

‘The Passion of the Christ’ (by Jim Hughes)

In light of the excitement in the Church about the movie produced by Mel Gibson—*The Passion of the Christ*—I thought it would be useful to provide a brief analysis of the movie from a Biblical perspective. I have not seen the movie, and I do not plan to see it, for a number of reasons:

- 1) **The Written Word** – God, in his providence, chose to communicate the life of Christ through the written word of the Scriptures. He could have sent his Son to earth during a technologically advanced age in which there would have been TV crews covering the events of his crucifixion. He could have planned for technology to develop more quickly or could have delayed his Son’s arrival on earth, but he chose to send Jesus at a time when there were no cameras. His timing was right (Rom 5.6; Gal 4.4). We have no idea what Jesus looked like as a man and no written or visual record has been recorded of his physical appearance. God must have had a purpose for keeping that information from us. We overstep the bounds of propriety before God, and present a false statement about Jesus, when we presume to communicate the life and death of the Son of God with a visual representation.
- 2) **The Preached Word** – God has chosen preaching as his primary means of presenting the Gospel. This God-appointed means of reaching the lost with the Gospel is being undermined everywhere today—in the Church and society. Supporting the movie reinforces this trend. It is simply wrong that a person has to pay money to hear the message about Christ. The message of truth should be free, not at the cost of a movie ticket at a commercial theatre.
- 3) **The Living Word** – Jesus is the visible representation of the eternal God (Jn 1.14; Col 1.15; Heb 1.3). It is inappropriate for us to make representations of God in any form (Is 40.18; Acts 17.29)—whether a stone carving, a renaissance painting, or a movie. In addition, it is wrong for a sinful person (an actor) to portray the sinless Christ. *The Passion* is, in essence, no different from a medieval morality play. We need to reconsider why the Council of Constantinople in 753 AD reinforced the position of the early NT Church against the use of images and why the 15th-century reformers were against visual representations of Jesus. They understood that God is not pleased with having men create images of the Living Word, separating his physical nature from his divine nature.

The pragmatic response to my objections is, “But many people will hear about Christ and be converted.” I do not question that some people will begin to consider Christ, and thus receive salvation, through attendance at the movie. I expect that over the coming months we will hear of many amazing conversions. We should thank God that he will use this means as an instrument in the salvation of souls. However, does this mean that we should approve of an incorrect means because it produces good results? Some people were probably saved by considering their future destiny when they were on the sinking Titanic. Should we sink cruise ships to bring people to consider the meaning of life? Some people are saved when they exit from a drug-induced stupor. Should we push drugs so that someone will be saved? Paul answers the silliness of the pragmatist’s arguments with an emphatic ‘no’ (Rom 3.8; 6.1,2).

Someone will say that I am the one being silly with my examples, “This movie isn’t like sinking a ship or pushing drugs; it is a good thing!” For the sake of discussion, let’s assume that it is a good thing in itself. Is the resurrection of a dead person a good thing? Yet, what does Jesus say to the suggestion that a resurrection could be used to bring people to consider their future destiny? “He [Abraham] said to him [the rich man], ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” (Lk 16.31) The God-appointed means of reaching the lost with the Gospel is preaching Moses and the Prophets. Maybe I am just an old fogey and don’t understand that the modern way of ‘preaching’ is to show movies that hit people at the visceral level.

Regardless of what we think about attending *The Passion*, in God’s providence it is a ‘blockbuster’. God in his mercy will use, for his purposes, means he has not authorized. What might those purposes be? Certainly, he will save some through this movie; but I believe that there are two other key reasons why it is a very significant cultural phenomenon. They are summed up by what Paul says he preached: “Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” (1 Cor 1.23)

- 1) **Stumbling Block** – You have heard the complaints about the movie being anti-Jewish. Mel Gibson was called a ‘sadist’ (by Newsweek’s David Ansen) for stirring up hatred against Jews. *The Passion* is no more ‘anti-Jewish’ than the Gospels themselves. Jesus was a Jew, Mary at the foot of the cross was a

Jewess, three of the Gospel writers were Jews, and the thief on the cross who repented of his sins was a Jew ... The reason that Jews don't want to hear the Gospels' message is because it presents the truth. It reminds Jews today that their ancient leaders and many of the Jewish people at the time of the crucifixion rejected Jesus. Jews today do not want to hear that Jesus was the true Messiah, and they do not want to be reminded that *they* have rejected him.

- 2) ***Foolishness*** – Non-Jews criticize the movie for its violence, or as just a money-grab by Gibson. Who would have believed that an R-rated movie about Jesus, in Aramaic and Latin with English sub-titles, was a viable commercial venture? These very critics have turned a small-scale niche movie into a cultural phenomenon. God has overruled their belief that Jesus of Nazareth is foolishness and has slapped them in the face with the reality that an event that happened outside a city wall in an obscure province of the Roman Empire about two thousand years ago is the most important event in the history of the world.

The Church needs seriously to rethink many things: Where do the media fit? What are the Biblical principles guiding their use? What is preaching? Why is preaching so ineffective at reaching the lost today? Is the problem with the preachers or our lack of prayer? However, there is one thing we don't need to rethink: the horror of the Cross of Jesus Christ continues to offend (Gal 5.11) both Jews and Gentiles. God is never going to let men forget that on the cross Jesus Christ bore our sins and the punishment we deserve.