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The Case for Christ (Movie Review)

Abstract

"*The Case for Christ* tries to present a rational defense of Christ's death and resurrection."

Posting about the movie *The Case for Christ* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/the-case-for-christ/>

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Comments

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The Case for Christ

 [inallthings.org/the-case-for-christ/](http://allthings.org/the-case-for-christ/)

May 22, 2017

Josh Matthews

Movie Title: The Case for Christ

Release date: April 7, 2017 (USA)

Director: Jon Gunn

Adapted from: *The Case for Christ*

Story by: Lee Stroebel (book), Brian Bird (screenplay)

Producers: Jon Gunn, Faye Dunaway, and Robert Forster

When I told my friend that I was headed to the movie version of *The Case for Christ*, he was dumbfounded. “They made a movie out of that?!” he exclaimed.

Yes, they made a movie out of Lee Stroebel’s 1998 apologetics best-seller *The Case for Christ*. His book is subtitled *A Journalist’s Personal Investigation into the Evidence for Jesus*, which does not scream “Hollywood screenplay!” It also does not shout novel, short story, or any other dramatic form. It barely whispers History Channel documentary.

And yet, the movie version of *The Case for Christ* tries hard. Given its production value, the movie is one of the best “Christian movies” that I have seen, which you should not construe as a compliment. The movie is two-thirds drama, one-third apologetics essay. It does not break free of the clichés of the “Christian movie” genre. But if you are looking for some decent shots and decent editing, you could do much worse, such as anything involving the rapture or the afterlife.

The artistic problem facing the moviemakers is that Stroebel’s book is a series of conversations with Christian scholars. As figures in a book, they speak in language that’s too scholarly for movie dialogue and too stilted for dramatic interest.

But *The Case for Christ* believes that there’s high drama in an atheist’s quest to discover the facts about Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. It also believes that all Christian apologists should speak as if they are dictating an essay. Thus, in the movie, we get a Catholic priest who assures us that there are exactly 5483 manuscripts that prove the Bible’s accuracy. Not a manuscript more or less! To that, Stroebel blandly replies, “You have given me a lot of food for thought,” which is what my students say to their textbooks before throwing them away. All that’s left out of this turgid conversation are subtitles with footnotes and citations. (Stroebel does have one fascinating chat with a doctor about what exactly happens to a human body during crucifixion. It has a high cringe factor. I could feel the audience, mostly composed of people over the age of 60, wanting more.)

Besides its didactic moments, which are many, *The Case for Christ* dramatizes Stroebel’s conversion from an atheist to a Christian. As a journalist for the *Chicago Tribune* in the early 1980s, Stroebel lives the bourgeois life: a pregnant wife, a job he likes, an adorable young daughter, and a sports car. But his wife Leslie, a fellow atheist, becomes a Christian after a providential encounter with a Christian nurse, who saves the Strobels’ daughter from choking to death.

Lee Stroebel will have none of that Christian stuff. His wife’s conversion turns him into The Angry Atheist. He mocks his wife and rudely confronts Christians in public. He has bizarre outbursts over his pet obsession, which is that Christians believe. Of course these things happen in real life, but in evangelical movies, The Angry Atheist can only think about his hatred of Christians and can only act upon that hatred. I await the Christian movie where we see the Mellow Atheist, followed by something a little different, such as the Boring Buddhist and the Merry Muslim.

Stroebel’s anger fuels his desire to prove his wife wrong. He obsesses over facts that could contradict her faith. He

uses his journalistic skills to research, in secret from his wife, the death and resurrection of Christ. This is the main dramatic storyline.

But it wasn't enough for a feature-length movie, which is why I think the moviemakers here chose a more intriguing subplot to augment Strobel's historical research. Strobel also investigates a cop-shooting involving what appears to be a police informant. He is convinced about the truth of the case when he uncovers new evidence, only to discover later that overlooked evidence could change his view completely. These scenes of the crime subplot, while undeveloped as a possible main storyline, provide far more intrigue than Strobel's attempt to discover whether or not Jesus really rose from the dead.

Actually, I wanted this movie to turn into a 1980s crime story. I would rather re-watch many times the great movie *Zodiac*—Strobel looks like he belongs in that movie—than watch *The Case for Christ* again. If only *The Case for Christ* were a strong artistic response to *Zodiac*. If only.

The Case for Christ tries to present a rational defense of Christ's death and resurrection. The movie picks on an older apologetics target (that is, rationalistic atheism), and it names its opponents—Bertrand Russell, Antony Flew, Freud, Nietzsche. Here, Christianity must prove that it too is rational. See, atheists: Christianity cares about facts, reason, and truth!

Yet, just as the movie's setting is almost 40 years ago, the attack on Enlightenment atheism seems outdated. There are so many other views that Christian movies have not addressed well or at all. I had a delightful Buddhist professor once who did not believe in the law of non-contradiction, so Strobel's apologetics would go nowhere with him. What about Daniel Dennett's idea that consciousness is an illusion, that our brains edit reality, making us all delusional to an extent? What if my debating partner is not an Angry Atheist but a Jovial Jew? A Pushy Postmodernist?

The Case for Christ is produced and released by *Pure Flix*, a streaming service that tries to provide "family-friendly and wholesome entertainment" to its viewers. But that word "pure" boldly pronounces what the films that *Pure Flix* carries do not automatically demonstrate. Purity is not necessarily about what is said or displayed in a movie. It is also about the soundness of the writing, the excellence in the directing, the technique of the acting, and a thousand other details.

The Case for Christ is about a reporter at a major newspaper 40 years ago. Let's talk about pure movies about reporters at major newspapers 40 years ago. *Zodiac*, for example.