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“The Passion of the Christ”

A NUMBER OF IMPORTANT QUESTIONS ANSWERED.

The substance of a sermon preached by Rev Brian McClung Minister of Newtownabbey Free Presbyterian Church, on Lord’s Day evening, March 21st 2004.

Much media attention has been concentrated upon the film, directed by Mel Gibson, entitled: ‘The Passion of the Christ’. This film purports to focus on the last twelve hours of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. The film begins in the Garden of Gethsemane where the Lord Jesus had gone to pray after instituting the Last Supper. In the garden, He must resist the temptations of Satan and be betrayed by Judas Iscariot. He is then arrested and taken within the city walls of Jerusalem where the leaders of the Pharisees confront Him with accusations of blasphemy and His trial results in a condemnation to death. Media comment has particularly been directed towards two matters:

[1] the violent nature of this film. There are supposed to be scenes of the most grotesque violence, prolonged scenes of the scourging of Christ and also of the subsequent crucifixion;

[2] the anti-Semitism which might be stirred up as a result of depicting the Jews in a particular way. In America, and it is reasonable to conclude the same will happen in Great Britain also, multitudes have flocked to view this film. We are not surprised that Roman Catholics are desirous to see it. Rome has since the Dark Ages believed in ‘passion plays’. What is more surprising is that professing evangelicals are praising this film and even using it as an outreach tool. Whole congregations of professing evangelicals have block-booked ticket allocations so that they can watch it together. The film cost \$30 million to produce. It has already recouped its costs during the first few weeks since release. It was released in America on Ash Wednesday, a day of significance for Roman Catholics and increasingly for apostate Protestantism. We want to consider whether the production of this film is a good thing or something to be opposed. Let us first deal with the retort that you cannot criticise something before you have personally seen it. We can answer that objection by simply applying the same maxim to poison. You do not have to drink poison to know the effects it will produce in the body. You just need to read the label. We will do the same with this film. We will read what those who have produced this film have said about it. There are five major issues surrounding this subject:

[1] Is it right for Christians to attend cinemas and theatres?

[2] Is it Scriptural to make a physical portrayal of the Son of God?

[3] Are the contents of the film in keeping with the Word of God?

[4] Is the physical representation of Christ’s sufferings an appropriate means of evangelism?

[5] Who did ultimately crucify Christ?

1. Is it right for Christians to attend cinemas and theatres?

This is a general point but still very important. It has been the historic position of Biblical Christianity to oppose the attendance of Christians at cinemas and theatres, whatever film is being shown. Attendance at cinemas and theatres is manifesting a love for pleasure and



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entertainment. The Christian is to seek joy entirely in the Lord and not in the things of the world. We are warned against being “lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God,” 2 Timothy 3 v 4. Believers are not to set wicked things before their eyes. The cinema and theatre do not promote morality or virtue. They promote ungodliness and immorality. “I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes: I hate the work of them that turn aside; it shall not cleave to me,” Psalm 101:3. “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things,” Philippians 4:8.

The ungodly lives of actors and actresses are an indication of the spirit of these places. It has long been known that those who give their lives to acting are generally among the most ungodly of individuals. “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one,” Job 14:4. The Christian ought to avoid all appearances of evil. Cinemas and theatres are places of worldly entertainment and amusement and therefore not appropriate places to be frequented by a Christian.

2. Is it Scriptural to make a physical portrayal of the Son of God?

I do not believe that it is Scriptural in any way. The whole concept of depicting Christ's life in film is questionable. This point applies to all films of this nature and not only this latest effort. The question needs to be asked: Who would put himself forward as worthy to play the leading part i.e. that of the Incarnate Son of God? These films are not mere depictions of a great man, but of Him to Whom one day “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord,” Philippians 2:10-11. It cannot be right that an actor, who can in other films play an immoral character, should be given the role of playing Him who knew no sin. Who could claim to enter into the part of playing the Son of God? No one is capable of doing so. Anything less is an inaccurate presentation of Christ. The uniqueness of Christ's person and ministry is sacrificed in this film. The use of any visual aid to depict Christ violates the second commandment. “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth,” Exodus 20:4. It is worth noting that although art had been established long before Christ appeared in Israel over 2,000 years ago, God did not inspire any artist to give us a visible representation of Him. No sketches or pictures survive to tell us what the Lord Jesus looked like. The danger now is that when people think of Christ, they will associate the Son of God with the face of the actor who took upon himself to play Him. This is practical idolatry. God gave us the Scriptures as the sole revelation of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures nowhere emphasise Christ's physical appearance.

3. Are the contents of this film in keeping with the Word of God?

I do not believe that this film is in keeping with the Word of God. This passion film is based on the Bible and also on the visions of two Roman Catholic mystics. Mel Gibson is a traditional Roman Catholic, belonging to a group which wants to overturn the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and return to old-fashioned Romanism, before she put on her ecumenical mask. He has produced this film about the death of Christ based on the visions of two Catholic mystics.

The first is Anne Catherine Emmerich, who claimed to have seen visions of the passion,



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death and resurrection of Christ which were recorded in her book, 'The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.' She narrated in incredible detail her understanding of the horrendous sufferings which He underwent in His death.

The second is Mary of Agreda from Spain, who wrote a book entitled 'The divine history and life of the Virgin Mother of God as manifested to Mary of Agreda.' Needless to say 'the stations of the cross' form the basis. A number of these stations are nowhere found in the Word of God. Christ falling three times on His way to Calvary, the meeting with His mother and His meeting with Veronica who wipes His face on her veil, who in turn discovers the image of His face on her veil - His gift to her, are nowhere found in the Bible. By intertwining truth and falsehood into one account, we have an adding to the Word of God, a practice forbidden in the Bible. "Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar," Proverbs 30:6. This film gives an inordinate place to the Virgin Mary in the last twelve hours of Christ's life. A minister, present at a preview of this film, reported that the film should be renamed as the Passion of Christ and Mary. Without doubt, Mary suffered greatly as she watched her son die on the Cross. What mother wouldn't? However, despite the persistent claims of the Roman Catholic Church, Mary's sufferings were not atoning in value. Claims that she is a Co-Redemptorist in the work of salvation are totally opposed to the teaching of the Bible. Speaking of Christ, Peter said: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved," Acts 4:12. Unlike the film where Mary features prominently, the true, unadulterated account of Christ's passion mentions Mary only once, John 19:25-26. Some interpret the constant looking of Christ to His mother in this film as Him drawing strength from her presence. This is Roman Catholic fiction and without any Biblical authority. Christ did not need to draw strength from His mother or anyone else. His deity was all sufficient to strengthen His humanity to fulfil the work of the cross.

4. Is the physical representation of Christ's sufferings an appropriate means of evangelism?

Though many believe that it is, the physical representation of Christ's sufferings is not an appropriate means of evangelism and will never prove to be of an efficacy to bring souls to Christ. An attack upon the sufficiency of the Bible. To promote another means of evangelism ahead of the Scriptures cannot have the blessing of God. It is the preaching of His Word God blesses and not 'passion plays'. Those who wish to learn more about the sufferings of Christ ought to search the various accounts as they appear in the Bible, Psalm 22, Isaiah 53 or the Gospels. The truth is learned from the Bible. Who can argue that the film experts of Hollywood with all their expertise in camera work and music etc., can outdo the effect of the Spirit of God working upon the heart? 'Passion plays' versus preaching. Medieval Europe was a hotbed of passion plays where fact mingled with fiction was presented as gospel truth. This period of time has now been rightly described as the Dark Ages. The Reformation marked a return to solid, sound Bible preaching. The latter alone has the approval of God upon it as a method of communication. "For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe," 1 Corinthians 1:21. Gibson's film is just a high-tech, state of the art passion play. It is just another Roman 'passion play' which has moved out of a Church building into a local cinema. It is amazing that some evangelical churches have block-booked cinemas to endorse not only the message of this film, but its method of communi-



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ation. His physical sufferings made no impression upon many who stood around the cross. Is this not testimony to their inefficacy as a means of witnessing? Grace alone saves the soul. Films of any sort are not means of grace. The enormity of His sufferings involved more than the physical pain. Others were crucified as well. What made Christ's sufferings so unique was that His soul was becoming an offering for sin, "Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand," Isaiah 53: 10. His soul was exceeding sorrowful unto death. No physical representation of these sufferings can ever be made. The communion feast is not a meditation upon His physical sufferings alone.

5. Who ultimately crucified Christ?

To say that Christ was crucified because Judas betrayed him to the Jewish authorities, who in turn delivered Him up to the ruling Gentiles, who in turn nailed His hands and feet to a Roman cross is true, but falls woefully short of the whole answer. Humanly speaking both Jew and Gentile were guilty. "For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done," Acts 4: 27-28. The charges of anti-Semitism may well have some foundation in the light of comments made both by Mel Gibson and his father who said that the Holocaust was exaggerated, just prior to the release of the film in the USA. Ultimately it was God Himself Who crucified His own Son. The Bible tells us: "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" Romans 8: 32. This does not in any way lessen the accountability of those who were humanly responsible for His death. The real reason why Christ was crucified? God crucified His Son to accomplish redemption once for all — something this film will never convey because neither Rome nor Mel Gibson believes in the finished work of Christ. Calvary is God's way of enabling the guilty sinner to go free while still maintaining every last jot and tittle of His holiness. Calvary enables God to be just and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus, "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit," 1 Peter 3: 18. To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus," Romans 3: 26. Calvary completely put away sin. Its benefits are received by faith alone in Christ alone. This is the true message of the cross and one which this film in no way portrays.

It is sad that evangelicals are deceived into thinking that some good will come from this film. When it contravenes the Scriptures in so many ways, how can it ever have the blessing of God?