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Bible Quiz

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Bible Quiz

Abstract

This is a film review of *Bible Quiz* (2013) directed by Nicole Teeny.

Keywords

Evangelical Christianity, Competitions

Bible Quiz

Directed by Nicole Teeny

Slamdance Documentary Competition

The high-concept pitch for this well-observed documentary by Nicole Teeny might be “Spellbound” meets “Jesus Camp.” Like that well-received look at participants in the national spelling



bee competition, “Bible Quiz” captures the ups and downs of several young people as they fight their way towards a national competition of memory prowess. The twist, as the title makes clear, is that the competitors have memorized whole chapters of the Bible and hundreds of pieces of related trivia. As answers must be given within a miniscule timeframe, Holy Scripture comes out as a compressed, flat torrent of syllables.

Besides the inherent drama found in any well-told contest tale, or even the sweet depiction of puppy love harbored by the film’s lead figure, Mikayla Irl, for her teammate, JP O’Connor, “Bible Quiz” presents two other interesting elements of tension in its narrative. While Mikayla’s other teammates, coaches, and

competitors are openly, devoutly, and joyously Christian, her own faith seems to be on a low simmer throughout the competition. She even openly wonders what the point of Bible Quiz is anyway. Mikayla's home life may have much to do with her priorities and perspective: her mother is an absent alcoholic, her dad, divorced from her mother, is supportive in everything but Bible Quiz. Thus her drive to excel, which is to say, learn by heart reams and reams of Bible verses and knowledge, is driven more by her desire to impress JP than to know the Word of God. Yet as it becomes clear in the film that she is feeling the first stirrings of attraction for her teammate, she elaborates to the camera all the ways she finds the idea of a boyfriend repellent. "I don't need a boyfriend. I have Jesus. He's my boy!" she concludes. As the competition draws to a close and JP prepares to leave for college, however, Mikayla's take on Christianity is decidedly non-orthodox while her thoughts about dating have matured dramatically. Reflecting on the Christian hang-ups about kissing and sex (one other competitor boasts about having kept her "mouth-ginity" and "foot-ginity" while accidentally losing her "hand-ginity" in a moment of prayer), Mikayla states simply that "Christianity is so much bigger than rules."

At the cast and crew Q&A after the Slamdance screening, the participants asked



Bible Quiz cast and crew (L to R): Editor James Codoyannis, Christopher Teeny, Mikayla Irl, Director Nicole Teeny at the Slamdance screening. (Photo by Dereck Daschke)

what their relationship to Christianity was now, some years after the events depicted. Some were still practicing Christians, and JP was a youth minister and in seminary, but Mikayla reiterated her view from the closing minutes of the film. The director (sister of Bible Quiz participant Chris Teeny) noted that while there's

a higher rate of religious retention among the “Quizzers,” by no means does everyone involved stay with the church afterwards.

This statistic might reflect the very nature of Bible Quiz's relationship to the Bible. One of the competition's directors does state that he wants the contests to be ministry events as much as actual competitions, and each match begins with a prayer. Yet, the meditative and contemplative benefit of Scriptural study is almost by definition drilled out of these kids, and the meaning and context of the wisdom contained in the Gospels and Epistles is certainly hard to discern in the

rush of words, chapters, and verses that constitute a quiz answer. What's more, while quizzers may give a nod to the Christian virtues of charity and love, the competition still drives them to the same rah-rah fist-pumping triumphalism over their rivals that exists in any other team play. Still, JP and Chris do talk about how they will call each other after finding some spiritual message during studying connecting with something they had learned at another time, and the team's coach compares the process to the quests of video games: they are picking up tools now, but they won't know what they will find to be necessary until later in life. That may or may not be true for any given Bible Quizzer, but a viewer of this film will certainly be struck by the sheer mastery of so much sacred trivia juxtaposed with the mundane – but oh-so-American – environment in which it is demonstrated.

— Dereck Daschke