

Passion-ate Thoughts—Hobart Newton

By the time you receive this, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of The Christ* will have opened in theaters across the country—although from the sheer volume of press and “advance showings” to selected audiences, it almost seems like very few people *haven't* seen it yet. This movie will clearly be a significant cultural event—the as yet unreleased movie's been in the news since last year, and it'll get bigger once it hits screens—so it would behoove Christians to be ready to deal with the phenomenon.

As tempting as it is, I won't address the question of whether a Christian should go to the movie or not. In my opinion the answer is no—but many people have done a better job than I can in showing that.¹ Ultimately, though this is a question that should be left to the individual conscience. But Christians who decide to watch the film need to view it with discernment, and those who don't should be ready to discuss the general themes of it anyway.

One of the first things that needs to be said is that Mel Gibson has shown a remarkable amount of courage and integrity in interviews he's given leading up to the film's release. It is all too rare today to see someone unapologetic in their conservative religious beliefs. We would do well to emulate him at this point.

As for the movie itself, for most people—particularly those who are more visually oriented, how will viewing this movie affect the way they think about Christ or the Gospel narratives as a whole? How many of us will have Sean Astin and Orlando Bloom in the back of our minds (at least occasionally) as we read *The Lord of the Rings*? In turn, for those who see *The Passion*, will James Caviezel be their mental image of Christ?² If this does happen, then truly those people have a problem they need to work on.

Much has been made of this film being an historically accurate account taken from the pages of Scripture. Many Evangelicals who are praising the movie will add that like any adaptation, certain “artistic liberties” are taken, adding lines or scenes that aren't in the text. However, it appears that most of these *aren't* artistic license, but are taken from books like *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* by Anne Catherine Emmerich (Gibson carries a “relic” from this mystic and stigmatic). One of the greatest influences of that mystic is the Marian dogma assumed throughout. Gibson has said, “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. For me the amazing thing is that the film is so Marian. But I think the way the film displays her has been kind of an eye opener for evangelicals who don't usually look at that aspect.”³ How far as Evangelicalism fallen if this is a film we celebrate?

Marshall McLuhan's famous statement, “The medium is the message” also has some bearing here. Yes, those who watch the film will see some of the bloodiest, most horrific punishment that can be inflicted on men. But this is seen on the silver screen—in the same context as people saw the torment of the Jews in *Schindler's List*, or the

horrors of war in *Saving Private Ryan*, or even cheered at the gore in *Kill Bill*. Ultimately, doesn't the setting (theater) and medium (movie) undermine any possible spiritual content?

The last comment I want to make on the film itself. Emphasis in the Bible was not on physical torment itself, indeed "the gospels record the actual act of crucifixion as sub-clauses in sentences, not even full sentences."⁴ The Biblical emphasis is on the wrath of God being poured out upon Jesus—and no movie can portray that. Retired OPC minister Rollin Keller asks, "Will the movie truly depict what Christ endured to save us from our sins? I believe the unfathomable agony of my Savior was bearing the wrath and curse of God due to me for my ugly sins. He bore our sins in his own body on the cross. Just how do we see on film the burning anger of God? If the flick turns our attention to the pain of crucifixion only, then it becomes a monstrous diversion of attention from the truth of the gospel. After all two others endured the physical agony of crucifixion on the same day. Are we to get caught up in their agony, thinking it to be identical to the pain Jesus suffered? That would be a gross perversion of the truth."⁵

I could not put it better than a friend did recently, "I find it very strange that this movie generates so much excitement when the church actively trying to fulfill the Great Commission seems to pass by without a whole lot of attention from the same people. I think this is a brutally inconsistent and ultimately, dare I say, unbiblical view of things, driven primarily by the godless, thoughtless culture around us, rather than a serious look at Scripture." What distresses me most about this movie is the way that conservative Evangelicals are reacting to the film. Some leaders even going so far as to say that this movie gives "the best outreach opportunity in 2000 years", or that this film will bring about a great revival. Evangelism and revival are products of the Gospel. Do we seriously expect a traditionalist Roman Catholic who believes that outside of the Roman Church there is no salvation to give us a clear Gospel presentation? And if an unbeliever is moved to further investigation of Christianity after seeing this film, are they likely to seek out a Baptist or Presbyterian church, or will they look for the same church that the movie came from?

There is a real providential opportunity here to discuss this movie and the true events with people in our lives. Granted, no one is going to walk out of the theater saying "You mean there are people who say this Jesus was hung on a cross? Why haven't I heard this before?" Yet how many really will have considered what that means. It is here that prepared and willing Christians have an opportunity. We are, or at least ought to be, very familiar with the primary source material, we've met the subject of the film, and have experience the blessings purchased by the events it chronicled (the events that aren't under the "artistic license rubric, anyway). Reportedly, film merely recounts the events—with a minimal amount of explanation for God's motive behind them and the reason for their necessity. Alert Christians can help others connect the movie and the motive.⁶

Ultimately we need to be careful regarding this (or any other) film. I'm not saying God cannot use a movie—I hope He uses this one. However, a movie is not the means he has ordained. Those who say we "need" a movie like this to spread gospel are on shaky

ground at best. As Abraham said in the parable, "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). If one raising from the dead will not convince, how much will a movie, no matter how well made?

¹ The *best* such an examination that I've seen is Andrew J. Webb's "Five Reasons Not to Go See The Passion of Christ." Available upon request.

² There are already reports of people on the street bowing down before Caviezel.

³ From an interview posted on <http://www.christianitytoday.com>

⁴ James White in IRC chat, 02/23/04

⁵ In an e-mail to the presbyterians-opc discussion list.

⁶ John Piper's (very cheap) book, *The Passion of Jesus Christ*, is an excellent new resource to help Christians to be prepared to do that. See <http://www.passion-book.com> for sample chapters