

Fireproof (2008)

Rated PG Our Rating: V- 1; L-1 ; S/N- 2. Length: 2 hours 2 min.

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Brothers Alex Kendrick Fireproof (director) and Stephen Kendrick (co-screenwriter) newest film, set in the small city of Albany Georgia, is far better than their Facing the Giants. The story of a couple heading for the divorce court— firefighter Caleb (Kirk Cameron) and Catherine Holt (Erin Bethea)—it shows that it is the little things in day to day relationships, not just some dramatic act of adultery, that eat away at a relationship—and which, as in Catherine's case, can weaken one's resolve to resist the temptation of adultery. The film, making no attempt to downplay its

Christian framework, has been embraced by church audiences but largely rejected by secular critics, a notable exception being the critic for the New York TIMES.

Caleb comes across as a thoughtless husband wrapped up in his own demanding job and dream of owning an expensive boat. He shows no understanding for the pressures that Catherine is under at the hospital where she serves as the head of public relations. He expects her to deal with housekeeping chores, meal preparation, and shopping, and talks about "my money" when finances come up in their frequent arguments. He also has a hair-trigger temper, but fortunately channels his anger into hitting with a baseball bat their garbage can, rather than Catherine. A running joke throughout the movie is his elderly neighbor watching him in bewilderment. On her part, Catherine seems to take no interest in his work or understand the dangers that confront Caleb.

Caleb is fortunate in that there are two persons available to mentor him. The first is his lieutenant at the firehouse Michael Simmons (Ken Bevel), whose marriage has been through the fire and emerged the stronger for it. It is during a conversation with Michael that the following exchange takes place: "Marriage isn't fireproof," Caleb observes, to which his friend replies, "Fireproof doesn't mean the fire will never come. It means when the fire comes that you will be able to withstand it."

His second mentor, who directly intervenes, is his father John Holt (Harris Malcom), living a four hour drive away. He challenges his son to delay divorce proceedings so that he can try what he calls "The Love Dare." Requiring forty days, this consists of a hand-written book with a suggestion to try each day, such as not responding in a negative way for the entire day, listening to the other, doing an unexpected, kind act for

the other—and to keeping a log or journal for each day. This, of course, proves difficult, especially when Catherine responds in suspicion, her hospital friends advising her that Caleb is just trying to manipulate her so he can obtain a more favorable divorce settlement. And then there is also the attention that a young doctor is paying her, something that she has not received at home for a long time.

The forty day process plays out amidst fiery rescues during Caleb's time on duty, frequent conversations with his father and Michael, and Catherine's growing attraction to the doctor. That the 40 day process requires a commitment to Christ can be debated, but that both will have to change and learn the meaning of what the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 13:4-7 I believe is beyond dispute. My chief criticism is that the film presents a very individualistic view of the Christian faith, that is, that believing is between the individual and God with little need for a community, the church entering the picture only at the end of the film. Nonetheless, this would be a good movie for church groups, especially young adults, to see and discuss in regard to their own relationships.

One final note: I was delighted to see that Caleb's good friend and model for a successful husband is an African American. Also, one of two comic characters, both rookie firefighters, is an African American, the two being fully accepted by the other members at the station. This is in stark contrast to the situation existing in Albany during the Civil Rights era, when that city was the scene of a bitter, often violent, struggle against segregation. (See Andrew Young's book *An Easy Burden* in which he devotes almost 20 pages to what he calls "The Albany Movement.") The film is evidence that some things have changed for the better in American society. Another positive note: the film was produced by the pastors and congregation of a Baptist church. Instead of attacking Hollywood for its films, this is a group that is taking positive action to bring God into the entertainment

industry—and it is good to see that other churches (the film's main audience) are responding by going to the theaters and supporting the effort.

For Reflection/Discussion

The following includes several spoilers, so beware, if you have not seen the film.

1) What seems to you to be the basic problem of Caleb and Catherine's relationship? Is one or the other more at fault, or do you think there is plenty of blame on both sides? List their complaints/criticism leveled against each other.

2) How is Caleb's dream about a boat a selfish one? When he talks about "my" and "your" salary, how does this indicate that the two never sat down to discuss responsibilities in regard to their jobs and their household economy? If you are married, and you both work, how have you dealt with this? How does the "my" and "your" pronouns need to change?

3) How is Caleb surprised to learn about the struggles that Michael and his father had to go through to retain their own marriages? How does this indicate that Caleb and Catherine must have held to the popular belief of young marrieds that romantic love would solve all problems and lead to "and they lived happily ever after" ?

4) What did you think of the way in which the filmmakers edited the parallel scenes of Caleb and Catherine discussing with their friends their complaints against each other? Whose friends seem the most objective to you? How do we see that our standpoint affects our interpretation of the other person?

5) How does Michael's faith help him in regard to the fear voiced by a fellow firefighter—fear of dying?

6) In Caleb's conversation with his father how do we see that Caleb has two problems. not just that between his wife and

himself? Might his be a problem shared by many males—of understanding strong women?

7) What seems to be Caleb's view of God? Close to that of Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover" ?

8) Why forty days in "The Love Dare" ? What Biblical significance do you see in the number?

9) How does Michael's reminder that Caleb rushes into a fire to save persons whom he does not know, move Caleb to accept his father's offer?

10) Why do you think that his father's reference to James 1:19 is a good place to start with in "The Love Dare" ? How is dealing with anger a basic problem for Caleb, the instances being played for humor throughout the film?

11) When Caleb follows the advice for the first few days, how do we see that his expectation of quick results stems from his selfishness? How does real love (as in 1 Cor. 13) mean letting go of expecting results favorable to oneself?

12) How is Catherine's reaction to Caleb's acts a natural one, especially when re-enforced by her friends? What does it ultimately take to convince her that Caleb is sincere?

13) What do you think of John Holt's saying that love is not "feeling" ? How is the equation of love and feeling a given in popular culture? (Check out most romantic songs and movies.) How is what the apostle Paul describes in 1 Cor. far greater than a feeling? Are feelings something that we can turn on and off, that is an act of our will? And yet doesn't the apostle see love as an act of the will? (See 1 Cor. 14:31.)

14) What do you think of Caleb's father that he needs Jesus to persevere in "The Love Dare" ? How does our faith in Christ contribute to this, or any other endeavor?

15) How do the filmmakers visually underline John Holt's

recitation of Paul's passage to the Romans when he meets with Caleb again at the park.? How is this a key passage to understanding 1 Cor. 13 and thus our understanding of love?

16) How is the elder Holt's saying that lust equals adultery and hatred, murder, in keeping with what Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount?

17) What apparently has Caleb given up in regards to Catherine's desire to provide a bed for her invalid mother? (Although the full identity of the donor is revealed later on in the film, did you guess the source of the gift?) How is this a sign that Caleb has at last "got it" concerning love?

18) How does Caleb's reaction to the appearance of the porno ad on his computer show that he "is in" (his word to Michael)?

19) How does the exchange between Caleb and his ill wife relate to 1 Cor. 13:7-8? Catherine: What day are you on? Caleb: 43. She: But there are only 40 days... He: That doesn't mean I have to stop.

20) Even had Catherine decided to continue with a divorce, how would they both be better off due to "The Love dare" ?

21)At the rededication ceremony the church enters the picture, though note that the gathering takes place at the cross in the park, not at a place hallowed by long worship experiences. Do you see any danger in an individualistic view of Christianity, and if so, what? How is this different from what the gospels (including Acts) and the epistles of the New Testament teach? In defense of the filmmakers, how are both Michael and John Holt representatives of the church? But wouldn't it be better if there were scenes of the gathered church nurturing and strengthening its members? Oh yes, what do you think is the meaning of the camera's panning over to the wedding cake atop of which we see a pair of salt and pepper shakers?