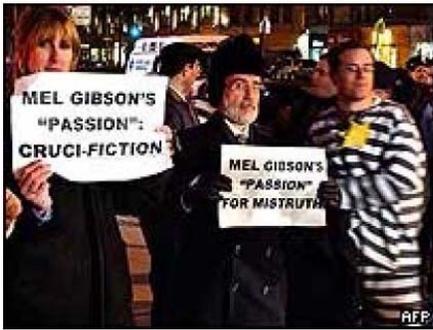




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The Passion of the Christ

by Rev. Andy Foster, Penticton Free Presbyterian Church, Canada.



Jewish protesters outside a cinema

This film claims to deal with the events of the last 12 hours of Christ's life and to be the most accurate and impressive film version of Christ ever. It is especially noted for the very graphic, brutal presentation of Christ's agonies and suffering — hence its R rating for violence. But is such re-enactment of Christ's suffering necessary or even right? Can Mel Gibson's film be, as some claim it will be, a God-honouring tool for mass evangelism? Should we go see the film or encourage others to go as most Church leaders are advocating? **What does the Bible say about such things?**

The release of this movie has created near-hysteria among many evangelicals. There are reports of churches buying large numbers of tickets; block booking multiple theatre screenings; distributing outreach promotional material; preaching special sermons to coincide with the release of the film — all to encourage crowds of professing Christians to attend and to use the film as a means of evangelising the lost. This is a real tragedy because from a Biblical perspective the film has nothing to recommend it and has many features to make it repulsive to the Bible-believing child of God.

MATTERS FOR GRAVE CONCERN

Endorsement of the film has been given by leading churchmen, including prominent evangelicals. There are, however, many troubling issues in the light of Scripture, that should alarm the child of God.

The claimed usefulness of the film as an evangelistic tool is based on a false premise.

It is inferred that all that is necessary to make a sinner a believer is for him to see the sufferings of Christ with his natural eyes. This is a fallacy. Sight is not necessary to faith as Peter indicates when he wrote, "Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8). The concept of natural vision leading to faith is proved false by the original events of Christ's suffering. Of all those who witnessed the original events in real life there are two conversions recorded — and it was the righteousness of Christ not the grotesqueness of His sufferings that impressed them (Luke 23:41, 47). The reality and purpose of Christ's sufferings are received by faith not by sight. The use of the film as a supposed aid to faith embraces the unscriptural notion that visual aids to faith are necessary.

This film in reality is a singular breach of the second commandment recorded in Exodus 20:4-6.

God prohibits the devising of any physical rendition of heavenly objects or persons for the



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purposes of worship. This prohibition will also extend to a man acting as Christ, since it is not possible to consider Christ at any level outside the context of worship because of His deity. He undoubtedly is truly man but He is the God-man and therefore ought not to be played by any mere sinful mortal. The dramatic representation of the Saviour in any way is equivalent to the raising of a graven image and is in fact idolatry. The film has the indelible stamp of Roman Catholic ideology upon it and has already produced converts to Roman Catholicism. The film is being aggressively marketed by the Church of Rome as a means of gaining converts. The premise of the film is Roman Catholicism's idolatrous practice of representing Christ visually — the Church of Rome is noted for its crucifixes, its bleeding icons and its innumerable statues. The Passion of the Christ has received the personal endorsement of the Pope and many leading Church officials including several Cardinals. Many have said Mel Gibson is a devout Christian. The fact is, both Mel Gibson and Jim Caviezel, who plays Christ, are ardent Roman Catholics, not Biblical Christians. Gibson belongs to a Traditionalist Catholic group that performs the mass in Latin, abstains from meat on Fridays, eschews ecumenism, and other such things that were changed at the Vatican II Council in the 1960s. Gibson built his own Catholic chapel, called Holy Family, near his California home. When asked by a Protestant interviewer if someone can be saved apart from the Roman Catholic Church, Gibson replied, "There is no salvation for those outside the Church" (The New Yorker, Sept. 15, 2003). The material for the movie is not based solely on the Bible but also on the visions of Roman Catholic nun-mystics St. Anne Catherine Emmerich and Mary of Agreda. Of the visions of Emmerich, Gibson said, "She supplied me with stuff I never would have thought of" (The New Yorker, Sept. 15, 2003). In December 2003 Jim Caviezel arranged a private presentation of the unfinished version of this movie at "The Mother's Village" in Medjugorje [the Marian apparition site in Bosnia- Hercegovina]. In an interview with a priest at that shrine he made the following comments: "The catharsis for me to play this role was through Medjugorje, through Gospa [a term which means "Our Lady" in the former Yugoslavia and is the name of a US foundation dedicated to this shrine]. In preparation, I used all that Medjugorje taught me. Mel Gibson and I were going every day for Mass together. Some days I couldn't go for Mass, but I was receiving the Eucharist. Somewhere along the line, I heard that the Pope was going to Confession every day, so I thought that I should go to Confession as often as possible. I didn't want Lucifer to have any control over the performance. So, the confession was the preparation for the Eucharist. *Ivan Dragicevic and his wife Lorraine gave me a piece of the true cross. I kept this on me all the time. They made a special pocket in my clothes for it. I also had relics of †St. Padre Pio, †St. Anthony of Padua, St. Maria Goretti, and St. Denisius [sic for St. Genesius], the Patron saint of Actors. Another thing was fasting. I read many of the messages continuously. Every day everyone could see me with the rosary in my hands". He went on to say: "This film is something that I believe was made by Mary for her Son. Because it was made by her, it will be attacked by the enemy." In an interview with Newsmax magazine Caviezel recalled telling Gibson, "I think it's very important that we have mass every day - at least I need that to play this guy." "I felt if I was going to play him I needed [the sacrament] in me. So [Gibson] provided that." The endorsement by prominent individuals including Rev. Billy Graham, Rick Warren, James Dobson and other evangelical organisations cannot hide the fact that this movie promotes Roman Catholic teaching. The involvement of those who claim to be evangelical is scandalous and an affront to the gospel. Caviezel clearly states that all who oppose this film are the enemies of Rome and



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Marian theology, thus inferring that all who endorse the movie are the friends of Rome! The direction in which the film will influence viewers is seen in that Jim Caviezel also stated to Newsmax magazine that the overall experience prompted many in the crew to convert to Catholicism.

The tactics embraced by evangelical promoters of this film are not those employed by Christ's Apostles.

With the exception of Paul, all of the Apostles were eye-witnesses of much of the sufferings of Christ. Not once do these men emphasize the gory details of the scenes they witnessed in order to impress their audiences or to produce conversions. Certainly, no gospel presentation of Christ in Scripture ever had a 'Restricted' rating as this film does on account of its nauseating and stomach-churning violence! The published trailers for the movie contain graphic scenes that are physically sickening — but are spiritually revolting for the Christian because of their degrading view of the Saviour. God has chosen "the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (I Cor 1:21) and the tactics employed by the Apostles was simply the preaching of the gospel of Christ using discreet but plain language.

To promote attendance at this film is to encourage an activity that has historically been regarded by the people of God as worldliness.

Attendance upon worldly entertainments is harmful to good Christian testimony and contrary to the plain teaching of Scripture. Theatre and cinema attendance is not for the Christian. It is contrary to the call of Scripture to personal separation and holiness. This is yet another instance of professing Christians sanctioning the methods and ideas of the world because of some supposed benefit. God does not use means that are at variance with His word, and are in themselves sinful, to promote His gospel.

A PROPER CONSIDERATION OF CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS

The sufferings of Christ climaxing in His death are very precious to the Christian. "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with **THE PRECIOUS BLOOD** of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19). "Unto you therefore which believe **HE IS PRECIOUS**" (1 Peter 2:7). None who holds Christ precious can be comfortable with His death being made a subject for playactors. Hollywood style treatment of the Saviour is repulsive to those who love Him. The ghoulish relish of hordes of professing Christians for the violence of this film is in stark contrast with the attitude of the followers of Christ who witnessed His crucifixion — "And all his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood afar off, beholding these things" (Luke 23:49). They could not bear the sight of His sufferings up close but displayed the natural reaction of abhorrence at the sight of a loved one's sufferings and so "stood afar off".

The sufferings of Christ are a vital element in the gospel. His suffering and death in the place of sinners is the key-stone of redemption. God has determined that an understanding of the sufferings of the Saviour is to be promoted by the preaching of the Scriptural record! Paul stated, "we preach Christ crucified" (I Cor 1:23). The saving power of God lies in the written word. As it is preached and applied by the Holy Spirit to the heart, a sinner is saved. Saving faith rests in the details of Christ and His sufferings that are revealed in the



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written word of God. The fictional drama products of Hollywood cannot produce the salvation that God has said the Scriptures alone will.

A saving response to Christ's sufferings is more than mere emotion at a raw presentation of blood and gore.

It is:

(a) A believing recognition of God's wrath on sin and His mercy in providing a Saviour who paid the penalty of sin and provides righteousness to satisfy the demands of God's Law. Such faith acts in response to the message of the Word of God, not as the result of visual stimulants to human emotions. "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).

(b) A repentant understanding of the evil state of the human heart. This evil is exemplified in the rejection of Christ by men and the nature of His penal sufferings at the hand of God. A true understanding of sin comes through the instruction of Scripture and especially through the application to the mind and heart of the demands of the Law of God — "for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). (c) An ongoing, life-long application of the doctrine of Christ's cross in the Christian life is the evidence of a right view of the cross. In Galatians 6:14 Paul explained what the cross meant to him — "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world." The power of Christ's cross in his life destroyed the appeal of the sinful world and also his own desire for it. The fact that advocates of this film are embracing and encouraging the twin evils of Hollywood culture and Roman Catholic heresy shows there is something radically wrong with its view of the cross of Christ. It encourages worldliness and disobedience of God's Law rather than, as Paul indicated, producing increasing holiness and separation.

A FINAL WORD

In Hebrews 6 Paul discusses apostasy. To act as an apostate, i.e. to turn away from the gospel of truth and reject Christ, is said to "crucify...the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame", v6. There is an application of Paul's words to this film. *The Passion of the Christ* is the offspring of the apostate Christianity of Roman Catholicism in union with the secular apostasy of Hollywood. This is not to say that everyone involved in making or viewing the film is an apostate, i.e. they cannot ever be saved. Many are swept along by the tide of apostasy without themselves being apostates. Nevertheless, the film is the product of apostasy and as such is at heart the very antithesis of Biblical Christianity. That is simply something that no true child of God could ever knowingly support.

* A "seer" from the Marian shrine at Medjugorje who claims that Mary has appeared to him every day since June 24, 1981 and travels to broadcast her 'revelations'.

† famous for the supposed bleeding stigmata in his hands.

‡ a man labelled by Rome as "the hammer of heretics" because of his ruthless efforts to stamp out non-RC teaching.