

How One Movie Expresses Christian Theology in 10 Minutes

The movie *5 Minuti* expresses much of Christian theology in a mere 10 minutes. Barbara is about to jump to her death when she is approached by a handsome young man who turns out to be Jesus.

Barbara tells Jesus she will give Him five minutes, and in that five-minute conversation we discover Jesus is a being beyond time and place, that He suffered greatly on our behalf, that God is the Creator of the universe, that faith is important to salvation and love is an overriding good, that we should be humble, and that we can have an intimate, personal relationship with the ultimate Being in the universe.

5 Minuti is simply one of the best expressions of Christian theology that I have come across. In a mere 10 minutes, this film establishes Jesus as a being beyond time and place, describes the suffering and sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross, identifies God as the Creator of the universe, shows the importance of faith in the process of salvation, identifies love as the overriding good, provides an example of humility from which many of the most famous representatives of Christianity could learn a lesson, and promotes a personal relationship with Jesus. Not bad for 10 minutes!

The story begins with Barbara standing on the railing of a bridge that spans one of the canals of Milano, Italy. It is obvious she is contemplating jumping to her death. But at just that moment, she is approached by a handsome young man dressed in an Armani jacket. He is wearing a dress shirt but no tie. His shirt is not tucked into his pants, and he has a five o'clock shadow. He asks Barbara what she is doing on the

railing. She tells him to go away and leave her alone. But the young man introduces himself to Barbara: "Jesus! You can call me Jesus."

Barbara is incredulous and tells the young man, "The stage name you've chosen for this prank is not funny at all."

Jesus responds by telling Barbara, "It is not that I call myself Jesus. I AM Jesus."

At this moment, Jesus invites Barbara to have a cup of coffee with him, and Barbara tells Him that she will give him five minutes—thus, the title of the film. For the next five minutes or so, Barbara and Jesus carry on a conversation, a conversation that reveals much of Christian theology.

I have no idea whether the jacket Jesus is wearing in the film is Armani, but Armani was the only name that came to mind for Italian men's fashion, and it made for an interesting concept. That Jesus is dressed in a jacket without a tie, however, is important to the film. It indicates Jesus is not someone in a long white robe and beard with bright blue eyes wandering around the Sea of Galilee in a pair of sandals.

By putting Jesus in Armani, the movie indicates that He is much more than the image with which He is often associated. He is, after all, the Son of God, and the Son of God is more than a long-haired Galilean. Because of the way Jesus is dressed, we are invited to think of Him as a universal and timeless being—the Son of God—rather than a particular iconic image to which we may attach greater significance than is warranted.

Although the movie calls on the viewer to think of Jesus as more than the iconic image, this idea is made much more explicit in the 25-minute version of the film.

When Jesus identifies himself to Barbara, she says, "You don't look like Jesus to me. I don't see any 'time machine.' I see no camels, no Roman soldiers." She also says, "If you are

Him—actually *Him*—shouldn't you be at least 2,000 years old?"

And Jesus tells her, "I've always been portrayed as tall, handsome ... blonde and blue eyes. ... [But] if I appeared as I am now in heaven, I think you would be a bit frightened."

At one point, Barbara tells Jesus that two minutes have passed and that He has only three of the five minutes she's offered Him left. He says, "Perhaps *you* have only three to go. I don't have time limits. Not anymore."

And, finally, in the longer version, Jesus tells Barbara, "I can't show you the holes in my hands. ... This is not the body I used at the time."

I think the idea that Jesus is a timeless being—the Son of God—is more subtle in the short version, but the longer version confirms this description of Jesus through the phrases above. The point of portraying Jesus in this way is to get the viewer to move beyond the iconic image. The result is that the viewer realizes the power of God is much greater, infinitely greater, than the power of the iconic image or the biblical image of Jesus.

For Christians, it is important to understand the vastness and timelessness of God, and the movie asks us to do this by looking beyond the icon. Once we look beyond the icon, we find the vast power of God and not merely the power of the moment or the power of a particular icon. At the same time, it is more difficult to conscript the power or sanction of God for one's own purposes when that power is the vast power of the timeless being than when we turn Jesus into an image of ourselves.

At one point in the second minute of their conversation, Barbara asks Jesus, "That day on the cross ... is it all true?" Jesus tells her, "That day in Jerusalem was terrible. What pain! It seemed like it would never end. A soldier even broke his wrist as he was flogging me."

He goes on to say, "But more than the lashes, nails or the humiliation of hanging in front of everyone like a criminal, I was shattered to see who shouted the insults, lies; who spat upon me, all coming from the very people that I loved so much and continued to love even while they were ..."

In just these few short sentences, the movie identifies the pain, both physical and psychological, that Jesus suffered, and thereby the movie identifies the sacrifice Jesus made on behalf of His people, a sacrifice made even greater by the rejection and denial of the very people upon whose behalf Jesus was making the sacrifice.

We discover that God is the Creator of the universe in a little story Jesus tells Barbara to divert the conversation from sad topics. In the third minute of their conversation, Jesus says, "I remember like it was yesterday when my Father and I created the world. As we created an animal, we thought of the faces children would make seeing it. ... I must say that the hippopotamus has been a big hit."

In this very short and gently humorous story, the movie establishes a basic element of Christian theology—that God is the Creator of the universe. It also shows God's love for children—for all of His children.

I think it is important to remind ourselves that God is the Creator of the universe, as the film does, because as the Creator of the universe, the Creator of everything, much of God is beyond our comprehension, a real mystery. And it is arrogance on our part to claim to know what the Creator of the universe is all about. I think this means that when we claim, for example, "God hates fags," or, "God has punished Haiti for abandoning Christianity," we are really creating God in our own image. When we do this, we diminish the power, mystery and awesomeness of God.

If God is the Creator of the universe, as the movie reminds

us, then we will have to live with great mystery, with a Being in many ways beyond our comprehension, and we must avoid using God for our own purposes.

After five minutes have passed, Barbara turns to find Jesus now standing on the railing of the bridge where she had stood earlier. It is obvious He is prepared to jump. Barbara shouts, "No! Stop. Don't do anything stupid." But Jesus explains, "It's called substitution. I've done it already. Don't worry, it works. I take on Me all the things that you wanted to kill with yourself, and I kill them with myself. I don't dislike the idea. Like I said, I did this once already, and if I have to do it again in order to save you ... no problem.

"Will I suffer?" Jesus asks. "Maybe. But your life will be saved, purged of sadness, depression, guilt and the rest. You will go back to being the lighthearted girl you were."

Jesus makes it clear that Barbara's salvation is a matter of faith, a gift from God, and not something earned by means of action. He says, "You only have to believe it's true."

When Barbara asks Jesus what she is to do, he tells her, "Go and live your life. Your faith has finally saved you." In this brief exchange, Jesus reaffirms what is said in Ephesians 2:9: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast" (KJV).

My colleague, Paul Williams, pointed out that in Christian theology, the death and resurrection of Jesus is a singular event. It is not repeated from time to time as the scene mentioned above might suggest. In an interview with the director and screenwriter, the filmmakers acknowledged that the death and resurrection of Jesus were indeed a singular event, but they see salvation—what Barbara is experiencing at this point in the film—as a kind of death and resurrection, the death of the old life or the old ways and a birth into a

new life (being born again). They intended the scene above to represent that death and rebirth (what is called in the film "substitution"), not to suggest that Jesus is actually dying for the sins of human beings on an individual basis.

The exchange between Jesus and Barbara discussed above, however, is not only about faith, but also about love. Here Jesus is preparing to die again in order to save Barbara. He did it once already, but He is willing to do it again: "No problem." As Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (15:13). In this Bible passage, Jesus indicates the importance of love in the world, and in the movie, the willingness of Jesus to die again for Barbara brings this importance home to the audience.

When Jesus says He has loved and continues to love those who "shouted insults, lies; who spat upon [Him]," He is indicating both the love He has for His children and the importance of love in general.

But there is another moment in the movie that seems to capture the importance of love as well. In the fourth minute of their conversation, when Barbara is not quite sure this is really Jesus, Jesus pulls from His pocket a picture of Barbara as a child and recounts the events surrounding a moment in her life—a moment only Jesus could know.

After recounting the story of Barbara falling in the bathtub at her Aunt Rosa's house and almost losing an eye, Jesus says, referring to the picture He has let her hold, "Pardon me. Can I have that back? It is precious to me." That the picture is precious stands for how precious Barbara herself is to Jesus, and her preciousness is an indication of Jesus' love for her.

One other element of the film that indicates the importance of love is the song that plays at the end of the film over the credits. The song, "Just As You Are (Cosi Come Sei)," by

Nincini, is a song about God's love for all of His children. One of the lines repeated in the song is "I, I love you as you are." For those who do not speak Italian, this element of the film might be missed because the song is sung in Italian. But the song is an essential part of the film and must be included as part of the message of the movie.

One of the elements of the film that struck me is the humility of Jesus. I asked Sergio Mascheroni if he intended to show this humility and what in the film was intended to show that humility. He was adamant that he wanted Jesus to be a humble figure in the film. After all, it was Jesus who washed the feet of His disciples. (See John 13:1-17.)

The fact that Jesus is not wearing a tie is of special importance here. Mascheroni told me that if one is wearing a tie in Italian culture, it is a sign of work or business. That Jesus is not wearing a tie makes him "approachable" and thereby open to a more intimate relationship than would be the case if it were a business or professional relationship. The casual dress of Jesus is the only feature of the film that Mascheroni mentioned in relationship to humility, and it is the only feature that I could identify specifically in relationship to humility. The kindness, gentleness, even tenderness of Jesus as He interacts with Barbara, however, also can be taken as signs of the humility of Jesus. Jesus is never the focus of the stories that He tells Barbara. The focus is always upon her, her pain and the possibility of her salvation and the return of her happiness.

I think that we also can point to things that are not in the film as indications of the humility of Jesus. Jesus could have put Himself at the center of the stories He tells, but He does not. Jesus could brag about who He is, but He does not. Jesus could make proclamations about the world, but He does not. Jesus could boast about what He has done, but He does not. Even when Jesus tells the story of creating the hippopotamus, He is not boastful but merely expressing the pleasure He feels

at the joy the children experience in seeing the hippopotamus.

There is a sweetness and humility in the Jesus of the movie that stands in marked contrast to some of today's most visible representatives of Christianity. The Jesus of *5 Minuti* is nothing like these highly visible and outspoken representatives of Christianity.

When we try to interpret a film, we usually look at particular features of the film that support a particular interpretation. But we might also, as we did above, ask what is *not* in the movie. In *5 Minuti*, there is no mention of prayer in public schools, no mention of terminating a pregnancy, no mention of homosexuality or same-sex marriage, no mention of using tax dollars to send children to religious schools, and no mention of posting the Ten Commandments on the courthouse wall or placing them in public parks.

The Jesus of *5 Minuti* has nothing to say about these hot-button issues that consume so much of the religio-political debate, at least in the United States. Come to think of it, the Jesus of the Bible does not have anything to say on these topics, either. Probably the closest Jesus comes to saying something about religio-political topics comes in Mark 12:17, where He says, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Finally, at the end of the scene where Jesus stands on the bridge offering to die again for Barbara, Barbara reaches out her hand to Jesus and we see Him take her hand in His. Deborah Brown told me in an email that as director, "That was the first image that came to me as I planned the film. We were very conscious of the image portrayed. ... Unlike Michelangelo's image on the Sistine Chapel, where man is reaching out to touch the finger of God, I wanted to show that in Christ, we can reach out and *grasp* the hand of the very real Savior."

The relationship between Barbara and Jesus as He takes her

hand is both real and personal. It is not an abstraction in the way that the relationship between God and man is in the Sistine Chapel. Clearly, the personal relationship with Jesus is, for Brown, an important element of Christianity. The idea suggested by Sergio Mascheroni that because Jesus does not wear a tie, He is approachable and someone with whom you can have an intimate relationship also provides evidence of the importance of the personal relationship with Jesus. The personal relationship is also suggested by Jesus in the 25-minute version of the film when He says, "It's absurd for people to kneel before an image of me, when they can approach the real me."

Given the various and interesting features of this film, there is something that seems to transcend each of these. In the end, the movie seems to promote two seemingly contradictory ideas about God. The first is that God is a timeless being, the Creator of the universe, and as such is very much beyond human understanding. God is a vast power and a great mystery. God is not made in man's image. God is not the petty being we so often describe when we use God for our own purposes. There is something awesome about God.

The second idea is that we can have a personal, intimate, day-to-day relationship with Jesus. Here there is nothing abstract about God. Jesus is someone with whom we can have a personal relationship. As Jesus says in the 25-minute version of the film, "Why kneel before an image, when you can have the real thing?"

While it may seem contradictory to think of God as both beyond our comprehension and the other in a personal, intimate relationship, this is the message of Christianity. Christianity offers us a personal, individual, real relationship with God, but a God that is beyond all understanding. And this is a feature of Christianity that *5 Minuti* expresses clearly.

Dr. William L. Blizek is professor of philosophy and religion and founding editor of *The Journal of Religion and Film* at University of Nebraska at Omaha. This article is reprinted by permission from the *Journal of Religion and Film* 11/15/2010, Department of Philosophy and Religion, University of Nebraska at Omaha Volume 14, Number 2 (October 2010). [Click here to read this article on .](#)