Review of
*Faith and Film: A Guidebook for Leaders*
by Edward McNulty

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Title of resource:


What it is (book, curriculum, study guide, website, etc.):

Edward McNulty’s *Faith and Film* is a “practical” guidebook featuring a detailed discussion of how and why pastors and Christian educators should seek to bring faith and film into dialogue with one another, as well as twenty-seven movie discussion guides.

Publisher or source:

*Faith and Film* is published by Westminster John Knox Press (WJK), the imprint for the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation (PPC), the denominational publisher for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). PPC’s mission statement, available on its website ([www.ppcbooks.com](http://www.ppcbooks.com)) is as follows:

*Building on the Reformed tradition, the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation seeks to glorify God by contributing to the spiritual and intellectual vitality of Christ's church. To that end, PPC publishes resources that advance religious scholarship, stimulate conversation about moral values, and inspire faithful living.*

The materials PPC issues through WJK cover a wide range of modern religious thought and represent the work of authors from a wide range of religious affiliations (A second PPC publisher, Geneva Press, publishes work specifically for a Presbyterian audience).

Goal/aim/purpose of the resource:

In the introduction to *Faith and Film*, McNulty writes, “This is a practical book designed to help pastors, Christian educators, and that much-sought-after group “the intelligent laity” enter into a dialogue with some of the films produced by Hollywood and independent filmmakers...What I hope for readers to see and hear is nothing less than the sovereign God who refuses to stay boxed within our churches and liturgies, the Holy One leaping off the pages of our Bibles, to confront us in the lives and decisions of the characters on the screen.” McNulty certainly achieves this. It would be difficult for any reader to walk away from this book without a thorough appreciation for how effective film can be for engaging people in theological conversation.
Specifically, this guidebook seeks to:

- Reveal how the “meaning” of a work of art (be it a painting, poem, book, film, etc.) comes from the dialogue or conversation people have about that work rather than from the artist.
- Explain to readers what Jerusalem has to do with Hollywood and, in the process, discuss key objections raised by those who are opposed to using contemporary films in the church (offensive language, nudity and casual sex, excessive violence, the lack of reference to God and negative views of the church).
- Argue that a film should not be judged by its rating, as many films with a rating of “R” are amazingly insightful and powerful and very effective when used appropriately in the church.
- Differentiate between the four types of film: harmless throwaway films, toxic junk, gritty reality films, and visual parables.
- Advise readers on becoming their own critic from a theological perspective and on the importance of film discussion and proper settings for film viewing.
- Offer discussion guides for twenty-seven mainstream films (no foreign or esoteric films) which aim to connect Scriptures and film.

**Intended audience for the resource:**

*Faith and Film*, according to the author, is intended for use by “pastors, Christian educators, and that much-sought-after group ‘the intelligent laity’.” What qualifies the latter group as “intelligent”, it would appear, are not advanced degrees or theological training, but rather the ability to use the guidebook as it is intended to be used. In other words, someone from this group would not simply pick up *Faith and Film*, flip to a discussion guide and use it exactly as it is laid out. He or she would read the introductory chapters thoroughly, look at the discussion guide for the movie he or she is planning to use, read through the questions and study the relevant Scripture, and make decisions about how best to format a session using the material as a guide rather than a hard and fast lesson plan.

Anyone who is attempting to use the discussion guides as lesson plans will be disappointed (or their audience will). The leader needs to understand the importance of faith and film in dialogue, appreciate how films should be set up, viewed, and discussed, how to bring Scripture into the conversation, and how to tie everything together. Someone who has never before attempted to talk about theology and film will struggle if they do not invest some time laying the groundwork (I
would argue this is true for any curriculum or resource, regardless of how it is marketed). Also, and perhaps this is an obvious point, any leader who has not viewed the film he or she plans to use in its entirety, will not find *Faith and Film* helpful as it assumes a certain degree of familiarity with the material at hand.

**What you get in this resource:**

*Faith and Film* is divided into two parts and includes the following:

**Part I**

- **Introduction: Developing a Theology of Seeing**
  - Why use films in the church? What value do they have? Why should a church be a party to the dialogue between faith and film?
- **What Has Jerusalem to Do with Hollywood?**
  - What do moviegoers hope to get from viewing a film? What can they get?
  - Objections to contemporary films
  - Why we should not judge a film by its rating
- **Four Types of Films**
  - Harmless throwaway films
  - Toxic junk
  - Gritty reality films
  - Visual parable films
- **More on Parable and Film**
  - Are the best parable makers today in Hollywood rather than in the church?
  - Criteria of a visual parable film
  - What about the intention of the filmmaker?
- **Help for Becoming Your Own Critic**
  - Includes a set of questions and suggestions to consider for anyone seeking to become their own critic, at least from a theological perspective:
    - What seems to be the theme of the film?
    - Are the characters and story presented in simplistic or multidimensional ways?
    - Where is sin or self-centeredness hurtful to one or more characters?
    - If religion is part of the story, is it sweet and/or impractical? Or dull and deadening?
    - What other themes of theology are in the film?
    - What genre does the film belong to?
    - Do you feel better or more aware as a result of seeing this film?
  - Includes a discussion of understanding the “language of film” and recommends some additional questions to consider when reading about and viewing films:
- Into which of the four categories does the film seem to fit?
- What seems to be the film’s view of humanity or human nature?
- How are the characters depicted?
- What is the attitude of the characters (and filmmakers) toward sin – approval, disapproval – or, in rare instances, is the act help up for the viewers to make their own judgment?
- What other theological or mythological themes can be detected in the film?
  - The importance of discussing a film

- Settings for a film discussion, when to discuss the film, and how to lead discussion
  - At a home
  - At church
  - At a retreat or conference center
  - At a theater

- Using the Guides

Part II


Discussion guides are divided into the following parts:
  - Introduction (Provides a brief overview of the film, points for leader to be aware of (e.g. film is controversial), why film is appropriate to discuss in concert with Scripture chosen)
  - Themes (Simply listed, not discussed)
  - Recommended audience (Is this film for adults, children, youth...is permission needed from parents prior to viewing?)
  - Rating
  - Scriptures (Only verses are given, not text itself. Leader will need to have Bibles for all group members for each discussion session.)
  - Director
  - Screenwriter
  - Release date
  - Running time
  - Characters/Cast
  - Key Scene (Not necessarily the most important scene in the film, but one which could help the group remember important characters or themes in the film if they are discussing it a day or more after watching it.)
  - Just Before Showing (basically, how to set up the room and what supplies you will need for discussion)
  - For Reflection/Discussion (discussion overview, suggestions about how to introduce and lead discussion, discussion questions)
How the resource handles/treats films and theology:
It is clear from the introduction to *Faith and Film* that McNulty has enormous respect for both film and theological conversation. He writes, “For those who affirm that faith is concerned with relationships with God and neighbor, who trust that faith is about living and loving, erring and seeking forgiveness, laughing and crying, dying and seeking new meaning in life, Jerusalem and Hollywood have much to do with each other, for these same concerns are at the heart of some of the best movies of our time.” This respect reads into the introductory material as well as each of the movie discussion guides. McNulty reviews each film carefully, without warping its themes or trying to make discussion fit some preconceived notion of what the film “should” say. Scripture is brought into conversation appropriately and is incorporated into questions only when doing so enhances both an understanding of the film and interpretation and comprehension of the text. McNulty does a wonderful job of building this conversation out with additional recommended texts (poems, children’s books, other films), props (e.g. food, movie posters) and suggestions for leading discussion. He has clearly reviewed these conversation partners and their impact on discussion thoroughly and readers can be confident that he has utilized each discussion guide himself on more than one occasion and revised it accordingly.

Kinds of conversation between theology and film it supports:
In an overview of how to use the guides he presents in *Faith and Film*, McNulty states that each guide seeks “to connect Scripture and film.” Thus, this book is primarily a resource for generating conversation about Biblical texts. For example, in his discussion of the film *American Beauty*, McNulty recommends, if possible, discussing the film alongside a study of the entire book of Ecclesiastes and argues that had the main character in the film lived longer, he might have written a modern version of this biblical book. In the movie discussion guide for *Chocolat*, he recommends using Scripture that relate to the key themes of the film, including hospitality, liberation and grace. McNulty includes numerous biblical text recommendations in his discussion questions for *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* and suggests that the leader have groups examine these texts as they discuss characters and situations as well as the key themes of good versus evil, the importance of friendship, etc.
It is important to note that though each discussion guide seeks to connect Scripture and film primarily, these are not the only discussions encouraged and hopefully, produced by the questions for reflection and discussion. Throughout *Faith and Film*, set-up details and film introductions, as well as discussion questions, address ethical issues and create opportunities for conversation about different doctrines. For example, in his discussion guide for *The Insider*, McNulty includes the following question: “Do you think Lowell is fair in laying out to Jeffrey his two choices – to honor his confidentiality agreement or to share information that could be important to the health of the public? How did you feel as you watched them [corporate leaders] raise their right hands to tell the truth, and then proceed to state to the Congressional Committee that nicotine is not addictive?” Another question in this guide asks the group to consider how a particular character’s decision reveals his humanity.

Christ-figure conversations also feature prominently in McNulty’s discussion guides, though he does not refer to them as such and does not tend to make them the focus of discussion. In the discussion guide for *Hotel Rwanda*, for example, several questions invite the group to consider the person of Paul Rusesabagina, the main character who houses over a thousand Tutsi refugees during their struggle against the Hutu militia in Rwanda. The questions point to the character’s comparison to Oskar Schindler (“There is an old saying or poem about a person drawing a circle and including only him/herself, but then Christ comes along and makes the circle larger to include others. How does this describe what happened to Paul?”) and to the role he plays for the people he is protecting (“Where or when does Paul shoulder a “cross” in his efforts to save the people under his care?”). Paul is most certainly a Christ-figure, but McNulty recognizes that the leader does not need to explicitly say this for a group to come away with this understanding from their viewing and discussion of the film.

**Overall recommendations, comments, advice about this resource?**

*Faith and Film* is a wonderful resource for pastors, Christian educators, and laypeople. It presents a thorough introduction to faith and film in conversation and arms any leader not trained in this area with an understanding of why this is important business, why this type of conversation is effective within the church, and what to be aware of when using films for theological discussion. McNulty’s discussion about the four main objections to film is particularly helpful, though more detailed discussion about how to deal with these objections in a real church setting would have
been welcomed and particularly useful for leaders working with younger audiences. In other words, if I am choosing to use a film that has some objectionable material in it with a senior high group, how should I approach parents with this film in advance of the discussion? McNulty does provide some questions leaders should consider when deciding whether the objectionable material is too objectionable, but no real practical advice for those times when it isn’t, but the film still requires “selling” to parents or staff.

The movies McNulty chooses to discuss in *Faith and Film* are, for the most part, widely known and widely available (the same cannot be said, in my opinion, for McNulty’s *Praying the Movies*) which is nice for church leaders who do not have a library of DVDs at their disposal. Though I appreciate McNulty’s recommendation that leaders and viewers avoid judging a movie by its rating, a couple of his discussion guides fail to mention certain material that a leader might need to warn an audience about prior to screening the film. For example, in the discussion guide for *Chocolat*, McNulty recommends using this film with middle school children and youth but fails to mention one brief, but fairly graphic sex scene. In addition, he notes that the film has a rating of PG when it actually has a rating of PG-13. I am not suggesting that the film should not be used with youth at all, but I certainly would not do so without parental permission and would probably not use the entire film with youth younger than 13. Hopefully, no leader would use a film that he or she had not seen (McNulty makes a point of saying he assumes leaders have viewed the films before showing them) but unfortunately, it happens. A note beside the rating listed in the discussion guide about why the film received that rating and warnings about potentially objectionable material would have been a helpful addition to this guidebook.

The questions for reflection and discussion are well thought out and clearly have been utilized by the author with real audiences. They effectively bring multiple partners into conversation with each film, thoroughly exploring the film’s key themes from a theological standpoint. However, they do assume that groups have viewed the entire film and thus, are less helpful in circumstances where time is limited. Though McNulty provides a “key scene” in each guide, this scene is really meant to spark conversation if there is a delay between viewing and discussion, and not to be viewed and discussed in isolation. The questions are thought-provoking and beautifully tie in to the selected Scripture, but leaders should note that not all may be appropriate for every recommended audience McNulty lists. For example, in the discussion guide for *Harry Potter and
the Sorcerer’s Stone, McNulty lists children and families as the recommended audiences, but the first question asks viewers to respond to charges that the Harry Potter series teaches witchcraft and Satanism. Such a question would be wonderful for parents to discuss, but not very useful for conversations with children. Leaders will need to view the entire film, consider their audience, and select questions accordingly in advance of showing and discussing the film.

As a Youth Director, Edward McNulty’s Faith and Film is most certainly a resource I will be adding to my library and I would highly recommend it for anyone fortunate enough to be working in Christian education.