First Reformed (Movie Review)

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Recommended Citation
Clark, Tom, "First Reformed (Movie Review)" (2018). Faculty Work Comprehensive List. 945.
https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/945
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Abstract
"The experience of watching First Reformed is deeply moving, unsettling, challenging, quieting, but above all worth it."

Posting about the movie First Reformed from In All Things - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

https://inallthings.org/movie-review-first-reformed/

Keywords
In All Things, movie review, First Reformed, Paul Schrader

Disciplines
American Film Studies | Christianity

Comments
In All Things is a publication of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College.

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July 17, 2018

Movie Review “First Reformed”

Tom Clark

Title: “First Reformed”
Directed by: Paul Schrader
Starring: Amanda Seyfried, Ethan Hawke, Cedric the Entertainer
Written by: Paul Schrader
Music by: Lustmord

Paul Schrader’s 1979 film Hardcore is a story of a Calvinist named Jake from the Dutch Reformed tradition who goes in search of his daughter who went missing in California. In it, Jake’s faith only serves to separate him from the people he meets along the way; it simply does not connect. Richard Mouw writes in his book, Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport, that the problem with Jake’s response to questions of faith presented in Hardcore is that he reaches for the Canons of Dort, and the mysteries of TULIP, which as Jake says only make sense from the inside. Instead, Mouw says that he should have drawn on the comfort and warmth of the Heidelberg Catechism, specifically the first question and answer:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free
from all the power of the devil.
He also preserves me in such a way
that without the will of my heavenly Father
not a hair can fall from my head;
indeed, all things must work together
for my salvation.

Therefore, by his Holy Spirit
he also assures me
of eternal life
and makes me heartily willing and ready
from now on to live for him.

In contrast, First Reformed literally opens with these lines being read together in a church service. It is almost as if Schrader read Mouw’s critique and, after all these years, decided to make another film in response. In fact Schrader says in this interview, that Hardcore is an angry movie that he is not terribly happy with, a piece of “juvenilia...full of spite” and “a young man’s [anger towards] his father and his church.” While First Reformed certainly includes some criticism, most of the lay Christians in the film are presented positively, welcoming, and genuine; it is for the church, not against it.

First Reformed is set in and around the longest continuously operated church in the United States and focuses attention on its pastor Ernst Toller played masterfully by Ethan Hawke. Toller is depressed, suffering from what Kierkegaard calls the sickness unto death, which is due to disillusion in his marriage from guilt over the death of his son. He serves a small congregation, maybe ten, who are not interested in the programs and polish that the wildly successful nearby megachurch led by Reverend Jeffers has; “it’s more of a corporation than a church” one says. The two pastors could not be more different; though both are genuine in their faith, each one reflects an extreme version of the fundamental question of the film: the choice between hope and despair. Jeffers offers a version of hope that insufficiently attends to the realities of this fallen world; Toller sees the destruction wrought by humanity in detail and lives daily through the dark night of the soul. He tries to assuage it with the liturgies of the bottle and the daily journal, but neither suffices. Instead what takes root is a “nasty virus”, as Schrader calls it, that dominates his attention. He is a fascinatingly complex character, simultaneously prophetic and villainous at times.

First Reformed is a slow burn, a meditative film. It is almost intentionally boring in a way that makes you think. Instead of turning off your brain and vegging, this one makes you aware that you are watching, aware that there is enough silence and space for your mind to begin thinking, reflecting, and considering. The cinematography is simple and static, that is until Schrader suddenly grabs your attention. The characters are real flesh that are both relatable, likable, but also flawed. In that way it works, for the happy few who will sit down and watch it. And, we should watch it while allowing it to ask tough questions without prescribing the answers, because it takes faith seriously, but lacks condescension.
Because it is indefatigable in its presentation of the ruinous effects of the Anthropocene on the environment, it will likely find a small audience among Christians. However, that is unfortunate given how honestly the film tackles issues of despair and opens the door to honest conversations. Surprisingly, it is also pro-life in a way that is genuine and non-political. And yet, the movie takes seriously as fact the dangers of climate change while presenting a hard critique to environmentalism and eco-terrorism. Even for someone who believes the scientists on the matter, the film is shocking in this matter. It had me reflecting on how I can both believe the science that the global average temperature has been rising since the industrial revolution, know many of the implications of that, and still live an affluent life no different from a climate change denier. This line from Tolkien in *Fellowship of the Ring* is prescient:

The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater.\(^3\)

Some characters in *First Reformed* lack the eyes to see the peril while others miss the love comingled, but Mary, the parishioner played beautifully by Amanda Seyfried, is able to hold them both in tension. She passes through the dark night of the soul to become the knight of faith.

While the film is slow and meditative, it becomes exciting in the third act as tension builds to a fascinating climax that I shall not spoil here. Several times throughout, a little photograph appears of an outstretched hand cupped, holding something out. To me, it almost looked like Morpheus offering the red pill to Neo in *The Matrix* (probably not a reference Schrader intended). Nevertheless, Neo has the opportunity to continue his life asleep in a world of untruth, or to wake up to a new life—a choice. Perhaps the hand in the photograph holds out the holy sacrament, an offer of faith and forgiveness. Instead of offering hard doctrine like Jake does in *Hardcore*, perhaps the offer is of comfort in life and in death, of friendship, and in Christ himself.

I think Schrader ends the film with a question that is open to interpretation, a choice between despair and hope. Different characters engage this question throughout the film in different ways. In the end, the interpretation is up to you as the viewer. Which is it, hope or despair? What will you choose? The experience of watching *First Reformed* is deeply moving, unsettling, challenging, quieting, but above all worth it. It should be seen and discussed widely by thoughtful audiences.
