

Film

In *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, a fascinating real-life story of the televangelist movement is obscured by its redemptive narrative.

Gospel untruths

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In America, alongside Hollywood's colossal entertainment machine sits a parallel universe of evangelical Christian celebrities who go largely unnoticed by godless citizens. In the 1970s and 1980s, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker lorded over this world, the prototype Kardashians of televangelism. Their dizzying rise and equally spectacular fall – and the narrative of the generously eyelashed and campily outfitted Tammy Faye within that fall – is at the centre of director Michael Showalter's new biopic *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*.

The film opens by charting Tammy Faye's severe upbringing, her Bible college romance with Jim and their early forays into Christian television as the sweet, dorky hosts of a children's puppet show. It is in 1974, when the duo strike out on their own with *The PTL Club* talk show – an acronym for both "Praise the Lord" and "People That Love" – followed by a television network of the same name, that things start to get spicy.

PTL was the third network in the United States to use satellite transmission, allowing Jim and Tammy Faye to beam their "prosperity gospel" into 14 million American homes and reach dozens of additional countries, including Australia. The duo appealed to an increasingly consumerist culture by insisting God wants his true believers to receive not only spiritual blessings but material riches.

Jim preached that with enough faith it was possible to will anything your heart desires into being, a concept known as "name it and claim it" or "blab it and grab it". He even urged followers to specify the model and colour of their desired car in their prayers.

This marriage of spirituality and wealth, alongside an emphasis on individuals'

responsibility for shaping their own reality, is a fascinating precursor to contemporary movements such as the "law of attraction" as espoused in Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* and the flashy, youth focused Hillsong Church, both of which are Australian exports. Earlier this year, Hillsong founder Brian Houston pleaded not guilty to charges alleging that he covered up child sex abuse carried out by his late father, also a pastor, in the 1970s.

Jim continued to expand the PTL universe with Heritage USA, a "Christian Disneyland" where visitors could be healed at a replica of the site of the Last Supper. To fund the theme park, Jim led aggressive on-air telethons that called on viewers to give beyond their means.

As John Wigger writes in *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire*, evangelical Christianity celebrates missionaries who travel to unknown lands with little more than the clothes on their back. Among PTL fans, it was widely accepted that "faith meant taking risks, extending beyond your resources. God only handed you the parachute after you jumped out of the plane." Adopting a fundraising and business strategy that privileged God's will over balance sheets allowed PTL to rake in hundreds of millions of dollars yearly and justify their sloppy accounting. Ultimately, as chronicled in *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, Jim was unable to balance the messages from God to expand exponentially with the reality of creditors knocking on his door.

As Tammy Faye, Jessica Chastain makes a convincing case that our protagonist's greatest crimes were extreme naivety and blind faith in her husband. Chastain has mastered Tammy's cadence, mannerisms and preternatural ability to connect with people from all walks of life. In one scene, a heavily shoulder-padded Tammy watches on sincerely as a *PTL Club* guest demonstrates a "penile pump", encouraging the titillated live-audience



Andrew Garfield as Jim Bakker and Jessica Chastain as Tammy Faye Bakker. Searchlight Pictures

to clap. In another, tears stream down Tammy's face as she tells an AIDS patient "Jesus loves us through anything", subtly guiding viewers to show Christian love to then highly stigmatised AIDS sufferers. These scenes show Tammy was no buttoned-up judge of "sinners", but a woman eager to provide practical solutions to common problems and promote an apolitical Christianity that brought people in rather than waged war on outsiders.

While undoubtedly moving, these interview segments are literal re-creations of archival footage that has already been artfully compiled in Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato's documentary, also called *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*. Released in 2000, the film features a voiceover by drag queen RuPaul, a testament to Tammy Faye's engagement with the LGBTQIA+ community throughout her life. The biopic draws heavily on the documentary but adds little insight.

If there is a point to *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* – beyond letting Chastain shine – it is to redeem Tammy Faye to a broader audience. The film joins other recent projects that portray a kinder version of history for previously scorned women, such as the *Impeachment: American Crime Story* series on the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, co-produced by Monica Lewinsky, and the *Framing Britney Spears* documentary. Tammy Faye was misogynistically maligned in the press for her appearance and penchant for shopping, despite the general acceptance that she was largely unaware of fraud and conspiracy carried out by PTL. It is satisfying to see her celebrated for her relatively progressive social views and message of unconditional love.

However, it is unforgivable that a current re-examination of this saga overlooks the sexual assault allegations against Jim that initially prompted his resignation from PTL. In the film, Jim tearfully confesses to Tammy Faye that "there was a woman" whom he paid to stay quiet using donor funds. Viewers

might assume, as Jim maintains, that he had a consensual encounter with a sex worker hired by another pastor. By his accuser Jessica Hahn's account, as a 21-year-old church secretary she was taken to meet her idol Jim Bakker on the premise of "doing something tremendous for God", only to be raped by him and another pastor.

After posing for *Playboy* alongside a lengthy interview detailing the assault, Hahn was dismissed as a fame-hungry bimbo by the press. In a 1987 *New York Times* article, feminist academic Catharine MacKinnon says that after Hahn's nude photoshoot "any access to respectability that she had, she has now lost".

Hahn is no "perfect victim" by 1980s or 2021 standards – she has questioned allegations of sexual assault against Donald Trump – yet she deserves the same grace afforded to Tammy Faye. It is as if the film can hold space for only one woman's redemption, its creators unwilling to explore the implications of how Tammy Faye could be both an LGBTQIA+ icon and an ex-wife who maintained her husband was an "honest man" until her death in 2007.

Despite its fascinating subject matter and impressive sets and costuming, this is an unremarkable film that follows an uncreative chronological time line and fails to offer emotional insight or worthy analysis. Chastain is the film's saving grace, bringing Tammy Faye's boundless energy to its rare moments of glory. The triumphant final scene attempts to tie together big themes of religion, entertainment, fantasy and patriotism that are only skirted around throughout the 126-minute feature. If little else, *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* is an entrée into a uniquely American tale, done just well enough to spark viewers' independent research into the messier – and more interesting – real-life story. ●

The Eyes of Tammy Faye opens in cinemas this week.



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