

# Constantine (2005)

Rated R. Our ratings: V-5 ; L-4 ; S/N-3

*Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, "Come here at once and take your place at the table"? Would you not rather say to him, "Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink"? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!"*

*Luke 17:7-10*

It would be easy to dismiss Constantine director Francis Lawrence's film, based as it is on characters from the "Hellblazer" graphic novels, as just another comic book-based affair. However, it opened as the No. 2 film (behind Hitch). Put these two factors together, and that means there are a lot of teenagers and young adults for whom this Matrix-like film will be their chief source of theology—at least until the next such film comes along. Church leaders interested in understanding and reaching young adults would do well to go see it and offer opportunities for gathering and discussing it and its ideas.

Keanu Reeves plays John Constantine, another example of a gifted person whose gift is more like a curse. He can see the half-breeds that walk among us, appearing on the surface as just another human being. Some of these are angelic, but others are demonic, causing great harm. Ever since he tried to escape the torment of his gift by attempting suicide during his teen years, Constantine has been destroying the demonic breeds, sending them back to hell. Actually, his suicide had been successful: he had entered hell for the two minute duration of his death, until he had been resuscitated by the paramedics called to his home. Now he hunts down the half-demons in the hope that he might be able to earn his way into heaven, despite the judgment against suicide.

He performs exorcisms whenever his world-weary priest friend Father Hennessy (Pruitt Taylor Vince) calls on him. He chain smokes even though he has been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. And of late he has joined forces with Angela Dodson, an L.A. police detective anxious to get to the bottom of her sister Isabel's supposed suicide (Rachel Weisz plays both parts). Constantine turns down her request for help at first, so absorbed is he with his own problems. But when she is attacked by the half-demon breeds, he springs to the rescue.

Constantine's world is one in which there is a precarious balance between the forces of Good and Evil. According to him, God and Satan made a wager for the souls of humanity (a little touch of Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*?), part of the agreement being that neither would interfere directly in the conflict. They would use only indirect influence upon humans. However, in his exorcisms Constantine has discovered that Satan has apparently violated the agreement by sending full-fledged demons to enter the bodies of people.

How this all turns out makes for fascinating, though at times confusing, watching. The special effects are great, the scenes in hell obviously influenced by medieval artist Hieronymous Bosch. Rounding out the cast are Max Baker as Beeman, who

supplies Constantine with various high tech gadgets; Djimon Hounsou as Midnite, proprietor of a weird bar providing neutral territory where breeds from both sides can gather for relaxation; and Peter Stormare as Lucifer. And then there is the angel Gabriel, God's gatekeeper who seems to have it in for Constantine because of his attempts to win back God's favor. The scenes between Gabriel, played by the androgynous Tilden Swinton, are the most intriguing of the film, she feeling that Constantine lacks both faith and compassion. She also has her own agenda.

The film seems based on a Manichean or Zoroastrian theology, with God's power being balanced by that of Satan. Those planning to lead a discussion might want to brush up on their comparative religion, especially theistic ones emanating from the Middle East.

For reflection/Discussion

- 1) What do you make of the strange opening scene? What is the Spear of Destiny? How is this like the Grail? Compare such to the medieval fascination with holy relics.
- 2) What is Constantine's view of God? A God of law or grace?
- 3) What do you think of the wager between God and Lucifer? About God's not contacting directly human beings? What is the Scriptural view of this—for instance, what is the history and meaning of the title Emmanuel?
- 4) What might Jesus have replied to Constantine's question, "Haven't I served him enough?" (See the passage at the beginning of this review.) How insightful is Gabriel's answer to him? How can church's that emphasize faith as a matter of saving one's soul from hell reduce faith to a selfish affair?
- 5) How do such films as this one over-emphasize the power of evil? What does the film's view of God have in common with Deism? In what way is its theology more Manicheaistic than

Scriptural? (For instance, is the great struggle between God and Satan depicted in the Book of Revelation a warfare between equals?) Check out and share (maybe even sing) Martin Luther's great hymn "A Mighty Fortress is Our God " and see how it might relate to the film