

HOW SHOULD WE VIEW MEL GIBSON'S "THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST"?

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This film is written and directed by the Hollywood A-list actor Mel Gibson for his production company Icon. The film came to the UK on 26 March, having opened first in nearly 3,000 cinemas across the USA and taking around \$100 million in its first week. Even by its third weekend its total went beyond a quarter of a billion dollars. It has enjoyed similar success in Britain and Ireland, with first weekend takings at a record £2.01m. The film tells the story of Jesus' life from the Garden of Gethsemane to the resurrection. The main part, however, centres on the time prior to the crucifixion.

Depiction

This religious blockbuster has generated controversy. Its depiction of Jesus' sufferings is intentionally graphic, with nothing left to the imagination. Gibson said, "My Jesus will be shaken by his human suffering. Real blood will flow from the wound in his side, and the screams of his Crucifixion will be real as well." He has succeeded all too well. According to Russ Bravo, editor of the *Christian Herald*, "Mel Gibson has managed to put together more than two hours of absolutely gripping cinema which is both tremendously powerful - and extremely brutal. The way the story of Jesus' last 12 hours is portrayed - moving from trial scenes and harrowing violence to flashbacks of his early life and later ministry - brings Jesus to life on the big screen in an intensity no other film has ever managed. Yet the extended scenes of flogging, scourging and torture are more than I could bear to watch at times."

A woman who saw the film in the USA posted her review on a web site,

"The film is unrelentingly violent. It's blood-soaked. Jesus gets so whipped you can see his ribs, blood spatters all over the cobblestones, and the sound is frighteningly realistic. And it doesn't stop after a pivotal scene or two - it goes on and on and on. Non-stop violence. During the first couple of violent sequences, I winced and cringed ... It was gruelling to watch, especially after already watching Jesus be whipped half to death. He drags the cross while enduring more whipping. There's a trail of blood on the ground behind him. He falls, gets up, falls, gets up, falls, over and over ... When it comes to the crucifixion, Jesus doesn't just get his hands nailed to a cross, no - once he's nailed to the cross the Romans flip the cross over and Jesus lands face first into the ground ... Finally they prop up the cross and he dies pretty quickly after that ... I was numb."

So powerful is the violence that, according to BBC News, two people have died of heart attacks watching it, a man in Brazil and a woman in Kansas.

Enthusiasm

Many American evangelicals have greeted the film with enthusiasm. The welcome seems twofold. Firstly, the spiritual benefit for Christians. Del Tackett of Focus on the Family said, "It has been nearly three weeks since I saw the rough cut of The Passion. It is still impacting my life. I can't stop thinking about it nor can I stop talking about it. I have never seen a film that has so affected my life."

Secondly, the film's evangelistic value. They see it as a tool for evangelism that surpasses anything they could have produced. Ed Young Jr., Pastor of Dallas-Area Fellowship Church said, "I have no doubt that the movie will be one of the greatest evangelistic tools in

modern day history. I think people will go to it and then flood into the churches seeking to know the deeper implications of this movie." And Greg Laurie, Harvest Crusades, "I believe The Passion of The Christ may well be one of the most powerful evangelistic tools of the last 100 years, because you have never seen the story of Jesus portrayed this vividly before."

Less fulsome

UK reaction has been generally less fulsome, but still positive. Representative is Russ Bravo, quoted above, "For some Christians, this film will not be something they want to see. That's fine - maybe they shouldn't see it. For others it will be an uncomfortable, unsettling but profoundly faith-enhancing experience that will change them and deepen their love for Jesus. The key thing is: the nation is talking about Jesus and why he died. Even if we don't see the film, we can use this climate of debate and openness to show, live and gossip the Gospel."

Our appraisal of this film might seem belated since others have already preached and written about it so faithfully. However, perhaps now that the film has been with us a while, we might be better able to step back and take another look at the issues it raises. How should we who take God's word seriously view this film? The answer, of course, is that we should not view it at all. To see this film, or give any credence to it, would fly in the face of some very serious considerations.

1. This film is carnal and worldly.

It could be argued that most Hollywood films rated 18 are that. However, this is a unique marrying of an apparently devout attempt to honour Christ and at the same time net a huge profit. Gibson invested 25 million dollars of his own money so that he could be director, producer and co-writer of this film. In its first few weeks of showing, he enjoyed a multiple return on his investment. In the USA, shallow Christianity ("evangelical" and Roman Catholic) has proved a lucrative market for cashing in on the greatest event in human history. Not to mention the non-religious whose money boosted the coffers because it was a Mel Gibson film.

Added to the movie is the plethora of hot merchandise that goes with it. For example, The Passion Nail Key ring that features a 4.5cm nail with Isaiah 53:5 inscribed on the side and on a stainless steel ring. The "Cross" pendants, bracelet and key ring, "The Passion Nail" pendants featuring Isaiah 53:5 inscribed on the side and available in two lengths and on a 60cm leather cord. Then various photos from the movie, a book, PC screensavers, tee shirts, mugs, soundtrack CDs, etc.

All of this surely makes merchandise of the word of God. Just like the paraphernalia promoting Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings, so now this will enhance the already massive profits made from exploiting Gospel truth. It is tantamount to those in our Lord's Day who made material profit in the temple that was His Father's house. The Lord dealt with these men, "And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; and said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise" (John 2:15,16). The apostles spoke of such in their day, calling them "men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself" (1 Timothy 6:5). And Peter likens them to Balaam, "who loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Peter 2:15).

Others have commented on the incongruity of Gibson and his film. One respondent to the BBC web site stated, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of needle than a rich man into heaven. Gibson has

become an even richer man because of this film. Anybody who has made so much personal profit from telling the Bible story is wrong in my book." And another, from the standpoint of those the film hopes to affect, "I am an atheist, and always have been, but what I do know about Christ's message included not living in excess. Gibson, as a Christian, most definitely lives in excess, and the money spent on this movie could have been spent on feeding the hungry as Christ did. Isn't that what Jesus would do?" The Passion, far from honouring Christ, is a horrible mix of religion and mammon.

2. This film is Roman Catholic.

Gibson, 48, is a conservative Roman Catholic and has strong views on divorce, abortion and contraception. He also fervently supports the Latin Mass, having a private chapel at his home in Malibu, California, with services conducted in Latin. Gibson said that what interested him in Christ's last hours before the Crucifixion was that it was "the drama of a man torn between his divine spirit and his earthly weakness."

He sought the advice of Roman Catholic theologians and prelates for his film. Concerned to be historically accurate, he has used the Gospel of John and even has the script spoken in Aramaic and Latin, with English subtitles. It appears that religious motivation lies behind this movie quite as much as financial reward. Mel claims that "This was the film that God wanted me to make." Each morning before work started he attended Mass in order to keep "squeaky clean." Even the actor who plays Jesus, James Caviezel, is a devout Roman Catholic. Such was the ordeal involved, with hours of make-up, injuries and the gruelling film sessions that he found himself "praying" his way through. Apparently, during the filming a number of the crew were converted to Roman Catholicism.

Although it claims to be based upon John's Gospel, the extra-biblical material is Romish. Gibson admits this, stating that he was partly motivated by the book *The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*, which details the visions of the nun Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824). Elements from this and other such sources appear in the film to such an extent that one reviewer, Bruce N. Fisk, wrote,

"The Passion of the Christ is also very Catholic. The storyline borrows bits from each of the four Gospels (with nods toward Matthew and John), but it is also steeped in church tradition and guided by images and symbols long cherished by Catholic worshippers. Jesus stumbles three times on his way to Golgotha, in keeping with the traditional Fourteen Stations of the Cross. The legendary Veronica of Station Six steps forward to wipe Jesus' bloodied face, only to find his image perfectly imprinted on her cloth. And Mary is highly visible and central to the story ... John calls Mary his mother, if I heard correctly, even before Jesus suggests the idea (John 19:27), and Jesus, while praying, self-identifies as 'the son of your handmaid' (cf Psalm 86:16; 116:16). At the cross, Mary murmurs 'my son, let me die with you' and later cradles her son's dead body, Pietà-like, while gazing into the camera, as if to assure us that all will be well."

This sacramental emphasis upon the literal and visual sufferings of Christ is typical of Romanism. This apostate system glories in its Images, crucifixes, and relics. Also its Passion Plays, which came to their height in the 15th century and now perpetuated every ten years at Oberammergau in Germany. In addition, the gaudy processions carrying a Madonna or an effigy of Christ continue to this day. Not to mention the fact that in the Mass the sacrifice of Christ is re-enacted and thus unfinished, and others have said that "The Passion" is like a Mass on celluloid. The film represents a powerful 21st century fillip to the most blatant features of this pagan and worldly

religion. In Gibson, Romanism has a wealthy and talented champion. Roman Catholics have always dominated and exploited the media for propaganda purposes. This lavish and powerful film is the latest example.

3. This film is ecumenical.

Focussing upon the Person of our Lord and His sufferings has meant that evangelicals can identify with this film. Lacking biblical discernment, they have justified their backing simply because it portrays a suffering Saviour. We can see the extent to which they have capitulated by juxtaposing two comments. The first is by Cardinal Castrillon Hoyos, The Vatican, Worldwide Prefect of the Clergy,

"I experienced moments of profound spiritual intimacy with Jesus Christ. I would gladly trade some of the homilies that I have given about The Passion of Christ for even a few scenes from this film."

And the other by Billy Graham,

"Every time I preach or speak about the Cross, the things I saw on the screen will be on my heart and mind."

How much difference is there between these two statements? They seem to speak with one voice. We have read of evangelical leaders even congratulating Gibson for what he has done, and assuring him of their prayers for this great undertaking!

David Cloud on his web site (www.wayoflife.org) makes the point that the film is helping evangelicals see Mary in a new light. He writes, "In an interview with *Christianity Today* in February, soon before the release of *The Passion of the Christ*, Gibson admitted that his movie is 'so Marian.' He then made an observation that should make give fundamentalists tremendous pause: 'I've been actually amazed at the way I would say the evangelical audience has - hands down - responded to this film more than any other Christian group'" (Mel Gibson, reported by David Neff, 'Mel, Mary, and Mothers,' *Christianity Today* online, Feb. 20, 2004).

In the many pre-screenings of the movie for various evangelical crowds, such as for Bill Hybels' Willow Creek Community Church, Rick Warren's Saddleback Church and other large Southern Baptist churches, and for James Dobson's Focus on the Family, Gibson has noticed: 'THE WAY THE FILM DISPLAYS [MARY] HAS BEEN KIND OF AN EYE OPENER FOR EVANGELICALS who don't usually look at that aspect. They understand the reality of a mother and a son.'"

David cloud then quotes from an email he received, 'Whatever you or I may think of this movie it has achieved at least one thing. After visiting several message boards where the movie is being discussed I have found that THE PASSION IS BEING VERY INSTRUMENTAL IN BRINGING CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS TO BE MORE ECUMENICALLY UNITED.'

Cloud concludes, "I am convinced that ecumenism will be the movie's greatest legacy, regardless of what evangelistic opportunity arises in its context. It is going to be a great encouragement to the Roman Catholic Church and to ecumenical endeavours everywhere."

Not surprisingly, the film is seen as a mighty PR coup for the Roman Church, with US Catholics quoted as saying that the film is "the best recruiting tool for 2,000 years." An article in *The New York Times* saw Gibson's movie as possibly being a Roman Catholic's answer to the Bill Bright, Campus Crusade for Christ movie, "Jesus" (1979), which has been translated into many languages and is claimed to be perhaps the most watched movie of all time. Be that as it may, the fact that

evangelicals can claim the film for themselves and *their* outreach shows how little difference they see between themselves and popery.

As Richard Bennett (an ex-priest) perceptively put it, "The Evangelical church's acceptance of Gibson's movie gives shocking - maybe apocalyptic - insight into the state of popular Christianity today. Will history reveal this day as the time when Evangelicalism, on a popular level, merged with the Roman Catholic Church?" (www.bereanbeacon.org/articles/mel_gibsons_vivid_deception.htm).

4. This film is idolatrous and even blasphemous.

Not that this was necessarily the intention of Mel Gibson or his team. However, in the light of scripture it can only be viewed as being that. Some justify visual depictions of Jesus because it only shows His manhood, and that hardly makes it a "graven image, or any likeness" as forbidden in the 2nd Commandment (Exodus 20:4). However, what right have we to limit this commandment to forbidding the representation of His deity? Our Lord's humanity belongs just as much to His Person as His deity. To try to represent *that* is just as much making an idol. Moreover, to depict His humanity can only show *part* of who He is. Our Lord is God incarnate (1 Timothy 3:16) and a human actor impersonating "Jesus" cannot possibly show His deity. He cannot even show His sinless humanity, since the actor is sinful. All this is to *mis*-represent Him grievously, and is that not blasphemous?

The two most prominent features of Gibson's "Jesus" - his personal appearance and physical sufferings - are the features given least prominence in the New Testament. We look in vain for any hint of what our Lord looked like. Try as we might, it is impossible to construct an image of Him. This is because believers are not to contemplate Him in these terms. Mary Magdalene had to learn this lesson (John 20:17 "Touch me not, etc.") and the apostle states that "Although we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more" (2 Corinthians 5:16).

As to His physical sufferings, the gospel writers mention these in the most restrained and chaste terms. Compare the explicit, prolonged, sometimes slow motion details of Jesus' agonies in this film with, say, the passages in John chapter 19 - "Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him" ... "Golgotha: where they crucified him" (verses 1,17,18). The reason for not dwelling on what our Lord physically endured is that this is not the main part of His substitutionary work. The sufferings of His soul are the soul of His sufferings, (Isaiah 53:12; John 12:27; Matthew 27:46). In these, He made satisfaction to the Father and procured life and blessedness for all His people. Gibson's Christ is clearly not the Christ of God and the Christ that saves us.

Concentrating on "The Passion's" Jesus for more than two hours is bound to print an image on the mind. Prayer after that cannot fail to involve a mental picture of "Jesus" that looks like James Caviezel. We have already read about the cardinal and Billy Graham's idolatrous response to this film. This will inevitably happen. An email correspondent to David Cloud included this testimony, "I agree with you that this movie is idolatrous. Years ago, I attended a Catholic private school, and at the time that was the only exposure to anything resembling Christianity. From that time, the Jesus I thought of was the one displayed on icons, pictures, and paintings of him. WHENEVER I PRAY TO GOD, I HAD THAT MENTAL IMAGE OF JESUS THAT WAS DEPICTED ON PAINTINGS. I KNOW THAT IS IDOLATRY." What a solemn indictment of, not only this film, but of all professing Christians who support it!

5. This film exposes the modern departure from preaching.

Those who welcome it will do so because they have little confidence in preaching. In a visual age, so the argument runs, we must include visual means to communicate the Gospel message. However, saving grace is found, not on the big screen but in "the word of the truth of the gospel," and the way that grace comes to men is the preaching of the Word: "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" ... "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" ... "In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation" (Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; Ephesians 1:13). This is the *only* means God has given. Granted, preaching can also be read on the printed page, or heard through an audio cassette, or seen and heard on video/DVD. The requirement here is the Word expounded and applied by God's sent servants, "the LORD'S messenger in the LORDS message unto the people" (Haggai 1:13).

Historically, faithful churches have held to this. It is a conviction still found in evangelical and reformed churches today, although that number is shrinking as the clamour for contemporaneity gains ground. This excitement about "The Passion" is a heady departure from God's way. As a resort to other means, it takes its place alongside sketch boards, Rock bands, jazz evenings, healing services, drama, mime, the ventriloquist dummy, puppets and even conjuring. It will only be viewed and used by those who forget that "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds" (2 Corinthians 10:4).

Tragically, "modern methods of communication" are the order of our day. Preaching, apparently, cannot communicate to modern people, whose concentration must be sustained by the visual entertainment. As if the God who ordained preaching did not know what the situation would be at the beginning of the 21st century! When our Lord commanded us to "Preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15), He intended His Church to do just that, until the end of the world. He promises His blessing to what He has commanded us to do (Matthew 28:20: 1 Thessalonians 1:5; 2:13).

The significance of "The Passion" is clear. Those who view, support or use this film must face facts: celluloid replaces the Bible, sounds and images the Lord speaking through the preacher, the big screen the pulpit, the cinema the house of God, and "a moving experience" conversion to Christ, idolatry true worship and popery Protestantism. Thousands may flock to see this film for curiosity, entertainment, evangelism or spiritual blessing. Let us who are on the Lord's side cleave to the true means of grace and do God's work in God's way.

"Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:17,18).