

Jesus boot camp

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [October 31, 2006](#) issue

I made a weekend visit to an Amish community in northern Indiana just days after the funerals of the Amish schoolgirls shot in a Pennsylvania schoolhouse. I happened to pass a schoolyard outside a one-room schoolhouse where a dozen or so Amish children were playing and staring out through the fence. It gave me chills.

I had chills of a different sort watching *Jesus Camp*, a documentary by the directing team of Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, who last year produced the inspiring and frightening *The Boys of Baraka*. That award-winning documentary concerned a group of troubled black youths from a Baltimore ghetto who were given the opportunity to go to school for four years in Kenya. The inspiring part was witnessing the boys start to morph into stable young men. The frightening part was seeing how, when the program was canceled after the first year, many of the boys quickly slipped back into their old, hopeless ways.

Jesus Camp is also about children who are tested in a trying environment, but very little of it is inspiring and most of it is more than a little frightening. In its broadest sense, the film is about how some conservative Christians try to shape the psyches of the young. The main figure is Becky Fischer, an energetic Pentecostal pastor who loves winning over developing minds via colorful language concerning heaven and hell, a challenging message of us versus them, and an ominous line about the road to salvation being narrow indeed. Anyone who isn't born again, even fellow Christians, Fischer explains, can pretty much expect to spend eternity on the spit.

After a hallelujah-filled first act where we meet Becky and her flock, which includes Levi, 12, Tory, 10, and Rachel, 9, we watch Becky prepare for her "Kids on Fire" summer camp in North Dakota. Besides offering some normal camp activities, the two-week session features fire-and-brimstone speeches intended to scare the bejeezus out of most of the kids (tears flow freely) while pumping up the select few who will prove to be the movement's future flag-bearers. Levi, in particular, exhibits a powerful hankering to be a preacher himself one day, and is already developing an onstage strut.

Some critics have been shocked by the ferocity of Fischer's fiery pitch, especially when she calls up guest speakers who mock the theory of evolution and enlist recruits to join an antiabortion rally in Washington, D.C. Shocking too are scenes of fresh-faced Rachel accosting people on the street, in parks and even in bowling alleys, warning them about the flames that await them unless they are born again.

I found myself thinking about Rachel and the rest of these evangelical kids as I exchanged stares with the Amish children in the schoolyard. Both groups believe that they have found the right way to live, both here on earth and in the next world. But unlike the born-again people featured in *Jesus Camp*, the Amish do not force their beliefs on those outside their world.

When Fischer talks about the way Islamic children in the Middle East are being brainwashed to become suicide bombers for Allah, she conveys a sense of admiration; she seems almost envious of the way these Muslims are willing to lay down their lives for their beliefs, even though she considers those beliefs to be false. She has her own desire to organize "God's Army" in the U.S., with these eager-to-please children being some of the first recruits.

Though the film could be more thorough in its examination of the evangelical movement (both historically and spiritually) and of how these particular children got to the Jesus camp, it does a solid job of conveying a dimension of the evangelical world. The French writer André Gide once said that we should "believe those who are seeking the truth, but doubt those who find it." That doubt grows rapidly when the "truth" involves a roomful of crying, screaming children stricken with fear and guilt.