

Where Hope Grows (2014)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 38 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 2; Language 1;
Sex/Nudity-4.

Our star rating (1-5): 3

You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

2 Corinthians 3:1-3

Writer-director Chris Dowling's faith-based film is a cut above most others of the genre. Although there are a couple of church scenes and Bible references, the film can also be seen as a father-daughter and as a buddy film, the last being especially a delightful twist on the genre. Although the film becomes a bit over dramatic in the last act, which has a bit of a surprise in the final scene, there is no tearful altar call or long preachy scene that we find in other such films (except for a very brief eulogy the pastor gives near the end).

Calvin Campbell (Kristoffer Polaha) is a single father stuck in a failed past, thus becoming overly dependent on alcohol. Once a member of the Detroit Tigers, he was let go, returning to his hometown in Kentucky. He apparently has enough cash laid by that he can drink his days away while trying to cope with raising his teenaged daughter Katie (McKaley Miller). However her strong defiance shows that she has lost all respect for him. We don't know what has happened to his wife,

but we do know that he is incapable, given his frequent drinking binges, of keeping her boyfriend Colt (Michael Grant) away from her. He is right that the older kid is interested in Katie mainly for sex, but his clumsy attempts to separate them only make her want to be with the boy all the more.

Fortunately for all, Calvin (may we say, given his name, that this is "predestined?") becomes acquainted with the produce clerk at his grocery store, where he buys as much booze as food. Known only as Produce (David DeSanctis), we see from various shots of the young man that he is a Downs Syndrome person. He rides to work on his bicycle and takes his Bible everywhere. Produce loves to talk with customers, giving those whom he knows well a big hug, even though the store manager does not approve. Calvin is uneasy at first talking with the young man, even more so when he receives a big hug. However, soon he is drawn to the clerk because of his winning, optimistic personality. Produce is happy in every respect except for one thing. Employees who have worked at the store far less than he are chosen as "Employee of the Week," but not he. Fellow employee Colt, who cannot compare with Produce in friendliness and genuine concern for the customers, is the current EoW. We think we can see what lies ahead in this regard for the lad, but there is a neat plot twist that was enjoyable.

Despite taking out Produce and admiring his attitude, Calvin continues his drinking, messing up a promising job opportunity in baseball, even threatening his new friendship. And Katie is in danger from an increasingly aggressive Colt: he uses the age-old come-on that if she really loved him, she would climb with him into the back seat of his car. There is also a subplot involving Calvin's best friend Milt (Billy Zabka), who discovers his wife might be cheating on him. Still another is Calvin's stopping his drinking and meeting an attractive woman at an AA meeting. All of these plot lines converge in a tragic climax out of which a lot of good things emerge.

I think one more round of rewriting would have made a fairly good family film even better, more acceptable to a non-churched audience. I felt less "preached at" while watching this than I usually do from other films made primarily to promote the faith. The makers of this film seem to understand that their first objective must be to entertain the audience, not to preach to them. But I wish we had been shown a little more of Produce's background or home life so that he does not seem to be just a foil for Calvin's redemption. (I do recall that a mother is mentioned, but we never see her or his home.) Also the last scene between Colt and Katie stretches credibility, that he would do what he did in such a public place.

The cast members are all good, and making one of the main characters afflicted with Down Syndrome was an inspired idea. At various points we see that prejudice is not just a racial matter, that those like Produce who are different in a mental or physical way are also ill-treated. We can see why Produce won Calvin's heart. The lad is the living embodiment of the apostle Paul's statement to the Corinthians that they are "a letter from Christ." Just by being himself, a person of simple, but deep faith, he gently opens Calvin's eyes to matters of the spirit. Due to the film's limited release in theaters you might have to seek it out.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the June issue of Visual Parables. A subscription to the journal will also give you access to Lectionary Links, a feature for preachers that links a film to one or more lessons from the Common Lectionary.