

Vera Farmiga Wrestles Religion in 'Higher Ground'

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The subject of religion in America is rarely portrayed honestly in the movies, with its power to both inspire or offend. Vera Farmiga makes her directorial debut and plays the lead character in the religious-themed “Higher Ground.”

Points are immediately given to Ms. Farmiga for taking on the story, based on a memoir by Carolyn Briggs. No matter what you feel about organized religion, whether a church goer or secularist, Higher Ground is a thought provoking message film, and relevant to today. The story is uneven, but the sincerity of Farmiga’s direction is in every frame.

Farmiga plays Corinne, a woman who is shown at the beginning of the film being baptized in a river. She is a new convert to a small Evangelical Christian church and her path to that moment is shown in flashbacks from her 1960s childhood to the present, around the 1980s. Her younger self is shown cynically testifying at a Sunday School, her love as a teenager for a rock star named Ethan morphs into marriage and the child that motivated their marriage is nearly killed in a bus accident. This is the incident that leads to the baptism. The reprieve from God due to their near miss in the bus is the impetus for Ethan (Joshua Leonard) and Corinne to change their lives.



Converting: Vera Farmiga as Corinne in 'Higher Ground'
Photo credit: Molly Hawkey for Sony Pictures Classics

The church that represents them allows Corinne to meet Annika (Dagmara Dominczyk), a free spirit who flaunts her carnality along with her ‘speaking in tongues’ to the Holy Spirit. But the rules in the church, most having to do with a women’s subservience, begins to chip away at Corinne’s sense of belonging. Her marriage starts to disintegrate when her husband begins to relate to her only through church doctrine. Annika has a sudden and major brain tumor. The road to redemption becomes rocky, and Corinne must sacrifice everything that is familiar,

including her devotion to faith, to save herself.

This is based on a true story, Carolyn S. Briggs's memoir called "The Dark World," fictionalized in this adaptation by Briggs herself. It feels authentic as an exploration of a person's religious journey, but is less so in creating motivations for that trek. So much on the Evangelical Christian landscape is about creating the community, intensifying the experience of the gathering and the rules on the inside as to reject outside morality. Corinne is a lost soul in her development. At every turn, she goes along with what is happening, but doesn't seem fully indoctrinated at any stage of both her conversion and falling away from it. A telling exhortation at her baptism has to do with the church "finally" getting her soul.

As interpreted by Farmiga, Corinne has a sense of pride and stubbornness in going through the tug-of-war with her faith. This gives her a constant outsider status, which is punctuated by odd fantasy sequences, showing Corinne's viewpoint on the various slights she receives within the church. Whether it is how the story is stitched together or the stop-and-go nature of the screenplay, the motivations are vague for Corinne's shifts in her life. Although the film valiantly tries to make her questioning heroic, at times it seems confusing.

What the film lacks in those motivations, it makes up in themes. This particular sect of Christianity doesn't represent all churches, but it certainly exposes where the power lies, and in this case it is in the men. They react to her with anger (her husband), frustration when she tries to speak (the preacher) and outright disdain (a male Christian marriage counselor), merely because the seeker chooses to seek. Briggs's screenplay and Farmiga's direction makes a case for a woman's independence in a man's world, using religious sanctity as a smaller subset in the larger spiritual canvas.



Joshua Leonard as Corinne's Husband Ethan and Vera Farmiga in 'Higher Ground'
Photo credit: Molly Hawkey for Sony Pictures Classics

The use of period is fascinating for what it doesn't say. Perhaps the production is following the timeline in Briggs's memoir, but besides the period costuming of the 1960's, '70's and '80's, there is no atmospheric relationship to those times. This adds to the confusion because the time passage is also vague, and despite the cars and hairstyles it's hard to tell what year or era the film ends up in. The decision to fictionalize the story would also had been an opportunity to make it contemporary. The same themes are prevalent in today's world, and today's Evangelicalism.

Overall, the film is worth seeing just to gauge the reaction to it. What does organized religion give the average soul, especially if that soul is within a woman? Are church communities only comfortable with conformity? Vera Farmiga certainly didn't fear taking on these issues as a new director, or embodying them within Corinne.

"Higher Ground" continues it's limited release in Chicago on September 2nd. See local listings for theater and show times. Featuring Vera Farmiga, Joshua Leonard, Dagmara Dominczyk, Taissa Farmiga and Bill Irwin. Screenplay by Carolyn S. Briggs and Tim Metcalfe. Directed by Vera Farmiga. Rated "R." [Click here](#) [13]for the HollywoodChicago.com interview of Vera Farmiga.



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