Writing a Christian Movie:
An Analysis of the Motion Picture
*Fireproof* (2008)

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**Introduction**

Sherwood Pictures is a ministry of Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia, started by associate pastors and brothers Alex and Stephen Kendrick. Seeing filmmaking as a way to impact the culture, they began making films affirming Christian values, first with *Flywheel* (2003), a film made for $20,000 about a used car salesman who finds Christ and becomes an honest man. Their second film, *Facing the Giants* (2006), about a high school football team that trusts in God and begins a winning streak, was picked up for theatrical distribution and, on a $100,000 budget, earned an unprecedented $10 million. But Sherwood’s success didn’t end there: their third film was *Fireproof* (2008), the story of a firefighter facing divorce whose father gives him a 40-day devotional which leads him to God and helps him restore his marriage. On a $500,000 budget, the film made $33 million, opening at number four at the U.S. box office.\(^1\)

The success of *Fireproof* led to more opportunities for Sherwood Pictures, including a fourth film, *Courageous* (2011), and a fifth to be released in the fall of 2015.\(^2\) But the film also opened the doors for what Ben Howard, senior vice president of Provident Films (distributor of Sherwood’s films), called “the dawning of the new era of independent Christian films.”\(^3\) Works such as Provident’s own *The Grace Card* (2010) and *October Baby* (2011), among others, have created a “brand”\(^4\) of films “made, marketed, and consumed by the same faithful audience.”\(^5\)

2014 has thus become “the year of the Christian film.”\(^6\) A decade after the success of *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) (which made over $600 million worldwide on a $30 million production budget), big-budget Biblical epics like *Son of God, Noah*, and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* have found wide theatrical distribution, but so have much smaller, independently produced

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Christian dramas like *God’s Not Dead* and *Moms’ Night Out*, films about people learning about faith in everyday settings. And although these films are smaller in budget and scope, they make back a significant profit. The *Passion* may be the most recognized movie that has led this growing trend of faith-based films, but equal amount of credit is due to Sherwood Pictures—specifically, as Howard asserts, *Fireproof*.

The film arguably had multiple factors behind its success. The film had a redemptive message, wholesome content, a Gospel presentation, an experienced lead actor, and a successful companion devotional book in *The Love Dare* by Alex and Stephen Kendrick, who had built with their previous movies a trust with their distributor and audience. Most of all, the film was, as Alex has told interviewers as he has talked about all of Sherwood’s films, “bathed… in prayer” by the filmmakers, volunteers, and congregation of Sherwood Baptist.

But I would like to suggest another factor for the film’s success: its story. *Fireproof* and many other ‘Christian films’ are often criticized as “propaganda” that trade story and character development for “squeaky-clean moralism and sermonizing.” But even though these films can be heavy-handed with their spiritual message, does it mean that the actual story is automatically bad? In the case of *Fireproof* in particular, I have found that there is in fact a unique premise, a protagonist with weaknesses, and even a three-act structure, all of which make the film’s story as powerful as its message of faith, and I believe that it contributed to the film’s success. This essay will analyze the story structure of *Fireproof* and determine what was (or even what was not) done right, and in doing so will help identify why audiences responded to the story as well as how future faith-based filmmakers can be inspired to tell stories of excellent quality.

This essay will go through the film scene by scene, identifying the significance of each one in relation to five notable and respected sources of screenwriting theory: Robert McKee,

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whose book *Story* outlines three-act structure in detail from beginning to end; Joseph Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey” outline, refined by Christopher Vogler in his book and website *The Writer’s Journey*, detailing a more ‘mythic’ structure of drama; Syd Field’s ‘Paradigm,’ outlined in his book *Screenplay*, also outlining three-act structure and specific story elements; the late USC professor Frank Daniel’s “Eight-Sequence Approach,” dividing a three-act story into eight 15-minute ‘sequences,’ explained in Paul Joseph Gulino’s book *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach*; and Blake Snyder, whose book *Save the Cat!* contains the screenwriter’s own personal list of the elements of three-act structure, the ‘Blake Snyder Beat Sheet (BS2).’

These make up the most renowned screenwriting theories in recent years.\(^{12}\) Each writer has his own approach to screenplay structure, with his own terms for specific events in a story. Some of these approaches overlap or even contradict each other. But regardless of their differences, it is important for any screenwriter to know these theories as a basis of telling a story in a way that audiences will respond to. But I believe it is especially important for writers of faith-affirming stories such as *Fireproof*, so that they may know how a ‘Christian movie’ uses essential elements of screenwriting as well as Scripture to tell its story. I will therefore correlate each scene in the film to specific events in these five screenwriting theories.

Also, as this analysis begins, I should specify what I mean by a “scene” in the film. McKee defines a scene as “an action through conflict in more or less continuous time and space that turns the value-charged condition of a character’s life on at least one value with a degree of perceptible significance.”\(^{13}\) He also writes that a typical two-hour-long film contains between forty and sixty scenes.\(^{14}\) In this essay, I have narrowed *Fireproof* down to fifty-three scenes. These include shorter moments in the film that combine to create a single action, for instance, two action sequences and three mostly silent montages.

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\(^{14}\) McKee, 210.
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Act One

The first scene is a prologue, a mother tucking in her daughter Catherine at night (offscreen, as the camera pans to show images of Catherine’s room, including toy fire trucks and a photograph of her and her firefighter father). Catherine tells her mother that one day, she wants to marry a man like her father. This prologue is what Snyder calls the “opening image… the very first impression of what a movie is – its tone, its mood, the type and scope of the film.” Field calls it a “visual ‘grabber,’ an opening that grabs you by the throat and seizes your attention… to boldly establish the style and tone of an entire screenplay.” And while the prologue of Fireproof isn’t exactly ‘throat-grabbing,’ the innocent conversation between mother and daughter does set the film up to be a sensitive melodrama. This prologue also establishes the relationship that Catherine has with her mother (which was director Alex Kendrick’s intention, according to the film’s audio commentary from him and his brother, producer Stephen Kendrick), as well as the back-story of Catherine’s father’s job as a firefighter (a back-story only mentioned briefly in the film but explained in detail in the film’s novelization).

This opening, however, does not introduce Caleb, the protagonist – and while Catherine is certainly a main character, it is Caleb’s journey that the plot follows closest. His introduction comes after the opening credits roll, as we see him and his firefighter colleagues returning to the fire station after a rescue. Two major plot elements occur in this second scene, the first appearing as Caleb scolds rookie firefighter Eric for disobeying orders and leaving another fireman, Terrell, during the rescue. “You never leave your partner,” Caleb tells him, “especially in a fire.” This line is the film’s ‘theme stated,’ an idea that Snyder explains: “Somewhere in the first five minutes of a well-structured screenplay, someone (usually not the main character) will… make a

15 Unless otherwise noted, all information about Fireproof and its making comes from the film, director and producer’s commentary, and behind-the-scenes featurettes on the special collector’s edition DVD of the film.