

‘I Can Only Imagine’ Continues to Shatter Expectations—What It Means for the Future of the Craft

I Can Only Imagine continued to shatter expectations in its second weekend in theaters, grossing another \$13.8 million for a \$38.3 million total since its debut.

Paul, Apostle of Christ cracked the top 10 in its first weekend, garnering \$5 million.

The two faith-based films will be joined by *God’s Not Dead: A Light in Darkness* this weekend.

“There is this mainstream bubble that is marginalizing these types of films, and we do underestimate them,” *comScore*’s senior media analyst (and box office expert) Paul Dergarabedian tells *Entertainment Weekly*. “The faith-based films may be bolstered by perhaps the most grassroots of all movie marketing, which is at the church level. It’s like having a watercooler discussion at work, but you’re having a watercooler discussion in front of a church. You can imagine that, on Easter Sunday, when the leader of the flock is up there [giving a] sermon, it might be about going to see [a movie like the upcoming Jim Caviezel film] *Paul, Apostle of Christ*.”

He continues: “We don’t see them coming because the audience is developing at a grassroots level. It’s at the churches, with the influencers, the clergy, and among parishioners. Nobody [in the industry] is doing a survey or taking polls at churches about which parishioners are going to see a certain movie. You almost have to be a part of that community to feel the groundswell developing. ... Bigger studios wouldn’t be

getting into this business if they didn't feel it was a profitable business. *I Can Only Imagine* is probably the most talked-about movie in executive boardrooms this past week because it's a wake-up call. It seems like we've mined every genre [but this one]."

Both films have gained traction on social media with rave reviews.

Loved this movie! Inspiring! #PaulMovie

– DianeE (@dianeeldredge99) March 26, 2018

Paul Apostle of Christ is one of those movies that makes you think way after the theater. But it boosted my faith, and made me reflect on the persecuted church of those days and of what is yet to come. See this movie, even if don't believe. #PaulMovie #MovieReview #movietwit

– Mark Ganialongo (@fatlark) March 26, 2018

"Paul, Apostle Of Christ" is a well crafted, moving film, with a few difficult moments. Watch the review here: #PaulApostleOfChrist #np #NowPlaying #movies

– Airl News (@airlnews) March 26, 2018

Just finished watching "Paul, Apostle of Christ". Wow. Incredible film. Whether a follower of Jesus or someone on a spiritual journey, this is a fantastic depiction of such a historic time of the persecuted Church of Rome. #PaulApostleofChrist

– Andrew Voigt (@AndrewVoigt) March 26, 2018

I saw @onlyimaginefilm yesterday afternoon! Wow! What an amazing story behind the lyrics of this much-loved song!

Thanks @BartMillard, @mercyme, and everyone involved in the making of this film for sharing this story with the world! #ICanOnlyImagine

– Pearlene Richardson (@pr3clous_g3m) March 26, 2018

WOW! This is a very compelling reaction to the film.—>'I Can Only Imagine' How Much Everyone Needs To See This Film #ICanOnlyImagine #ICanOnlyImagineMovie

– City On A Hill (@COAHStudio) March 26, 2018

We are so grateful to all who have supported #ICanOnlyImagine! We are living Ephesians 3:20... "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or IMAGINE..." Let's flood the theaters this week and Resurrection Day!

– Matt Dickerson (@MattDickerson) March 26, 2018

Some reporters have questioned if the recent spate in faith-based films are cannibalizing each other's profits.

Alyssa Wilkinson writes for Vox:

What audiences prefer may indicate which sort of faith-based movie performs best in the marketplace, and it's possible that it may even gesture at how big the tent is for the faith-based movie audience—whether it tracks more in line with religious or political preference, or if the two are in lockstep. If God's Not Dead: A Light in the Darkness performs below I Can Only Imagine, for instance, that may indicate a weariness with politically tinged films and a preference for more broadly inspirational movies. If they bring in similar numbers, however, it may indicate that the Venn diagram between the two is close to a perfect circle.

In any case, the success of I Can Only Imagine confirms that

while the faith-based audience might be distinctive in its tastes, it's a power player at the box office. Once again, it seems that notions about the power of "niche" audiences might need a refresh. And for the movie business and those who analyze it, it's worth noting: There's a huge segment of the moviegoing audience that automatically supports movies like I Can Only Imagine, and the returns on that investment are very temporal.