

And the Best Christian Film of 2024 Goes to ... 'The Forge'

Just say the phrase “Christian movie,” and you’ll hear plenty of snarky comments. Most secular viewers don’t want to be preached at in theaters, so they aren’t going to praise a faith-based film no matter how good its production values are. And film critics rarely give five stars to anything that reflects Christian spirituality.

But Hollywood is paying more attention to Christian films these days because the scripts are better, the acting has improved, the religious cheesiness has been minimized and (most of all) profits are up because more people want wholesome, faith-based entertainment. Consider, for example, that the 2023 movie “Jesus Revolution” had a production budget of only \$15 million, yet it made \$54 million for Lionsgate Films.

Compare that to this year’s “Megalopolis,” a film by Hollywood heavyweight Francis Ford Coppola that cost \$120 million to produce but made only \$9 million at the box office. Ouch. And the overhyped “Joker: Folie à Dieu,” starring Joaquin Phoenix and Lady Gaga, cost \$200 million to make and only hauled in \$215 million for Warner Brothers.

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Christian filmmakers are perfecting their craft, and it showed in 2024 with such movies as “Cabrini” (about Catholic missionary Francesca Cabrini), “Bonhoeffer,” “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever” (from Dallas Jenkins, the creator of “The Chosen” TV series) and “Reagan” (starring Dennis Quaid as the 40th U.S. president). What was the best faith-based movie of the year? I might be biased because of my love for personal

discipleship, but my choice would be “The Forge,” the newest release from the Georgia-based Kendrick Brothers.

Set in the same film universe as “War Room,” a Kendrick Brothers movie about the power of prayer from 2015, “The Forge” tells the story of Isaiah Wright (Aspen Kennedy), a fatherless teen who takes a job at a fitness equipment factory in Charlotte, North Carolina, and ends up finding Jesus through the influence of his successful boss, Joshua Moore (Cameron Arnett).

Wright’s mother, Cynthia, a hairdresser (Priscilla Shirer), prays for her son and watches his miraculous transformation as he gets baptized, sheds old habits, takes responsibility, forgives his deadbeat father, apologizes to people he has offended and embraces responsibility and real faith. Cynthia also invites her own mentor, a feisty prayer warrior named Miss Clara (Karen Abercrombie) to pray for her son and to encourage him in his newfound faith.

The film’s title is a reference to the mentoring group that Isaiah’s boss convenes every two weeks. The men share a meal, talk about the Bible, pray for each other and make it their goal to invest their time and faith in younger disciples. They are following the advice of Moore, who urges them: “Be a fountain, not a drain.” As far as I know, it’s the first time the biblical principle of relational discipleship has been dramatized on screen. For that reason alone, “The Forge” should be required viewing in every church in the country.

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The evangelistic message of “The Forge” is anything but subtle, thanks to the Baptist faith of writer/director Alex Kendrick. When Wright sits on his bed and prays a sinner’s prayer after reading a gospel tract, some people will complain

about the preachiness. That's OK, because other people will pray along with the young man. This movie spreads the authentic gospel of Jesus as few films ever have.

I can count on one hand the number of times I've sensed the Holy Spirit's anointing on a movie. (One of those few films was last year's "Jesus Revolution.") I definitely felt God's hand on "The Forge." In fact, I cry in the same three places in the film every time I watch it. It's especially moving to watch how Wright opens his heart to the Holy Spirit and asks him to help him let go of his anger and forgive his father.

When I paid close attention to the closing credits of "The Forge" I realized why I was so moved: There were 42 intercessors praying in the studio when the film was made. Their names are listed as "inner circle prayer warriors" and "on-set prayer warriors." This might also explain why it did so well at the box office. The movie cost \$5 million to make; to date it has already grossed more than \$40 million.

If you didn't see "The Forge" when it hit theaters in August, it's now streaming on several platforms including Amazon, Apple TV and Pure Flix. It's rated PG for thematic elements, and it has no objectionable language. The movie is also great for kids. When I showed it to my two grandsons, ages 8 and 10, they sat spellbound through the full two hours and four minutes. Then the younger one remarked: "That was the best movie I've ever seen."

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