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Full Length Research Paper

The tree of life and courageous: Comparative analysis on faith-based filmmaking

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This thesis analyzes the story structure of two films, *The Tree of Life* (2011) and *Courageous* (2011), and their similarities and differences in storytelling and Christian themes. Using screenwriting scholar Robert McKee's theories on story structure, this comparative analysis highlights the plot elements, conflicts, dialogue, and overall execution of the two films in order to identify their agreement or disagreement with established screenwriting theory. Results from this analysis indicate how both films align with and diverge from McKee's theories, finding in conclusion that these motion pictures not only provide insight on differences in portraying Christian faith in film but also the importance of dramatizing conflict in filmmaking. This insight bridges a divide in the faith-based film industry between mainstream and evangelical filmmakers seeking to ask spiritual questions in their work.

Key words: Alex Kendrick, Christian film, courageous, Robert McKee, story structure, Terrence Malick, the tree of life.

INTRODUCTION

Lewerenz and Nicolosi (2005) began a discussion addressing how Christians can better influence culture through media with their anthology *Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film, and Culture*. Writers, producers, and film professors from around the United States addressed in their essays how Christian and non-Christian filmmakers and audiences claimed, "Christians missed [their] opportunity" (Detwiler, 2005: 38) to create a dialogue about faith, and even, "Most films that successfully incorporate religious themes are made by nonreligious people" (Parham, 2005: 54) These authors acknowledged a divide between the secular and evangelical communities in film. This project asks the question: What are the differences and similarities between films dealing with Christian faith made by

secular and evangelical filmmakers? Answering this question and addressing the divide between the two groups of filmmakers will give insight into how faith is portrayed in film. To address and bring insight to this divide will be relevant and beneficial to the current faith-based film industry. Wilkinson (2015) noticed evangelical audiences responding differently to these films, embracing openly Christian films like *God's Not Dead* (2014) and shunning others such as *Noah* (2014). However, she was also convinced that many filmmakers wanted to bridge that gap. As she interviewed many filmmakers at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, she found many filmmakers, whether or not they were religious or spiritual, who wanted to reconcile the divide between secular and evangelical both *The Tree of Life*

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and *Courageous* told stories regarding familial relationships, the loss of a loved one, questioning God, reconciliation, and even succumbing to temptation. The films and their characters depict a specifically Christian worldview. The films also gained a substantial mainstream presence, with critical acclaim and financial success. However, *Courageous* did not fare as well critically as *The Tree of Life* did. Likewise, *The Tree of Life*, unlike *Courageous*, in its lack of promotion and recognition from specifically Christian audiences, “bypassed evangelicals almost completely” (Shone, 2014, n.p.). In their differences in reception from the public, *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* represent two sides of faith-based filmmaking. The former was produced by filmmakers who were working within a secular production company and distributor. The latter was produced by openly evangelical Christian filmmakers. The films, despite their similarities in content and close proximity in release, were never associated with each other because of the differences in their filmmakers’ backgrounds. The differences increase when comparing the biographies and careers of the individual directors of the films, Terrence Malick for *The Tree of Life* and Alex Kendrick for *Courageous*. Malick, a Harvard philosophy student before graduating from the American Film Institute, has directed feature films since 1973 and has garnered considerable critical acclaim and modest financial success. Kendrick, a Kennesaw State communications student, before graduating from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, began creating church media in 1999 and has earned an enormous profit from his low-budget feature films produced through his church in Georgia. *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* rank among the greatest commercial and critical successes for Malick and Kendrick, respectively. However, the two films, regardless of their strong mainstream presence, close proximity in release, and similar narrative content, were never associated with each other and have not yet been analyzed together. This project therefore will analyze both *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* in order to reveal similarities and differences in their storytelling concerning faith. To do this, this project will use renowned story structure theories, developed by acclaimed screenwriting professor Robert McKee, to identify the story elements of both films, such as acts, scenes, beats, and character arcs. Identifying these elements will enforce a thorough and specific analysis to recognize the difference between the similar narrative themes and structures of the two films.

Literature review

This project will contribute to ongoing research addressing the divide between secular and evangelical filmmaking about Christian faith. Christians working in

media, such as the authors and editors of *Behind the Screen*, as well as non-Christians have analyzed the different methods both filmmaking groups use in order to connect with audiences. This project will do so through the analysis of two specific motion pictures, but other authors have used different methods for research. Addressing previous studies will recognize the research that has already been completed on the topic and will distinguish this analysis from other projects regarding the relationship between Christian faith and filmmaking.

Evangelical Christian filmmaking

Hendershot (2004) analyzed the story, marketing, and commercial success (or failure) of evangelistic apocalyptic feature films, along with other evangelistic media that repeatedly failed in attempts to break into the mainstream. “The producers believe that these films are palatable to a mass audience,” reported Hendershot. “But even though they don’t mention Jesus, nonevangelical viewers easily identify and dismiss them as religious films” (Hendershot, 2004: 180). Lindvall and Quicke (2011) detailed the efforts of early Christian filmmakers and churches to combat Hollywood film with their own products. These filmmakers ranged from theologians and pastors using film for ministry use to film students attempting to use the craft of filmmaking for a higher purpose. Many of these filmmakers even created evangelistic parodies of Hollywood classics and blockbusters. Lindvall and Quicke claimed that many Christian filmmakers were “ready to engage culture rather than merely condemn it” (Lindvall and Quicke, 2011: 204).

The filmography of Terrence Malick

Fech (2013) recognized Malick’s “distinct, philosophical vision” and compared Malick’s first six films to the works of American transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson. Fech’s thesis specifically compared *The Tree of Life* to Emerson’s essay concerning grief and suffering, “Experience”. Fech claimed, “Like Emerson does in ‘Experience,’ *The Tree of Life* recognizes that the struggle between nature and grace, between love and hate, is an inherent part of existence, one that we navigate as best we can” (Fech, 2013: 108). Rybin (2012) analyzed techniques of Malick’s first five films that portrayed ideas of spirituality, a spirituality that was not necessarily Christian “but rather in the sensations of modern existence that have origins in the autobiographies of his characters and in past forms of human life” (Rybin, 2012: 173). Cortez (n.d.) used the writings of film theorists David Bordwell and Torben Grodal on

art cinema to analyze the filmmaking techniques of *The Tree of Life*. Cortez stated, “Terrence Malick uses allegorical passages in order to emit his thoughts instead of using more words” (Cortez, n.d., p. 23), arguing that *The Tree of Life* could be considered art cinema. Rosadiuk (2006) specifically analyzed Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and its relation to philosophies on insight, from the works of Plato and Socrates to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. Ultimately, Rosadiuk argued the 170-minute film created a film-viewing experience that transcended theory.

The filmography of Alex Kendrick

Johnston (2009) analyzed the creation of Kendrick’s film *Facing the Giants* (2006) rather than its content. Johnston used the production of the film as an example of guidelines for Christian filmmakers to follow in the future: prayerfully considering all elements of production, telling stories creatively, and working as a united crew to represent a united church. Parker (2012) argued that *Courageous*, with its larger production and marketing budget, represented a step forward for Christian filmmakers and their “engagement with potential audiences, their awareness of changes in communication, their evolution as the preeminent Christian independent film studio, and, more broadly speaking, the future of independent filmmaking” (Parker, 2012: 107). Brown (2015) used the films of Kendrick’s production company Sherwood Pictures to analyze film from a business perspective rather than an aesthetic perspective. Brown argued the films of Sherwood Pictures, which were openly evangelical and proved to be commercially successful, could open a door in the Christian film industry for action-adventure stories to be just as profitable. Benton (2012) also analyzed the commercial success and marketing strategies of the work of Sherwood Pictures, challenging Christian filmmakers and Christian entertainment companies to produce work that would create conversations about important issues.

Comparative analysis in film

Jordan (2001) compared Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* with Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), investigating the similarities and differences between the films in terms of genre, comparing the films’ “underlying issues of violence, masculinity, and nationalism” (Jordan, 2001: 27). After analyzing both films, Jordan concluded that, although, both brought revisions to the war film genre, *Saving Private Ryan* had more in common with the traditional war film

and its conventions, which *The Thin Red Line* strayed away from. French and Shacklock (2014) similarly analyzed Malick’s *The Tree of Life* in comparison with another motion picture from the same year, Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*. The authors analyzed the element of the ‘sublime’ in the two films based on the theories of philosophers Brian Massumi and Jean-François Lyotard. Each film characterized the ‘sublime’ with a slow pace, a cyclical narrative structure, and depiction of transcendence. Pfenninger (2014) compared the editing style of Kendrick’s *Courageous* to that of five Academy Award-winning and nominated films released in 2010 and 2011. Pfenninger analyzed the visual style in the six motion pictures and concluded that *Courageous* lacked the aesthetic value held by the other five. Comparative analysis has also been used to study films dealing with Christian faith made by other filmmakers besides Malick and Kendrick. Burton (2008) used comparisons of selected motion pictures to chronicle the changes in the portrayal of Christianity in film over almost a century. The analysis concluded that while the films all exemplified themes of sacrifice and vengeance, the character of Jesus generally transitioned over the decades from being more divine to human, especially after the 1960’s and 1970’s. Macnaughton (2011) compared several films to analyze the change in the cinematic portrayal of the Bible over decades, in order to analyze how the filmmakers “manipulated two spaces of spectacle (church and cinema) to make the church-going and cinema-going indistinguishable” (Macnaughton, 2011: 11). Sumera (2006) analyzed several films about faith from secular film distributors and producers, rather than from openly Christian filmmakers. The analysis focused specifically on character analysis in several films. Sumera argued, “By looking at characters’ attitude towards faith, and the circumstances in which they exercise their religion, general themes will hopefully emerge as to how Christianity is used in narrative” (Sumera, 2006: 19).

Although, not analyzing films dealing with Christianity, Steinke (2013) compared two motion picture adaptations of the same book, *The Great Gatsby*, considering the author’s background, the time periods during which the novel and films were produced, and the narrative elements of the story. Steinke concluded that classifying one film as ‘better’ over the other was dependent on the individual viewer’s preference. She argued, “...The comparison is not an evaluative criterion but a tool to explore the reasons why the director chose to introduce changes” (Steinke, 2013: 11). This project will contribute to these research projects, comparisons, and film analyses in the examination of the portrayal of Christianity in secular and evangelical filmmaking. However, this project will choose two motion pictures specifically for analysis in order to provide an in-depth example of that portrayal.

While Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* and Alex Kendrick's *Courageous* have been analyzed in these previous research projects, those analyses have studied the films based on filmmaking elements such as production, editing techniques, or even genre. This project will address the story structure in both films, an element that not only has been rarely addressed in previous research but also represents storytelling in film in its most basic form. Additionally, while the films have been compared in several of these studies to other motion pictures with similar aesthetics or theatrical releases, *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* have not yet been analyzed together. This project is the first to study the narrative elements of both films. Doing so will provide a specific comparative example of secular and evangelical filmmaking about Christian faith.

METHODOLOGY

To analyze the similarities between *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*, this analysis will focus solely on those traditional elements of story. To study these films' narrative elements, this project will use a screenwriting and story structure model recognized as one of the most respected in the filmmaking and screenwriting industries: the story structure theories of former University of Southern California professor Robert McKee, theories outlined in his bestselling book, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. In the book, McKee addressed the importance as well as the method of story structure. All story elements create what McKee named "The Structure Spectrum," or the overall design of a story. Stories are broken down into acts, caused by reversals of values in sequences consisting of scenes. Individual scenes contain beats, or actions and reactions in behavior, which create events that outline the conflict in story that is resolved by the ending. A story consists of many moments in a character's life, noted McKee, but those moments must be the most important ones that best suit the story structure. "The life story of each and every character offers encyclopedic possibilities. The mark of a master is to select only a few moments but give us a lifetime" (McKee, 1997: 31).

One of those moments McKee named the Inciting Incident, that is, the event that "radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life" and forces the protagonist to react. This event begins the protagonist's quest to find that Object of Desire, as McKee named it, that may or may not restore balance and defeat the inner, personal, or extra-personal forces of antagonism in his life. The protagonist's quest culminates in the Crisis, the ultimate dilemma for the protagonist who, "when face-to-face with the most powerful and focused forces of antagonism in his life, must make a decision to take one action or another in a last effort to achieve his Object of Desire" (McKee, 1997: 304). The crisis concludes in the story's Climax, where the protagonist and story's values come at "a value swing at maximum charge that's absolute and irreversible. The meaning of that change moves the heart of the audience" (McKee, 1997: 309). This event brings the Resolution, or the conclusion to the story and whether or not the protagonist achieves his goal.

Acts contain what McKee referred to as progressive complications, or Points of No Return. "A story must not retreat to actions of lesser quality or magnitude," claimed McKee, "but move progressively forward to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another" (McKee, 1997:

209). In addition, McKee argued that scenes must contain turning points, setups, payoffs, and emotional transitions. These events, which provide each scene with purpose and closure, support McKee's theory of the thesis/anti-thesis debate that motivates a story.

The character must make definitive decisions at turning points, which reveal character, progress the plot, and present a complex argument. "How a character chooses in a true dilemma," claimed McKee, "is a powerful expression of his humanity and of the world in which he lives" (McKee, 1997: 249). Robert McKee's *Story* provides an in-depth and insightful guideline on screenwriting and story structure. This project will use the book, its theories on scene analysis, and the terminology on story events and devices to analyze and identify the story structure and narrative elements of *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*. By identifying the events in the films with McKee's corresponding story elements, this project will provide a comparison on the similarities as well as differences of the storytelling of each film in order to analyze the different storytelling of secular and evangelical filmmaking about faith.

RESULTS

This analysis will divide the plot and story elements of *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* into sections based on three-act structure as advocated by Robert McKee, in order to provide specific examples of similarities and differences in the plot and story structure of both films.

Act one

McKee (1997) claimed setting up a story involves the delivery of exposition, "the information about setting, biography, and characterization that the audience needs to know to follow and comprehend the events of the story" (McKee, 1997: 334). McKee added that exposition must first further conflict, and secondly convey information. *The Tree of Life* opens with flashbacks of Mrs. O'Brien as a child, interacting with her loving father and animals on a farm filled with dandelions as her narration is heard: "The nuns taught us there are two ways through life: the way of nature and the way of grace." Not only does this reveal exposition about Mrs. O'Brien's religious upbringing, but the narration also establishes a central conflict that continues throughout the film: the conflict between nature and might versus grace and love. Her description of grace – the desire to please others and accept being ignored – is heard underneath images of herself, while her description of nature – wanting to only please oneself – accompanies images of Mr. O'Brien leading his family in prayer at dinner. Mrs. O'Brien's narration concludes, under images of a waterfall and a tree (among the many images of nature interspersed throughout the film), as she claims, "no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end" – then, speaking to God, "I will be true to you... whatever comes." *Courageous* opens with Nathan Hayes at a gas station, where his car is broken into and driven off by a thug. Nathan runs after him not to save the car but to save his infant son inside.

This scene introduces the film as a story with action as well as themes of justice and fatherhood. Eventually, Nathan rescues his car and his son after the thug escapes. In the following scene, he speaks with Adam Mitchell and Shane Fuller and tells them he is joining the police force the following week. This conversation gives the characters an opportunity to meet and establish relationships. That next week, after the officers arrest two men for drug possession, subsequent scenes show the Mitchell and Hayes family interacting at home, revealing tension between parents and children. Later, Javier and the Martinez family are introduced, not only revealing their own financial struggles but also adding to the spiritual aspect of the film as Javier prays and asks God what He wants him to do. Eventually, Javier starts working for Adam, and he joins the four other fathers in the narrative.

After setup and establishing setting and character, claimed McKee, comes the event that begins the character's journey: the Inciting Incident. According to McKee, the Inciting Incident "first throws the protagonist's life out of balance, then arouses in him the desire to restore that balance" (McKee, 1997: 192). However, McKee also claimed that while a protagonist might pursue an Object of Desire, that being a conscious desire, he might also be unknowingly pursuing an unconscious desire. The inciting incident occurs in *The Tree of Life* when Mrs. O'Brien answers the door to find a mailman with a telegram for her. She walks through the house and reads the telegram. As she reads, she stops walking, drops to the ground, and sobs. In the next scene, her husband speaks to someone on the phone at an airfield and learns the news himself. Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien, as is revealed later in the first act, have just lost their son R. L. The following short scenes cut suddenly from one to the next as Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien walk through their house and neighborhood as friends come to try to console them. Following a scene where Mrs. O'Brien grieves with her mother, Mr. O'Brien talks to his wife in the front yard, remembering a time when he criticized R. L.'s playing the piano. The sequence closes with Mr. O'Brien silently walking alone in the woods before transitioning to Jack's character arc. Jack, now a grown adult living in an unidentified big city, relates voiceover narration expressing frustration and cynicism of his environment underneath images of his home and workplace. Jack's attitude manifests itself not only through his dry voiceover narration, but also visually through his half-hearted interactions with others and disinterest in the office. However, as Jack reflects on his childhood and R. L. in particular, he wonders about that 'nature of grace' he found in both R. L. and his mother. "How did she bear it," he asks God, as he remembers his mother during her time of grieving. At this point in the

narrative, the point of view transitions back to Mrs. O'Brien, wandering through her house and the woods silently. Her narration reveals her questioning God: "Was I false to you? Lord, why? Where were you?" As she walks through the woods and closes her eyes, prompted by this inciting incident of her son's untimely death, the narrative begins its second act.

The inciting incident occurs in *Courageous* when Adam is working on construction at his house with Javier one day. Shane drives up in his police car in uniform, disturbed, and informs Adam that his daughter Emily has been in a car accident. Adam gets in the car and prays as Shane informs him of the situation, but by the time they arrive at the hospital, it is too late – Emily has passed away. In a brief scene with inaudible dialogue, Adam arrives, and his wife Victoria, who has just been speaking to a doctor, falls into his arms, weeping. Minimal dialogue continues through the next several scenes in the film, during the pastor's eulogy at Emily's funeral and a brief montage of neighbors and friends approaching the Mitchells' house with condolences. After some fruitless conversations with Victoria and son Dylan, Adam shares his grief with his pastor, who shares with Adam about taking time to grieve and be thankful for the time he had with Emily while she was still alive. Finally, Adam shares his Object of Desire: "I want to know what God expects of me as a father. And I want to know how to help my wife and my son." Prompted by the Inciting Incident of his daughter's untimely death, Adam asks the pastor to help him propel the story in a new direction, beginning the film's second act.

Act two—conflict

"When the protagonist steps out of the Inciting Incident, he enters a world governed by the Law of Conflict" (McKee, 1997: 210), stated McKee, claiming a story must contain inner, personal, and extra-personal conflict not only to convey themes and create complex characters but also to progress the narrative. Therefore, the dramatization of conflict as well as the presence of conflict is essential in storytelling. The second act of *The Tree of Life* contains scenes with limited dialogue, simply showing the O'Brien family in everyday life. As the O'Brien boys react to the environment and people around them, young Jack's narration asks God questions just as his mother's does. Thus, inner conflict progresses the majority of the film, as Jack realizes the dichotomy that his father and mother represent. But Jack, viewing his father's way as cruel and his mother's way as naïve, cannot choose one over the other. Jack thus, experiences personal conflict with his family as he tries to discern how to live. However, his inner conflict prompts his personal conflict, as internally he attempts to reconcile two

opposing ways of life, his father's way of nature and his mother's way of grace.

As Jack struggles with God internally, trying to reconcile the ways of his father and mother, his frustration is manifested in his relationships with the rest of the family. Although, Jack and his brothers occasionally get in arguments with their father, they never openly say that they hate him. In fact, the boys try to convince their father that they really do love him. But Jack's external respect with his father is in direct opposition to his internal bitterness towards him, creating strong personal conflict. Eventually, Jack decides to even downright disobey his mother when she commands him. "I'll do what I want," he tells her. "What do you care? You let him walk right over you," referring to his father's strict treatment of her as well as his children. Jack's bitterness towards his parents also affects his treatment of his brothers. Jack begins to view R. L. as weak because he is more hesitant to get into trouble. Jack wrestles with R. L. in the front yard one day, and R. L. does not fight back. Jack's attitude towards his brother exemplifies strong personal conflict—while he secretly admires his brother's kindness (similar to his mother's), he is jealous of him and wants to be loved as much as, or more than, R. L. is.

As Jack experiences a growing rebellion and loss of innocence, his conflict becomes one with society at large, not just with his own family. His childlike innocence begins to fade away as he sees wrongdoing and punishment. When their father is away on a business trip, the O'Brien boys play with other boys of their age from the neighborhood. As the boys begin destroying property, Jack is conflicted about whether or not his parents would agree with this. His friend, however, encourages him that his parents are irrelevant: "They're just trying to scare you, keep you ignorant. They say you can't try stuff? They do." Jack's rebellion serves as extra-personal conflict that drives the tense personal conflict between him and his family as well as the inner conflict he faces as he decides to do wrong.

The second act of *Courageous* begins after Adam has decided to make an effort to become a better husband and father to his grieving family. The Resolution for Men to which he and the five fathers commit at the film's midpoint intensifies inner conflict among the characters. As the men recite the promises of the Resolution, they make statements that will test them in the rest of the film's narrative. However, although, all the main characters have inner conflict that influences their decisions, that conflict is expressed primarily through dialogue, and conflict is normally resolved rather quickly. For the Mitchell family, inner conflict was most prevalent as they mourned the loss of Emily. Six weeks later, their lives and emotions have improved, leaving little inner conflict to progress the rest of the story.

As the five fathers struggle internally with their desires to become better men, their conflict and frustration extends to the way they treat their wives, children, and each other. However, for all five fathers, personal conflict is usually resolved in a short amount of time, similar to the inner conflict. One morning, as Adam and Dylan run together, they stop briefly so that Adam can verbally tell Dylan his decision to follow God and his desire for Dylan to do the same. Nathan has conflict with his family early in the film, particularly with his daughter Jade, as he and Kayla told her she could not date classmate Derek until she was older. But in one scene later in the second act, Nathan and Jade have dinner at a fancy restaurant where he asks her if she will wait to start dating, when she is older and has found a Godly man to date. She agrees, and to commemorate the night, Nathan gives Jade a purity ring. For Javier and his family, not only is there conflict in the first act when he struggles to find a job, but there is also conflict after he finds a new job at a factory. When approached about a promotion, he is asked to run a preliminary shift in another department and fill out a form about a shipment—reporting false information. Javier goes home that night and talks to Carmen about the situation, and neither can decide what to do. Javier knows he cannot lie; however, Carmen knows that this promotion is a way to provide for their family and Javier cannot pass it up. Their family and their future are at risk now, as is their opportunity to remain in the country. Although, the situation is resolved a few scenes later, the stakes are high, making the conflict strong.

Officer David Thomson's personal conflict with Amanda and Olivia is present in the film but only because David mentions it verbally to Nathan. After committing to the Resolution for Men, David sends Amanda a letter in an attempt to reconcile. In short montages later in the film, David and Amanda sit in a café having (inaudible) conversation, and eventually, David arrives at Amanda's house to see Olivia. Shane's personal conflict with his family is also given very limited screen time. His ex-wife is only mentioned in dialogue, and only in one montage in the middle of the film is Shane seen with his son Tyler at a restaurant, laughing and making (inaudible) conversation. Shane's personal conflict with Adam is much stronger, especially at the film's low point when Adam catches Shane in the act of stealing drugs from evidence. The two men, having been partners on the police force, have a strong relationship, and the stakes for their reconciliation become higher when that relationship is tested. As Adam, David, Nathan, and Shane serve on the city police force, they encounter conflict firsthand as they serve the community and punish wrongdoing. There are three sequences in the film where one or more of the officers chase after criminals, usually catching them, that represent the policemen's overall

struggle with crime in their environment. However, because these sequences are spread out in the film, the criminals seem less of a threat. However, at the beginning of the film, when the four policemen listen at a meeting where the sheriff shares statistics on prevalent crime from fatherless homes, the extra-personal conflict becomes even more relevant. As Adam writes the Resolution for Men, he tells his fellow officers and Javier that he wants to be a better father not only to please God (satisfying inner conflict) and his family (satisfying personal conflict), but also to set an example for the rest of society (satisfying extra-personal conflict).

Act two—Points of no return

Certain scenes in *The Tree of Life* when Jack observes events in his life that contribute to his loss of innocence are Points of No Return in his journey. In these moments, Jack realizes he cannot return to his childish ignorance and must face the hardships of life. When his family goes swimming at the community pool one summer day, one of Jack's friends named Tyler ultimately drowns in the water. Jack's prayers to God start to become bitter. "You let a boy die. You'd let anything happen. Why should I be good if you aren't?" One day, he sneaks into his neighbor's house when she is not home and looks around at her things. In her bedroom, Jack opens up his neighbor's dresser drawer, looking at her clothes. He finds a white dress, takes it out, and looks at it. But after hearing several sounds as if someone is coming back into the house, Jack sneaks out with the dress and throws it into a river. Jack returns home, unable to look his mother in the eye. This Point of No Return is the first time that Jack strongly feels remorse for his actions: he whispers, "What have I started? What have I done?" Jack's inner conflict has returned, and he can no longer blindly follow his rebellious friends – he longs to be innocent once again.

Several moments in *Courageous* when Adam, Shane, Nathan, David, and Javier make decisions that impact themselves and their families, for better or worse are Points of No Return in their journeys. Through the multiple subplots occurring throughout the film, each man has his own moments where he must choose between integrity and dishonesty, between forgiveness and bitterness, unable to look back once the decision is made. Each father finds himself tested to stay true to the Resolution. David finally takes the initiative to reconcile with Amanda and Olivia, although he does not know what Amanda's response will be. Nathan finally reconciles with his father, even though he never knew him and felt bitterness for him being absent in his life. Javier, at the risk of losing his job, stays true to his integrity and does not provide false

information on a report—which leads to him getting the promotion. Adam must decide whether or not to investigate on suspicious activity within his unit when he realizes that evidence has been tampered with, risking the respectability of the department. When Adam finally takes action, he finds Shane, who has struggled to maintain his own integrity rather than finding illegal ways to make a profit—and because Shane has failed, the story reaches its lowest point.

Act two—Low point and reconciliation

In *The Tree of Life*, Jack and R. L. ride their bicycles into the woods and start shooting at animals with a BB gun. Jack has R. L. put his finger overtop of it, and when R. L. finally agrees, Jack fires the gun. R. L. screams in pain and runs away, leaving Jack to walk by himself through the woods with a blank expression on his face. This turning point in Jack's journey is also his lowest. Although, the way of nature has convinced him that 'might makes right,' his efforts to seem tougher than everyone else have led to him hurting his brother. Now, Jack desires forgiveness and the way of grace. In a later scene, however, when Jack finally apologizes to R.L. at home, brings reconciliation as R. L. silently refuses to fight back and instead forgives Jack. This moment is where the scene turns, as Jack finally becomes vulnerable with his brother but in return receives grace. This reconciliation between brothers carries into Jack's attitude towards his parents, as he sees his father in the front yard and willingly joins him. In the following scenes leading into the third act, Mr. O'Brien is let go from his factory position, forcing him to take another job in another location. As the family moves away, and Mrs. O'Brien's narration reflects on the nature of grace once again ("Unless you love," she says, "your life will flash by"), there is closure because the family has been reconciled. This brings the narrative back to Mrs. O'Brien years later and Jack as an adult, as they seek closure once again after the death of R. L.

In *Courageous*, one day at the police station, Shane is asked to take some drugs in small bags to the evidence room. When Shane arrives at the empty evidence room, he takes some of the pouches of drugs out of the bags and into his pocket. Suddenly, Adam walks in and interrogates him, followed later by Nathan. Despite Shane's claims that he is underpaid and that Adam would do the same in his situation, Adam has Shane arrested. The high stakes and negative outcome indicate this scene as the film's low point. Adam now faces the most serious conflict he has faced since Emily's death, whether to have his friend arrested or to prevent the arrest. Shane's conflict is to either maintain integrity or

break the law. By the time Adam catches him, his conflict has already been lost. Shane is taken away; he and Adam are not on good terms, even after Nathan encourages Adam about staying true to his commitment. In a later state, however, Adam goes to visit Shane in prison, where Shane finally asks forgiveness and Adam agrees to help him by looking after Tyler. Here, Shane is able to reconcile with Adam, bringing reconciliation to the narrative. Shane is repentant for his actions, especially because he has realized that they have affected his son. However, asking forgiveness from Adam brings closure and even hope to his situation.

Act three—Climax and resolution

When describing the importance of a story's Climax, McKee stated, "This crowning Major Reversal is not necessarily full of noise and violence. Rather, it must be full of meaning" (McKee, 1997: 309). McKee even claimed the Climax serves as a tool for screenwriters to build up to: once a Climax for a story is determined, the writer must work backwards to create events leading up to the event. Following the Climax, however, is the Resolution, which McKee (1997: 314) claimed is necessary especially if the Climax has moved the audience. The Resolution must provide closure to the entire narrative. The climax of *The Tree of Life* portrays the O'Brien family in a fantasy sequence similar to that which opened the second act, the creation of the universe. The Climax becomes a dreamlike sequence combining images of nature and the characters reuniting together in an unidentified time and location. While the Climax is ambiguous and lacks much dialogue, the O'Brien family receives closure and reconciliation here. Adult Jack finds himself on a beach with dozens of people, several of whom he knows—including his own family. Mrs. O'Brien looks at her eldest son and embraces him. Jack walks along the beach with his father, putting a hand on his shoulder before Mr. O'Brien returns the gesture. Finally, R. L. appears, also in his young form, and adult Jack carries him along the beach to his parents. As the scene transitions to multiple other locations, Mrs. O'Brien, surrounded by a heavenly glow, whispers, "I give him to you. I give you my son." The sequence then transitions to present-day at adult Jack's workplace, as an elevator descends down a skyscraper. Jack stands in the middle of a field among the skyscrapers, looking around his environment as if he is seeing this place for the first time. As he looks around, there is the slightest sign of a smile on his face. With some final images of skyscrapers, a large bridge above a river and the forming light in darkness that opened the film, *The Tree of Life* concludes.

In this dreamlike sequence, the film reaches its Climax as well as its Resolution rather quickly.

Searching through unknown landscapes, visually representing his internal searching for meaning and reconciliation in his life, Jack eventually finds his family as he remembers them from his youth. Jack realizes the way of grace is not only a way to live in the present but also a gateway to eternity. Here, he sees his family as he remembers them and can finally reconcile with them all. Jack's resolution occurs as he finds comfort in the hope that he will see his brother and the rest of his family once again. Mrs. O'Brien similarly finds her resolution as she reunites with her family in this sequence. She sees her family again as she remembers them from years before in a place representing eternity. When she finally has to let young R. L. go into the distance by himself, she finds comfort in the fact that he is in a better place. Remembering a life beyond her life on Earth, she finally is able to surrender R. L.—and herself — completely to God. The third act of *Courageous* re-introduces the thugs into the narrative. After Nathan and David pull some of them over for a blown taillight, the driver gets out a gun and fires at Nathan, barely missing him. A shootout ensues, as Nathan and David call Adam for backup after wounding the thugs. The shootout culminates in the two thugs chasing after a little girl nearby in order to use her as leverage. Adam, Nathan, and the girl's father pursue the thugs and eventually capture and arrest them. Days later at church, Adam's pastor have Adam, Nathan, David, and Javier stand with him at the pulpit, as the pastor has been preaching the previous weeks on fatherhood. The pastor introduces Adam, who shares a word on his family's experience in the previous few months with Emily's death, which prompted him to reconsider his role as a leader of his home. As Adam shares statistics revealing the importance of a father in a family, he vulnerably promises to lead his home with integrity, respect, and the love of God, challenging the men in the congregation to do the same. Overtop of this are images of the other officers: Shane sits alone in his prison cell, David greets Amanda and Olivia at their home, Javier reads the Bible to his family, and Nathan reads Scripture to his family at home. As Adam concludes with an explicit call to action with a hand held up high, men in the congregation begin to stand one-by-one, agreeing with the call to action. With this call, *Courageous* concludes.

The film's Climax is an exciting, action-packed way to bring the film to a close. However, only three of the five main father characters appear, and the scene's conflict focuses not on the relationship between father and son but that between authority and crime. The Climax brings Adam, Nathan, and David to a point of closure in their line of work but not in their families—that conflict was resolved in previous scenes. By referencing and visually representing each of the five fathers, however, the film's Resolution brings closure to the

variations the film presents on the theme of fatherhood. The Resolution sums up the film's message, although, in addition to the visual representation of each of the five fathers, the sequence is essentially a sermon as Adam solely addresses a congregation about what he has learned through the film. However, by the end of the film, although not all of the characters' situations are perfect, such as Shane's or Derrick's, relationships have been reconciled. There is now closure to the conflict of these men becoming better fathers.

Results overview

The first act of *The Tree of Life* establishes a quiet, contemplative tone for the story and the film as a whole. Information is delivered about the characters, the setting, and even the spiritual aspect of the story. However, dialogue is sparse, replaced by voice-over narration that does not convey information so much as to reveal the thoughts of the main characters towards God. Mrs. O'Brien's opening narration establishes her religious upbringing, a conflict between nature and grace that will develop throughout the story, and her spiritual commitment to God, information necessary for the audience to know before the occurrence of the Inciting Incident. However, even most character names including the O'Brien's surname—are not revealed in *The Tree of Life* until the end credits. Consequentially, viewers may be disorientated because of the lack of information and thus, feel disconnected from the narrative. The first act of *Courageous* establishes several different tones, characters, and storylines that will develop throughout the entire narrative. Action sequences between the policemen and criminals create tension and extra-personal conflict. Domestic scenes with families together at home create personal conflict and relay information to the audience about character backgrounds and situations, primarily through dialogue. This delivery of exposition provides information for all five father characters and their families, building up to the film's Inciting Incident. However, *Courageous*, contrary to McKee's guideline to dramatize exposition, conveys information primarily through dialogue. These scenes reveal conflict and character in a straightforward manner, leaving little room for subtlety in the storytelling.

In *The Tree of Life*, the Inciting Incident happens practically without words. However, the O'Briens still react to their son's death, quietly remembering the times they had with him. Years later, Jack has become cynical and closed up emotionally to the people and world around him, although he still wonders about the hope that eventually consoled his mother through her pain. As Mrs. O'Brien and Jack seek God for answers (their conscious desire), their quiet reflection as they remember the past leads

them to realize the ongoing struggle between the way of nature and the way of grace and seek reconciliation (their unconscious desire). In *Courageous*, the Inciting Incident also happens with few words. However, Adam, Victoria, and Dylan all react to the Inciting Incident. Adam and Victoria question their own parenting and regret not spending more time with their daughter. Dylan closes up emotionally and shuts everyone around him out of his life. However, while the Mitchell family certainly reacts to Emily's death, the same cannot necessarily be said for the other four fathers and their families, who are seen very little at the occurrence of the inciting incident. Furthermore, when Adam does make his decision to become a better father (his conscious desire), there is no inner conflict to suggest an unconscious desire. In *The Tree of Life*, conflict is dramatized by extended flashbacks and voice-over narration. Flashbacks and voice-over narration are two techniques that McKee warned could be manipulative to the viewer if used incorrectly. According to McKee, the writer must dramatize flashbacks containing information that the audience has the desire and need to know. Concerning voice-over narration, he encouraged screenwriters to "respect the intelligence and sensitivity of your audience. Invite them to... draw their own conclusions" (McKee, 1997: 345). The film's extended flashbacks create a loose structure in the narrative, as the perspective transitions from an older Mrs. O'Brien and present-day Jack to their younger selves. However, the flashbacks still follow conventional exposition, as defined by McKee, because of their dramatized conflict and turning points, leading not only to complex character development but also a progressing narrative. Voice-over narration in *The Tree of Life* is not used to give context to scenes but rather reveal the characters' inner conflict. Conflict between Jack and God is dramatized as Jack prays and questions why tragedies happened. This use of narration continues throughout the film, as characters rarely explain information but rather speak intimately with God, contributing to the characters' inner conflict. Even when the characters in *The Tree of Life* do speak to one another, information is delivered quietly and subtly. Dialogue is used very sparingly in order to prevent too much explicit information from being delivered verbally, and to place emphasis instead on characters' inner thoughts. In *Courageous*, conflict is revealed much more conventionally than in *The Tree of Life*, within a linear story structure through dialogue-driven scenes. Although, the overall plot concerns Adam Mitchell's character arc, the narrative also contains several subplots following his fellow officers and their families. McKee welcomed the idea of subplots in a story to break up monotony, suggesting that subplots could be used to complicate the Central Plot, to contradict the Controlling Idea of the Central Plot, or

to resonate the Controlling Idea with variations on a theme. But McKee's fourth reason for using subplots relates most closely with the structure of *Courageous*: "When the Central Plot's Inciting Incident must be delayed, a setup subplot may be needed to open the storytelling" (McKee, 1997: 228).

In an approximate running time of two hours, the Inciting Incident of *Courageous* occurs around the forty-minute mark. However, the story progresses in the opening forty minutes before the incident because each of the five fathers is introduced, each with his own struggle within his family. These multiple storylines not only move the story along, but they also provide variations on the theme of fatherhood, allowing the theme to resonate throughout the whole film. However, McKee stated that, just like the Central Plot, subplots must have their own Inciting Incident, Points of No Return, Climax, and Resolution, to give the characters in these subplots more development. *Courageous* includes so many subplots, each one transitioning to the next, that there is sometimes little connection between events. Thus, there is an overload of information that detracts from the power of each character's arc. Furthermore, subplots are not only ignored at times, but they are often also resolved too quickly. As the film progresses, the screen time between characters becomes unequal. Because the journeys of the characters do not always overlap with each other, the overall narrative struggles to keep focus. The Climax of *The Tree of Life* occurs with the sequence portraying the reunion and reconciliation of the O'Brien family on the beach and snowy landscapes. The sequence contains little noise and no violence; on the contrary, the Climax is quite peaceful. However, the sequence is not without meaning. In this Climax, the O'Brien family finds each other at the end of time and reconciles together. The familial and spiritual conflict leading up to this point is finally given payoff in this Climax. The Climax of *Courageous* occurs with a final shootout between Adam, Shane, and David and the criminals they have pursued on and off throughout the narrative. This Climax, contrary to that of *The Tree of Life*, does contain noise and violence, adding tension to the story that hopefully will lead to a victory for the protagonist. Unfortunately, however, the theme of fatherhood is mostly put aside in this scene in favor of an action sequence. The main conflict in this Climax is between the police and the criminals, not between a parent and child. The familial conflict leading up to the Climax is not given full payoff in this event. Although, the Resolution in *The Tree of Life* is very brief, the narrative nevertheless finds closure. An angelic Mrs. O'Brien lifts her hands in surrender, committing her son to God. Following this, Jack finds himself back in present-day with a renewed sense of optimism about his surroundings. These two characters, whose

journeys began the narrative of the film, have now found both their conscious desire to find answers as well as their unconscious desires to reconcile with their past. The Resolution in *Courageous* presents closure for the five fathers and their families, each with their own individual conclusions. Adam addresses the congregation in church about his commitment to fatherhood and acknowledges the varying perspectives that fathers will have on the Resolution for Men. This sermon reveals the variations on the theme of fatherhood that the five main characters represent. Additionally, the sermon provides the congregation—and the viewing audience—with a call to action, specifically for fathers to take a stand to lead their families. However, the sermon is just — a sermon. The film's ending is more a verbal appeal to the audience rather than a dramatized resolution.

Conclusion

This project asked: What are the differences and similarities between films dealing with Christian faith made by secular and evangelical filmmakers? Previous research on this subject has detailed the story structure and character development in films dealing with issues of faith, as well as the methods evangelical filmmakers have taken similar to secular filmmakers to produce and distribute media. *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* provided two specific examples of films with similar familial and spiritual themes told with different storytelling techniques. Based on analysis according to McKee (1997) and guidelines on three-act structure in screenwriting, the films ultimately proved to have varying techniques in their storytelling. *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* differ firstly in the delivery of exposition. *The Tree of Life* contains minimal dialogue and verbal acknowledgment of a scene's location or time period, or even the names of the characters. *Courageous*, however, contains substantially more dialogue than *The Tree of Life* and primarily uses dialogue to deliver exposition. Concerning issues of faith and spirituality, *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* also differ vastly. Although, *The Tree of Life* explicitly references a Christian worldview through the characters, specifics about faith and spirituality are rather vague throughout the film, culminating in the final sequence as the O'Brien family re-unites and reconciles on the beach. In *Courageous*, a Christian worldview is not solely portrayed in the film but promoted, culminating in a final sequence where Adam appeals to the men in his church to take a stand for leadership. However, *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* still find similarities in storytelling, firstly in their conflict. In *The Tree of Life*, Mrs. O'Brien and Jack face conflict as they struggle to reconcile with the grief they have dealt with in the loss of R. L. Jack experiences the most turning points in his journey, as

he must constantly decide between disobedience and obedience, the way of nature versus the way of grace. In *Courageous*, Adam Mitchell and his family and colleagues face conflict as they struggle to reconcile the bonds within their own families. The characters, especially the five fathers, face turning points, low points, and reconciliation as they decide what to do.

Finally, *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* share similarities in their overall themes and content. Both films portray families practicing a Christian worldview that is emphasized throughout the narrative, including the explicit use of Scripture. However, those within families in both films struggle nevertheless to love one another, as parents feel unable to control their children and children yearn to disobey or be separated from their parents. Characters are prompted to change, however, after the death of a loved one. Characters then ask God why the tragedy had to happen and how they could have lived differently while their loved one was still alive. Ultimately, this event prompts parents and children in both films to reconcile, with one another and with God. Filmmakers Terrence Malick and Alex Kendrick took a similar subject matter with *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*, respectively, and manipulated the story structure in such a way that the final films became quite different. As a result, *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* represent two examples of filmmaking about Christian faith, Malick's being told from a more secular point of view and Kendrick's from a more evangelical point of view. Ultimately, both films received acclaim and financial success from audiences. This project contains limitations in the fact that the films are but two examples of motion pictures to analyze in order to specify differences in faith-based filmmaking. Moreover, Terrence Malick and Alex Kendrick as filmmakers also suggest limitations to this study, due to their varying levels of experience, storytelling technique, and even theological background. However, this insight on the variations of story structure is essential for filmmakers of any religious background. As writers study the various methods in which to construct a screenplay, they can discover ways to tell an original story that reflects their personal values. Malick and Kendrick have done this, with *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*, respectively, using characters, conflict, and recurring themes to tell a personal story rooted in faith. In Seger's (2005) contribution to *Behind the Screen*, she offered insight on two types of storytelling in film that can be applied to *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*. Seger identified two types of stories the Christian screenwriter usually chooses to write: the prescriptive (showing how the world *can* be rather than how it *is*) or the descriptive (dramatizing life and reality and lacking an evangelistic message). With this terminology, Seger established a dichotomy between two sides of

filmmaking about faith. The prescriptive story offers hope from a Christian worldview but fails, she argues, to dramatize reality; the descriptive story dramatizes reality but fails to offer hope from a Christian worldview. If a screenwriter attempts to tell a story portraying Christian faith from one of these two methods, the final product will have faults.

However, Seger offered that writing a story that is both prescriptive and descriptive is possible, through a transformational arc. A story must present problems for a protagonist as well as a clear journey for him to draw closer and farther from God, with events occurring within that journey that force him to react. Seger also emphasized that drama involves using subtext rather than explaining meaning. Therefore, according to Seger, "the Christian writer has to be willing to suggest rather than tell" (Seger, 2005: 159). Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* represents the 'descriptive' storytelling that Seger described, with subtle delivery of exposition and character development and themes of Christian faith that transcend conventional storytelling. However, many questions remain unanswered by the ending about the characters, their futures, and even their worldview. Alex Kendrick's *Courageous*, on the other hand, represents the 'prescriptive' storytelling. The film addresses themes for a family following a Christian worldview. However, themes are hardly dramatized because of a prevalence of dialogue and lack of sustained conflict. In short, *The Tree of Life* says too little, and *Courageous* says too much. The two films differ the most in their dramatization of character and conflict. However, while this dramatization reveals major differences between *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*, a similarity is also revealed: neither film dramatizes information on plot, character, and conflict in a way that is completely satisfying to the viewer. Both secular and evangelical filmmakers face a challenge in their storytelling, to provide just the right amount of exposition, dialogue, conflict, and resolution to create a complete narrative. Therefore, as filmmakers pursue storytelling dealing with spiritual themes and story elements, the objective to dramatize conflict is essential, for the Christian and the non-Christian. Perhaps in the future, evangelical filmmakers may create motion pictures alongside nonbelievers to not only compete at the box office or with critics, but also to build a bridge between a secular and evangelical community.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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