

Mel Gibson's

## *Passion of the Christ*

### Reasons why it is an invalid gospel medium

Much of the current media frenzy concerning Mel Gibson's movie production, *Passion of the Christ*, is most likely the product of planned marketing strategy. Be that as it may, the favorable acceptance of this film production by a number of Christians calls for an assessment that is not based upon emotion, sentiment, pragmatism, or even necessary cultural adaptation. Hence this evaluation is not the result of a personal viewing of the movie since the reasons given focus wholly on the objective standards of Scripture that overrule whatever excitement, either positive or negative, viewing could arouse. How I feel about a situation does not establish what is right, even though existentialist modernity tends to promote this idea. Certainly a number of reviews and news reports have been considered, though more than enough to gain a basic understanding of the format and content of the production.

It needs to be appreciated that while much of evangelical Christianity in the United States is confessedly based upon a belief in the final authority of the Word of God, yet a creeping relativist and subjectivist mentality has resulted, at the same time, in what has been termed a soft authority. Here is a case in point whereby our approach is to judge a certain situation, to begin with a personal opinion of appropriateness for self and modern society, and then impose our conclusions upon Scripture by means of accommodation of the sacred text to our already preconceived notions. In other words, a person first learns about the movie, usually according to a carefully designed public relations campaign, secondly becomes emotionally impressed with the convincing promotion, and thirdly, after a viewing, wonders how this well-intentioned, moving presentation might be supported by the Word of God.

If this is our *modus operandi*, then it must be faced frankly that the Bible is not our regulating standard, whatever our pretensions may be. In this instance, let it be understood that the principles here put forward are indisputably pervasive from Genesis to Revelation; they are as abiding as is God according to His revealed character. In other words, He is not a God jealous for His reputation in a past age while now desirous for modern respect that is to be understood as fundamentally different in this present age.

- A. The visual, dramatic representation of Jesus Christ is a violation of an abiding, fundamental principle that is clearly annunciated in Scripture.
  1. This is the essential objection, that is of a sinful human actor attempting to portray the sinless, divine character of the Son of God. To begin with, there is a degree of arrogance in the attempt here, that is the confidence that Jesus can be adequately and visually represented by man. Such a belief in fact fails to comprehend who Jesus really is in the light of who man really is. Dramatic representations of His perfect humanity and absolute deity are matters that ought not so much as to be attempted. Furthermore, the absence in history of any authoritative representation of Jesus Christ would seem indicative of providential wisdom.
  2. Certainly the Old Testament, that is with regard to the instruction that God mediated through Moses to the nation of Israel, is categorically opposed to both any visual representation of God and the resultant worship of God by means of such an idol (Exod. 20:4-6). When God earlier called Abraham out of pagan, polytheistic Mesopotamia, He

did not suggest that the father of Israel's future witnessing to monotheism should incorporate the idolatrous methodology of the secular world. Rather, God was adamant that communication of revealed truth should be by means of inscribed word revelation on tables of stone, and then parchment scrolls. Consider communications scholar Neil Postman's conclusion in this respect:

I wondered then, as so many others have, as to why the God of these [Hebrew] people would have included instructions [in the Ten Commandments] on how they were to symbolize, or not symbolize, their experience. It is a strange injunction to include as part of an ethical system *unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture*. We may hazard a guess that a people who are being asked to embrace an abstract, universal deity would be rendered unfit to do so by the habit of drawing pictures or making statues or depicting their ideas in any concrete, iconographic forms. The God of the Jews was to exist in the Word and through the Word, an unprecedented conception requiring the highest order of abstract thinking. Iconography thus became blasphemy so that a new kind of God could enter a culture. People like ourselves who are in the process of converting their culture from word-centered to image-centered might profit by reflecting on this Mosaic injunction.<sup>1</sup>

Hence in agreeing here with Postman's insightful analysis, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* is very much indicative of spiritual regression and at the same time the contemporary Christian's increasing retrograde belief that he must walk more by sight, or at least iconographic assistance, than faith. Furthermore, if this visual evangelism becomes the norm, then subsequent generations will become increasingly dependent upon sensual and visual stimulation. This would mean that ultimately Christians have bought into the supposed necessity of outward stimuli and carnality for the nurture of their souls, not the inward embrace of redemptive truth. At this juncture, entertainment will simply have been redefined as worship, not unlike that which Aaron introduced while Moses was with God on Mount Sinai. For the people tired of Word revelation, then rose up to play, dance, and worship the iconography of the golden calf (Exod. 32:1-35).

3. Prior to Abraham, back even to the Fall, there was never to be any man-made, visual representation of God. Even so, with the dawning of the Christian New Covenant era following the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, the same absence of any visual representation of God according to human devising continues as a marked apostolic standard. Visual representation was quite unthinkable, not merely not thought of or undiscovered in a promotional sense (II Cor. 5:16).
4. In response, some would suggest that there have been visual representations of biblical truth that have been employed to enhance the communication of the truth of God.
  - a. Biblical representations.

The prophets included material items to illustrate the truth of God, such as with Moses use of the brazen serpent (Num. 21:6-7), Jeremiah's use of the potter's vessel (Jer. 18:1-4), Ezekiel's use of a brick for Jerusalem (Ezek. 4:1-3), etc. There are also the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper that are similarly the application of material means for the communication of spiritual truth. However, all of these have

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, p. 9.

been at the direction of God, not man, which is of the essence of our objection as it relates to the Second Commandment.

- b. *The Pilgrim's Progress*, first printed in 1688.

The allegorical form here, by means of the printed page, is yet a portrayal of the text of Scripture. Bunyan did allow subsequent editions of *The Pilgrim's Progress* to have some supporting illustrations, that included Christian at the Wicket-gate, yet without any representation of Good-will who depicts Jesus Christ; indeed this caution was the case for at least the first hundred years of this classic's circulation. Further, Bunyan regarded "plays" as the worldly activity of Vanity Fair which Christian and Faithful spurned while in transit.

- B. The representation of Jesus Christ by the agency of the Hollywood movie industry is also in conflict with the gospel agencies that God has appointed. It is true that when the church has been lacking in vision, God has been pleased to use agencies that, while employing church members, have worked with churches while not being themselves classified as churches. They have been designated as parachurch organizations. Be this as it may, for centuries still the mode of proclamation of gospel truth has been within the parameters of an objective Word revelation, whether printed or audibly recorded. This proclamation methodology has, in the main, been the employment of a holy means for the obtaining of a desired holy end. However, it is denied that God is pleased to employ an unholy means, such as Hollywood in general, to obtain a holy end. Following the release of this movie, look forward to a further promotional frenzy concerning adjunct items; memorial nails are already available for purchase!
- C. The visual representation of Jesus Christ, as it were through modern media imagery, is implicitly suggesting that the appointed means of proclamation for today needs augmentation. Whereas over the centuries, according to biblical standards, God has been pleased to bless the objective proclamation of the Word of God, whether through preaching, teaching, conversation, the printed page, and recorded speech, the new media approach, incorporating visual and dramatic forms, has taken us from cognitive comprehension to the dominance of image impression and sensuality. Such an approach is certain to elevate the authority of impression and the strong feeling over the objective, concrete truth of the Word of God.
- D. If the present rationale for this movie is accepted, then there is no ground for opposing similar applications of this methodology, even if of lesser proportions, in local church life. Some large churches have already moved in this direction. If this continues, it will enable a smoother track along which some will enthusiastically travel that leads to much closer relations with Roman Catholicism. Furthermore, this particular production, in its seduction of many evangelical Christians, may well lead them to the encouragement of dramatic productions at our regular Sunday services, in which the vital matter of true worship and powerful preaching will have been wholly lost to the dramatic arts, with thanks being given to Hollywood! Whereas the Apostle John warns us, "Little children, guard yourselves from idols" (I John 5:21).

For the cause of grace and truth,

Barry E. Horner

(Underlining indicates added emphasis - B.E.H.)

## WORLD ON THE WEB

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### No mere martyr

*REVIEW: The self-consciously limited focus of The Passion of the Christ is both a strength and a weakness of the landmark film*

By Andrew Coffin

THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST is not the gospel. The movie is one man's meditation on and interpretation of one particular aspect of the gospel: the 12-hour period commonly referred to as Christ's Passion, His suffering and crucifixion.

It just so happens that this man, Mel Gibson, believes that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, that the events described by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John really happened, and that Christ is who He claimed to be. Mr. Gibson is also a talented and passionate filmmaker, and the combination of firmly held belief and artistic capability means that this film will resonate with many (perhaps most) Christians, despite some very real weaknesses and a singular, limiting focus.

But unlike the gospel itself, acceptance of this movie isn't an either/or proposition. Viewers can appreciate its artistry, its impact, its potential to communicate powerful truths while still looking critically at both art and message.

#### Brutal Violence

Two elements defined pre-release public perception of The Passion of the Christ: the film's brutal violence and alleged anti-Semitism. The anti-Semitism charge doesn't really have much to do with this film itself. Mr. Gibson's Passion play can no more be accused of anti-Semitism than the Gospels themselves. In fact, Mr. Gibson dropped a line straight from Scripture (Matthew 27:25: "His blood be on us and on our children") because of its potential to offend.

While The Passion may not be anti-Semitic, it is undoubtedly violent. Brutally, unrelentingly violent. Reports of the film's unflinching depiction of Christ's suffering have not been exaggerated, and the film is well deserving of its R-rating. Mr. Gibson's clear intent is to shock ("I wanted it to be shocking, I wanted it to be extreme, I wanted to push the viewer over the edge," he told Diane Sawyer). Parents, particularly, should be cautious when considering whether their children are ready to have these images burned into their young imaginations.

Although much of the violence may be historically accurate, Mr. Gibson's depiction of Christ's suffering certainly diverges from biblical accounts in this regard. All four Gospels pass quickly over the particulars of Christ's suffering and execution, more urgently focusing on the meaning of these events.

To focus so heavily on Christ's physical suffering verges on a distortion of what was really happening in these events. Christ died not, ultimately, at the hand of Romans or Jews, but according to the will of His heavenly Father. For the sins of believers, He willingly bore the Father's just and holy wrath—a far worse prospect—upon His shoulders, completing a spiritual task that is represented, but not exhausted, by the physical suffering of the cross. He was no mere martyr.

To be fair, Mr. Gibson does strongly suggest that there is spiritual, supernatural significance in these events, through the appearance of Satan personified in the visage of a woman and in the earth-shaking destruction that comes at the moment of Christ's death. The problem, if there is one, is a matter of emphasis.

(Mr. Gibson's choice of emphasis is perhaps the strongest indicator of his Catholicism—Jesus' repeated stumbling during the long road to Calvary perfectly matches the Via Dolorosa, or the stations of the cross, found in many Catholic churches. His depiction of Mary, on the other hand, will not be as problematic for Protestants.)

### An Incomplete Story

But however one interprets Mr. Gibson's exegetical choices, *The Passion* makes for powerful, emotionally wrenching viewing. This is partially due to Mr. Gibson's self-consciously limited focus, which can be understood as a strength of the film as long as it is also acknowledged as a limitation.

It may be best to liken *The Passion* to a painting of Christ by one of the old masters. Rendered in vivid detail, these works of art focus the mind and imagination on one aspect of Christ's life (very often the crucifixion), but lack the context and completeness to be anything more than one piece of the whole.

Similarly, Mr. Gibson's film lacks context. But his avoidance of the clumsy moralizing and tract-like artifice that characterizes so many other attempts at filming Christ's life adds significantly to the film's emotional (and even intellectual) impact. There's no clean resolution here. Most audiences, Christians and non-Christians alike, may well be provoked by the film to seek out the true context of these brutal events.

The film's limited focus does create a few artistic problems. The film lacks a narrative structure in any traditional sense. The images onscreen simply dramatize the events that occur over a 12-hour period, from Jesus' arrest by the chief priests to His death on the cross. There's quite a bit of repetitive imagery over the course of the two-hour movie. Time and again we see shots of laughing Roman guards, a fallen and beaten Christ, a sad-eyed Mary. The lack of a strong narrative arc also makes for a sometimes numbing viewing experience. *The Passion* gets so violent so quickly, and is so unrelenting, that viewers may find themselves somewhat desensitized to Christ's suffering before He even reaches the cross.

### Imagining Christ

One issue that has been almost completely ignored in the midst of the controversies surrounding the movie is that some Protestant Christians have been at best uncomfortable with visual depictions of Christ in principle, graphic or not. Far fewer Christians today share that concern, yet the dangers of blasphemy, idolatry, or simple misinterpretation are certainly worth

considering. To the degree that Christians treat this movie as a definitive or authoritative “incarnation” of the gospel, these issues can become especially troubling.

Part of the problem is that any depiction of Christ on film is by necessity lopsided. An actor can dig deeply in Christ’s human nature, but how can he communicate the divine? This can affect the narrative on several practical levels. The scattered flashbacks to earlier periods of Christ’s life are some of the most effective scenes in the film (minus one odd interlude of comic relief involving a high-legged table), but they place in Christ’s mind, as He faces His death, thoughts that we have no evidence to suggest were present. A man may well revisit the events of his life as he faces his own mortality, but would Christ’s thoughts not have instead been on the mission given to Him by His Father in heaven, as suggested particularly in the Gospel of John?

But while admitting that the dangers here are manifold, even “rigid” theologians of old recognized the importance of acknowledging and understanding Christ as truly incarnate. For instance (and to step back further than most reviewers of this movie are likely to do), 17th-century English theologian Richard Baxter, in his *Christian Directory*, noted (while at the same time strongly arguing against any and all images of God in worship) that “the making and using of the images of Christ, as born, living, preaching, walking, dying ... rising, ascending, is not unlawful in itself ... as Christ was a man like one of us, so He may be pictured as a man.”

The best understanding of *The Passion* is that it is Mel Gibson’s very personal expression of a deeply rooted faith, in the best way he knows how: on film. Christ’s Passion is a narrative with which Mr. Gibson connected. He felt burdened to tell it, and to tell it in a way that resonated most closely with his own experience.

However, what Mr. Gibson chooses to accentuate, what he leaves in, what he leaves out—all of these are choices that reflect his artistic sensibility and his personal experience, and are layers on top of the story. It is important to distinguish between this as Mr. Gibson’s interpretation of the Gospels and God’s Word itself.

Baxter continued his discourse on images of Christ by making the important point that “it is a great part of a believer’s work, to have Christ’s image very much ... upon his mind ... that a crucified Savior being still as it were before our eyes, we may remember the price of our redemption, and the example we have to imitate.” It is something of this image, it seems, that so profoundly affected Mr. Gibson’s life, and that he has boldly endeavored to share using the best tools of his art.

The challenge *The Passion of the Christ* issues to Christians is to place these images into the larger context of God’s redemptive plan, and to help unbelievers to do the same.