save him from that fate—and in doing so finds herself scheduled to “join the Unwed Mother’s Club” shortly after graduation. Mary spends her senior year trying to hide her pregnancy, while Dean is sent away for antigay deprogramming.

Meanwhile, the new boy in school is Patrick (Patrick Fugit), just returned from the mission field, and he has eyes only for Mary. He is the son of the school’s chaplain, Pastor Skip (Martin Donovan), whose heart is in the right place but who would never let a pregnant girl attend the school. Skip also seems to be more than casually interested in Mary’s mother (Mary-Louise Parker). If all this wouldn’t propel Mary into a crisis of faith, what would?

The characters provide excellent fodder for running theological commentary. Hilary Faye is a stereotypical Young Life enthusiast: she is upper-middle class and politically conservative, and she basks in her popularity. She’s also deeply insecure, worried about getting displaced from the top of the social food chain. She practices a cruel and vindictive demagoguery, wrapped in smarmy Jesus-slogans and feigned concern. She is the Pharisee of the parable, loudly announcing her gratitude that she is not like lesser beings. But she is also like the historical Pharisees in sincerely seeking to embody the ideals she has inherited, convinced that they represent God’s will.

The film’s Good Samaritan is a smoking, cursing rebel named Cassandra. Like the historical Samaritans, she is an outcast. In fact, she is not a Christian. (Mary describes her as “the first Jewish” at the school—a typical teenage syntactical error

and a sign of how attuned the film is to teen speech.) But it is Cassandra who befriends Mary and helps her hide her pregnancy. She is joined by Hillary Faye's wheelchair-bound brother, Roland (Macaulay Culkin), whose experience of hostile "Christians" has soured him on the faith.

Although stereotypes in many ways, these characters regularly burst out of the viewer's preconceptions. Hilary Faye's prayers are sincere; one of her scenes evokes the words of the Psalmist ("every night I flood my bed with tears"). Conversely, Cassandra's rebellion against religious piety is sometimes just meanspirited (as when she fakes speaking in tongues at a school assembly), and Roland's jabs at his sister can be vindictive.

As for Pastor Skip, he is shown as truly torn between his religious convictions that tie him to his absentee wife and his love for Mary's mom. The film is unclear about the depth of their affair, but Skip is sensible enough to recognize that, whatever its moral acceptability, it's making it difficult for both of them to support Mary.

At the end, he's still struggling—pacing back and forth in the hospital parking lot, trying to decide whether to bring flowers to a student who's just had a child out of wedlock with a man who is openly gay. What would Jesus do?

More than anything, the film celebrates telling the truth. The most poignant moments occur when teenagers announce that they know the adults are lying. Mary is slowly converted from being a simple follower ("I've been born again all my life," she says as the film opens) to being a young woman willing to proclaim that issues of sex and sexual orientation create real moral struggles—and that they present moral ambiguities that the adults are not willing to admit.

An interviewer for *Christianity Today* suggested to director Brian Dannelly that someday his film might be used by Christian schools to help students explore the faith. Dannelly expressed his doubts about that, indicating that some Christians seem to find the film offensive.

Films like *Saved!* will always be condemned by those whose Christianity is primarily a front for other agendas. (Predictably, Jerry Falwell attacked it.) But I think most Christians will appreciate its portrayal of young people engaged in genuine struggles of faith. *Saved!* has excellent potential as a discussion-starter—certainly more so than *The Passion of the Christ* or most of what is marketed as "Christian film."