

# An Analysis of Gibson's "The Passion of Christ"

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*The Passion of the Christ*, the movie by Mel Gibson, has proven to be more than simply another movie. More than a fine film, it has become something of a cultural phenomenon in its own right, as well as a significant theological contribution within the public square. With audiences prompted initially by controversy, and subsequently by positive word of mouth, the movie has been breaking box-office records left and right. It earned more than \$125 million in revenue during its first five days-better than *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* and *Star Wars, Episode One: The Phantom Menace*, and third best in history for a five-day opening, trailing only *The Matrix Reloaded* and *Spiderman*. After four weeks, it has earned well over \$300 million, and appears to be easily on its way to \$400 million. Having already surpassed *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* as the most successful independent film, *The Passion of the Christ* is on course to become the highest-grossing R-rated film ever. It is, in short, "a powerful and popular film that is likely to be a major milestone in cinematic history" (David Neff, "The Passion of Mel Gibson," *Christianity Today* 48:3, March 2004, page 30).



Along with my recommendation, however, I must also say up front that it is not necessary to see the movie, nor should any Christian be made to feel obligated to see it. It remains a movie, not the Divine Service, and it cannot take the place of the regular hearing and learning of the Word of God. Indeed, *The Passion of the Christ* is best seen (and most appropriately) in conjunction with ongoing catechesis in the Word of God-in the daily remembrance of Holy Baptism, in the regular reception of the Holy Communion, in contrition and repentance, Confession and Absolution. In particular, anyone who has seen (or will see) the movie, is encouraged to be in church for the daily services of Holy Week, in which the Passion of our Lord Jesus, the Christ, will be heard from each of the four holy Gospels in the course of those sacred days.

## Responding to Criticisms of the Movie

Allow me to begin my "review" of the movie by addressing some of the foremost criticisms that have been well-publicized against it:

### **Is the movie too violent? In my opinion, No.**

Critics have been fairly evenly divided in their overall evaluation of the movie. "Some applaud the portrayal of Jesus' final twelve hours while others are throwing rotten tomatoes. Nevertheless, they would all agree that watching it is an excruciating experience. For many, seeing Jesus' torments vividly, graphically and relentlessly illustrated only serves to heighten their appreciation of Christ's love for humankind. For

others, Gibson's hyper realistic violence is gratuitous, an act of cruelty carried out upon the audience by an agenda driven, heavy-handed, insensitive director" (Jeffrey Overstreet, "The Passion of The Christ," Film Forum, 26 Feb 04).

Roger Ebert, perhaps this country's leading film critic, was surely not alone in his assessment that *The Passion of the Christ* is "the most violent film" he has ever seen (Chicago Sun-Times, 24 Feb 04). But I must frankly disagree with Ebert on this point. He's seen a lot more movies than I have, including many that I would consider as violent, or more so, than this one (including some of Mel Gibson's past movies, such as *Braveheart*, the *Mad Max* and *Lethal Weapon* movies, and the very fine *We Were Soldiers*, released two years ago, as well as such other well-known films as *Saving Private Ryan*, *Blackhawk Down*, the *Die Hard* movies, and the *Terminator* movies, to name a few examples). There are several scenes in *The Passion of the Christ* (some of them extended) of intense "violence," although I am inclined to categorize these things more in terms of "sufferings" than "violence." The scourging and the nailing, in particular, are difficult to watch. But I'm not sure that it is any more difficult than I find it to be, every year, when I read the Passion accounts out loud from the lectern during the services of Holy Week. It does burn an image into the mind that would be hard to erase, and I guess I would have to regard that as a good thing (for those catechized by the Word of God).

Anyway, I did not find the violence to be as extensive or extreme as the reviews and other comments had led me to expect. In fact, although I did not use a stopwatch to clarify my perception, I would venture to say there is easily as much time spent on flashbacks to the teaching and ministry of Jesus as there is on the actual portrayal of "violence" against Him. Admittedly, one sees throughout the movie the increasing number of wounds (and stripes) that He bore as a consequence of that violence, but in a way that is hardly different than any artistic depiction of the Cross and Passion of our Lord. It is by His stripes that we are healed, and Gibson does not want anyone to miss that divine medicine. So, the violence is there. Yet, in reality, neither this nor any other movie can fully capture what our Lord endured, not even in terms of His physical suffering.

What is most profoundly sobering and humbling to me, is to consider that what the Lord Christ endured in terms of His bearing our sin and our guilt, and the righteous wrath and judgment of God in our stead, was far and away worse than the vivid images portrayed in the movie. In an opening scene, Satan taunts Jesus that "no one man can bear the full burden of sin," and what is so frightening (in the sense of contrition and repentance) is just how awesome that weight and burden truly was. But this One Man, the God Man and none other, bore it all upon Himself, in His flesh, for us men and our salvation. It is truly incomprehensible for us; yet, He not only "comprehended" it, but bore it, and suffered the divine, eternal wrath of judgment and damnation against it, in that Hour of His Cross and Passion.

## **Is the movie "anti-Semitic"? Not at all!**

The most persistent and vindictive criticisms of *The Passion of the Christ* have labeled it "anti-Semitic." ("Anti-Semitism" is typically used to describe negative, prejudicial and

even hateful attitudes toward the Jews as a people.) Accusations that the movie was (or would be) "anti-Semitic" began as early as 2002, long before the filming was complete or any such critics had seen a script or any footage. Similar criticisms have continued relentlessly and increased along the way, especially in the last few months before the movie was released. Consequently, those people relying solely on the coverage given by the secular media would logically assume there must be some truth to these accusations, which is unfortunate.

Let me say up front, and unequivocally, that *The Passion of the Christ* is by no means "anti-Semitic" in any way, shape or form. Rather, it faithfully presents the events of the Passion on the basis of the four Holy Gospels. Far from being unfairly critical or negative toward the Jewish people as such, the movie portrays a number of different Jews in a wide variety of roles, from Jesus Himself and His Mother, Mary, to the religious leaders of the day who handed Him over to the governing (Roman) authorities.

Thankfully, numerous reviewers, both Christian and secular (including Roger Ebert), have likewise refuted the charges of anti-Semitism. They have pointed out that many of the foremost Jewish characters in the movie are portrayed in a highly positive light, whereas the people portrayed in the most appalling light are the Roman soldiers (unquestionably). Significantly, all of the most pointed criticisms and accusations of supposed anti-Semitism have been leveled against words and actions taken directly from the Holy Gospels, indicating a problem not with Mel Gibson or his movie, but with the facts of history and with the very Word of God. It is also essential to understand that the whole point to the Passion, as Gibson has frequently stressed, is that everyone is responsible for the death of Christ, beginning for each of us with "me, myself, and I," not with the Jews, or Judas, or Pilate. "For culpability," Gibson told a group of Chicago religious leaders last July, "look to yourself. I look to myself" (David Neff, "The Passion of Mel Gibson," *Christianity Today* 48:3, March 2004, page 30).

Roger Ebert's comments are helpful here: "My own feeling is that Gibson's film is not anti-Semitic, but reflects a range of behavior on the part of its Jewish characters, on balance favorably. The Jews who seem to desire Jesus' death are in the priesthood, and have political as well as theological reasons for acting. . . . The other Jews seen in the film are viewed positively; Simon helps Jesus to carry the cross, Veronica brings a cloth to wipe his face, Jews in the crowd cry out against his torture. . . . The story involves a Jew who tried no less than to replace the established religion and set himself up as the Messiah. He was understandably greeted with a jaundiced eye by the Jewish establishment while at the same time finding his support, his disciples and the founders of his church entirely among his fellow Jews" (*Chicago Sun-Times*, 24 Feb 2004).

Of particular interest is the fact that, not only is St. Mary, the Mother of our Lord, a Jew, who is portrayed most positively in the movie; what is more, the actress playing Mary is herself a Jew (by birth and by faith), the daughter of a Rabbi. This fine actress, Maia Morgenstern, carefully examined the script and consulted with her father before accepting the role, and has publicly defended both Gibson and the movie against charges of anti-Semitism. That Gibson sought this Jewish woman out and asked her to play the role should also, in itself, refute any suggestion that he or his movie is anti-Semitic.

For my part, aside from my own observations of the movie, the most convincing arguments against the charges of anti-Semitism have come from Michael Medved, a well-known journalist (for USA Today), an historian and film critic, who also happens to be a devout, observant Jew, who has served in the past as the president of his orthodox synagogue. Notably, Medved has been outspoken in his defense of the movie, and in his criticism of various Jewish groups for their ill-advised and misguided opposition to the movie.

Among other helpful observations, Medved has pointed out that *The Passion of the Christ* is not about "the Jews," but about one Jew, in particular, whom billions of people regard and worship as the Messiah and the deity incarnate (Michael Medved, "Critics in the 'Passion' Pit: Jewish agony over 'The Passion' is misguided," *Christianity Today* [?] Feb 2004). Furthermore, "Gibson emphasizes the Hebraic identity of the Man from Nazareth. . . . Jim Caviezel [is] perhaps the most Semitic Jesus in cinema history—a welcome change from the Nordic Messiahs in many previous films. To make certain no one ignores the Jewish identity of Christ and the Apostles, Gibson insisted that his actors speak nearly all of their lines in Aramaic, the language of ancient Judea and a close cousin of Hebrew" (Michael Medved, "'Passion' elicits unfair conflict," *USA Today*, 21 July 03).

In Medved's opinion, the film is "so obviously free of anti-Semitic intent that [he] urged Gibson to show the rough cut to some of his Jewish critics as a means of reassuring them." His sense was that, "unlike most biblical films, with their stilted dialogue and cheesy miracles, *The Passion of The Christ* offered a convincing, richly imagined recreation of first century Judea and heartfelt performances" (Michael Medved, "The Passion and the Prejudice," *Christianity Today* 48:3, March 2004, page 38).

Gibson was "determined to bring to the screen what he considers the truth of the New Testament. Certainly, his account of the story—in which the Judean priests and the Judean mob force Pilate's hand in ordering the death of Christ—falls well within the Christian mainstream and corresponds to numerous references in the Gospels. Gibson's critics may resent these elements of the drama, but they must blame Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John rather than Mel" (Michael Medved, "The Passion and the Prejudice," *Christianity Today* 48:3, March 2004, page 38). In summary, writes Medved, "Jews will not enjoy this movie, but we ought to recognize it wasn't made for us and it doesn't focus on us. 'The Passion of the Christ' counts as a project of the Christians, by the Christians, and for the Christians" (Michael Medved, "Critics in the 'Passion' Pit").

As Medved implies, the simple reality is that Gibson's movie is forthrightly and unabashedly Christian, which is at the heart of the objections from the secular media. Indeed, "with each passing day, more and more film critics are publishing opinions on the film that will, eventually, show them up as reactionaries when it comes to religious art. They are so troubled by the intensity and focus of this work that they reveal a great deal of ignorance about Christianity and the way it has been represented in art throughout history. Many—perhaps even most—are showing themselves far more guilty of discrimination and prejudice than the filmmaker they seek to condemn" (Jeffrey Overstreet, "The Passion of the Christ," *Film Forum*, 11 Mar 04).

## **Is the movie too much influenced by Roman Catholicism?**

There is Roman Catholic influence, to be sure, but it is surprisingly understated, and it is not a problem.

Among Protestants, and on the part of some Lutherans, concerns have been expressed about the Roman Catholic piety inherent in the film. Gibson is a conservative, traditionalist Roman Catholic, and his faith and piety are surely present throughout his movie. Some "extra-biblical" details have been drawn from the works of Anne Catherine Emmerich, a late-18th/early-19th century nun who had visions of the Lord's Passion. The way of our Lord from His trial before Pilate to the site of His Crucifixion is, for all intents and purposes, a cinematic recreation of the Stations of the Cross, generally associated with Roman Catholicism (though not unknown among Lutherans). One Roman Catholic film critic, Steven Greydanus, summarized *The Passion of the Christ* as "an imaginative, at times poetic reflection on the meaning of the gospel story in light of sacred tradition and Catholic theology." It is "a preeminently important cinematic expression of the faith—probably one of the most important religious films of all time" (cited by Jeffrey Overstreet, "The Passion of the Christ," *Film Forum*, 26 Feb 04).

"Evangelical enthusiasm for *The Passion of the Christ* may seem a little surprising," therefore, "in that the movie was shaped from start to finish by a devout Roman Catholic and by an almost medieval Catholic vision. But evangelicals have not found that a problem because, overall, the theology of the film articulates very powerful themes that have been important to all classical Christians" (David Neff, "The Passion of Mel Gibson," *Christianity Today* 48:3, March 2004, page 30).

As for myself, I'm ambivalent to the "extra biblical" material, reflecting Gibson's Roman Catholic piety, but really more a case of artistic expression and poetic license than anything. We're not talking about a lot of "extras" in any case. The journey to the Cross (the *Via Dolorosa*) lasts seventeen minutes, the longest single stretch of the entire movie, but still only a small portion of the whole picture. It is really only that part of the film that follows so closely the "Stations of the Cross," which is not offensive in any case, but which has been overemphasized in many reviews of the movie. The "Veronica" bit (the young girl along the way who wipes the face of Christ and tries to give Him a drink of water) is a mild intrusion, artificially introduced and unnecessary. But even that is not theologically a problem. The role of Pilate's wife, "Claudia," on the other hand, works just fine and does not get in the way. All things considered, there is very little that has not come (directly or implicitly) from the holy Evangelists. The few pious traditions that are included generally contribute positively to the movie, and constructively serve the purpose.

## **Is the movie too focused on eliciting an emotional response?**

Due to the nature of the content, there is the potential for emotions to overwhelm your perceptions and response. That is a danger to be guarded against. Ultimately, though, emotions are ambiguous, neither good nor bad in themselves. To respond emotionally to such profound and powerful images as those portrayed in *The Passion of the Christ* is natural enough, but not a real measure of the Christian faith or life. Rather, you are

most firmly grounded upon the historic facts of the Passion itself-irrespective of your feelings and emotions-when you depend entirely upon the sure and certain, unchanging Word of God.

## **Evaluating the Movie on Its Own Terms**

Now, instead of simply dealing with the controversy and criticisms that have been raised against *The Passion of the Christ*, I'd like to consider the movie on its own terms:

### **As a movie-a work of cinematic art**

As a movie, I would place *The Passion of the Christ* on par with *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (and slightly lower than the first two LOTR movies). I'd give it 3\_1/2 or 4 stars, to use Roger Ebert's rating system. In the past year or two, I would score *The Pianist*, *Mystic River*, and *Master and Commander* as better movies. And I'd say that one of the last movies I saw Mel Gibson in, *We Were Soldiers*, was as good or better as a movie; it also contained a rather genuine affirmation of Christian faith, as well.

Ebert himself gave the movie 4 stars (his highest rating). He "was moved by the depth of feeling, by the skill of the actors and technicians, by their desire to see this project through no matter what. To discuss individual performances, such as James Caviezel's heroic depiction of the ordeal, is almost beside the point. This isn't a movie about performances, although it has powerful ones, or about technique, although it is awesome, or about cinematography (although Caleb Deschanel paints with an artist's eye), or music (although John Debney supports the content without distracting from it)" (Chicago Sun-Times, 24 Feb 2004).

To cite an example of the film's excellence, the arrest in the garden-including the kiss of betrayal from Judas and the ensuing struggle in which the servant (Malchus) loses his ear, which Jesus restores-is cinematographically fantastic, extraordinarily beautiful with an appropriately heightened sense of the real drama unfolding. In the opinion of one critic, "aside from the film's firm scriptural foundation, Caleb Deschanel's cinematography is *The Passion's* greatest strength. His mastery of light and darkness, his careful framing of panoramic pain captures some of the most breathtaking religious imagery ever filmed" (Jeffrey Overstreet, "The Passion of the Christ," Film Forum, 26 Feb 04).

The acting, by and large, is also excellent throughout, especially by those playing Jesus and Mary. "Jim Caviezel's commitment to showing us a convincing Jesus Christ is unnerving in its intensity," and "Romanian actress Maia Morgenstern is a strong, believable, sympathetic Mary." Pontius Pilate is portrayed more sympathetically, in a more developed and complex way, than I would have expected. His "quiet intelligence, fear, insecurity, and sympathy for this innocent, accused man are a fascinating confusion as he interrogates Christ and weighs his options" (Jeffrey Overstreet, "The Passion of the Christ," Film Forum 26 Feb 04). In contrast, King Herod and the murderer, Barabbas, are both caricatured and a bit "over the top," in my opinion; they seem superficial and almost cartoonish, although I did not find this impression to be as

distracting the second time I saw the movie. The Jewish high priest, Caiaphas, is more realistic than Herod and Barabbas, but he is portrayed in a way that is somewhat flat, without much nuance or contour, which is perhaps a shame. The Roman soldiers are too exaggerated and stereotypical, in a very unflattering manner, and I wonder if that wasn't an attempt to "balance" the fears of anti-Semitism.

It is, perhaps, also worth noting that well-known author, Stephen King, describes *The Passion of the Christ* as "a pretty terrific film, full of emotion and commitment." He is appalled at those who would bring their children under twelve years of age to see the film, because he believes it to be far too violent for tender eyes and minds to comprehend. Notwithstanding that urgent caution, King writes, "the film Gibson has made is, if taken on its own artistic and religious terms, good-perhaps even great" (Stephen King, "The Passion of Alicia," *Entertainment Weekly* #756, 19 March 2004, page 72).

### **As a portrayal of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ**

As compared to other theatrical portrayals of our Lord and His Passion-in contrast to both "Passion plays" and various movies (new and old)-Mel Gibson has done admirably well. In fact, I would readily describe *The Passion of the Christ* as the best of those portrayals I have seen. Contrary to what I had somewhat expected, I found the acting, the action and the dialogue, to be refreshingly realistic and down-to-earth. There is very little that I could fault as overly dramatic or "theatrical." There are some theatrical elements, to be sure, but for the most part they are used effectively to convey some of the hidden realities. There are a few things overdone, but not many.

The use of Aramaic and Latin (the languages of the day), with English subtitles, actually works very well, and is effective in giving the movie a far more authentic sense and feel than most "Jesus movies." In this regard, a subtle turn is made when the "ignorant" Jesus of Nazareth (as Pilate had supposed) answers the governor in Latin, instead of Aramaic. It's a clever move, though most movie-goers won't catch the switch; those who recognize Latin will, but those relying on the subtitles will probably not even notice.

Perhaps my single greatest disappointment with the movie is the way in which Peter's denials and remorse are handled. These are an aspect of the Passion that I typically find most moving and compelling. In the movie, however, they come and go so fast that one hardly has time to digest what is happening. The way the denials are interposed with flashbacks to Peter's earlier promise-to follow Jesus, no matter what, to prison, or even to death-is pointed. It calls to mind the confirmation oath, which ought to make every Lutheran take notice! Likewise, Peter's remorse-upon catching Jesus' eye after swearing that he did not know the Man-is poignant; but, again, it's all over so quickly that it doesn't sink in the way it might have. It is also unfortunate that the movie provides no hint or indication of Peter's later restoration, as the Gospels do following the Resurrection (the movie does not deal with that time).

While Peter's role in the movie is somewhat disappointing, the way that Judas is portrayed, as he confronts the reality and horror of his sinful betrayal, is very effective, and disturbing precisely because it does so effectively convey the inner turmoil of guilt.

It is striking, the way in which his "pastors" fail him-that is to say, the called and ordained servants of the Word of God, the chief priests-when Judas comes to them and confesses his sin, that he has betrayed innocent blood, and he tries to return the thirty pieces of silver (presumably as a fruit of repentance). Instead of absolving Judas in the name of the Lord, on the basis and authority of their office and the Old Testament promises of God, they simply dismiss him as being of no concern, and they send him on his way in utter despair.

Judas is then hounded by a growing horde of children, whom some have described as "demonic." They are more aptly identified as "little satans," that is, "little accusers," because they represent the accusations of the devil and the terrifying guilt of the conscience, as Judas is convicted of his sin but without the comfort of the Gospel (which his "pastors" had refused to give him). These satanic children, as Judas perceives them, chase him out into the desert, where he hangs himself near the decaying corpse of what appears to be a donkey, literally swarming with flies-no doubt recalling the "lord of the flies," Beelzebul, another name for the devil.

Simon of Cyrene-the man enlisted to assist Jesus with His Cross-is portrayed as a rather complex character, in spite of the relatively brief description of him in Holy Scripture. Initially, he does not want to help, nor does he want to get involved (contrary to the Eighth Commandment). In the most ironic line of the movie, he protests that he is "an innocent man, being forced to carry the cross of a condemned criminal." But Who is really carrying the cross for whom? In fact, Jesus is the only truly Innocent One, who voluntarily carries the cross for all of us unrighteous. The contrast between appearance and reality, in this case, is a compelling use of poetic license.

The Simon of Cyrene character also gives voice, indirectly, to one weakness and drawback in the movie. "Almost there," he says as they near Golgotha, anticipating the sense that, by the time they get to the Cross, the crucifixion itself feels almost like a relief! As it is, the actual time that Jesus spends on the Cross in the movie is relatively short: only about ten minutes. All things considered, that is insufficient time to savor, or really even to suggest in a satisfactory way, the spiritual agony that He endured. The most powerful indication of that aspect of the Passion is articulated in the cry of dereliction: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" It comes late in the movie, but it remains every bit as powerful as it ever is.

It is true, as many have noted (with some dissatisfaction), that the Resurrection is only briefly included (exactly two hours into the movie). It is unmistakably present, however, and it is beautifully and powerfully presented. The body of our Lord at that point is absolutely magnificent, in utter contrast to what has previously been seen: flawless and glowing, like we might imagine it to have been in the Transfiguration, yet with the nail scars clearly visible (as the trophies of His Passion!). In fairness, it needs to be said that the Passion cantatas of Bach, and the Readings of the Passion during Holy Week, do not proceed to the Resurrection at all, but end with the burial of our Lord. The movie is The Passion, not the Easter story.

**As a confession of Mel Gibson's faith and piety, expressed within his vocation**

What Mel Gibson has done, simply stated, is what every Christian is called upon and given to do: he has confessed his Christian faith and piety within and through his vocation-in his case, as a filmmaker. Admittedly, the "stage" on which he works his craft has given him the opportunity to address his faithful witness to a worldwide audience of "neighbors," but this is essentially no different than when you serve your neighbors, and witness to them by your words and actions, within your own particular vocations in life.

The present realization of this film grew out of a period of time, more than a decade ago, when Gibson was driven to the verge of despair over various turmoil's in his life, then driven back to the Cross of Christ and the conservative (Roman Catholic) Christian faith and practice of his youth. He found genuine spiritual healing, for his body, mind and soul, especially in the Passion of his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And from that intensely personal experience and benefit, not only were his own Christian faith and life strengthened, but he envisioned-and has now brought to fruition (at his own expense, to the tune of \$25 million)-a cinematic portrayal of the Passion, in the tradition of the great classical paintings of the Crucifixion.

Says Gibson, "I went to the wounds of Christ in order to cure my wounds. . . . And when I did that, through reading and studying and meditating and praying, I began to see in my own mind what he really went through. . . . It was like giving birth: the story, the way I envisioned the suffering of Christ, got inside me and started to grow, and it reached a point where I just had to tell it, to get it out" (cited by David Neff, "The Passion of Mel Gibson," Christianity Today 48:3, March 2004, page 30).

Coupled with his deep sense of appreciation and gratitude for the saving Passion of Christ Jesus, Gibson has been acutely aware of his own sin and culpability for the Cross. As he has said publicly many times, it was not the Jews per se, but all of us-and each of us-who caused the death of Jesus. So also has Gibson confessed the responsibility of his own sin for the Passion: a confession made poignant by the filming of his own hand nailing Christ to the Cross. Yet, in contrast to his turmoil and despair in years past, Gibson's sense of culpability does not end in guilt, but moves to a humble confidence in the good and gracious will of God, for which the Christ, the beloved Son, allowed Himself to be handed over to His voluntary suffering and death. In other words, what Gibson's movie has to say, is that Christ did not simply die because of our sins, but He willingly and lovingly, graciously and freely, gave Himself up for us all, to save us from our sins.

This voluntary self-sacrifice of the Christ, for the redemption of the world, is the faith that Gibson confesses with his movie. It is the singular theological message of the film.

Roger Ebert has put it well: "'The Passion of the Christ,' more than any other film I can recall, depends upon theological considerations. . . . It is a personal message movie of the most radical kind, attempting to re-create events of personal urgency to Gibson. The filmmaker has put his artistry and fortune at the service of his conviction and belief, and that doesn't happen often. . . . It is a film about an idea. An idea that it is necessary to fully comprehend the Passion if Christianity is to make any sense. Gibson has communicated his idea with a single-minded urgency. . . . I myself am no longer religious in the sense that long-ago altar boy thought he should be, but I can respond to

the power of belief whether I agree or not, and when I find it in a film, I must respect it" (Chicago Sun-Times, 24 Feb 2004).

## **The Theological Confession of the Movie: "By His Stripes We Are Healed"**

The Passion of the Christ begins with plain white letters, on a black screen, quoting the Prophet Isaiah: "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; by His wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53). This Old Testament Word of the Lord is the interpretive lens, or key, with which to view and comprehend the entire movie. In this respect, Mel Gibson has provided a tremendous theological service, which Lutherans ought to be able to savor and appreciate.

One of the hallmarks and outstanding contributions of Dr. Martin Luther and Lutheran teaching is the "Theology of the Cross," which is simply to confess the doctrine of Christ Jesus and His holy Apostles (St. John and St. Paul in particular). This Theology of the Cross (in contrast to the world's "theology of glory") perceives that the one true God is most profoundly-and paradoxically-revealed in His voluntary suffering and death: in the Cross and Passion of the Christ, the incarnate Son of the living God. There is He actively and intimately present and powerful to save. There is the Hour of His Glory. There and then, as He is lifted up in death upon the Cross (and as He is now lifted up in the proclamation of His Cross), He draws people of all nations to Himself, as the Redeemer of the world and the Savior from sin.

Hands down, Mel Gibson's movie is one of the most gripping and (visually) articulate expressions, ever, of this same "Theology of the Cross." It is not simply an artistic and cinematic gem, but an exquisite theological visualization of this divine mystery and paradox, which is the beating heart and living soul of the Christian faith: that God was in Christ—all the fullness of the Godhead dwelling bodily—reconciling the world to Himself, in His own flesh, by His innocent suffering and sacrificial death.

The interpretive lens of Isaiah 53, with which The Passion begins, finds its focus in the ten-minute scourging at the center of the film. Jesus is handed over to be "chastised" (lashed and scourged) 55 minutes into the movie, and the next ten minutes are, unquestionably, the most "violent" portion of the film. It deliberately seems to go on forever (and beyond), so much so that many have objected and complained that it is "overdone." Such perceptions have missed the most significant point: it is by His wounds and stripes that we are healed. Speaking for myself, I will never again be able to hear or read or sing of those "stripes" without considering those very real wounds that crisscrossed our Lord's back under the Roman lashes and scourges. Yes, it is difficult to watch the movie's depiction of those stripes, and many will be brought to tears at the sight. Such tears are not the point, nor are they necessary. It is neither particularly good nor bad, whether you cry or not. The reality remains that you are healed by those wounds that Christ endured in your stead, for your sins, as you hear from the Prophet Isaiah every year. To be confronted with those stripes ought to assist in calling you to repentance and faith: to cry over your sins, yet to rejoice in the forgiveness of Christ, which He has chosen to obtain for you at such great cost to Himself.

To that purpose, it is especially helpful that, when the scourging is about to commence, and Jesus has been chained to the scourging post, kneeling in a posture of prayer (not unlike that of the garden), He calmly and quietly speaks: "My heart is ready, Father . . . My heart is ready." It is one of the clearest examples of the many ways in which the movie underscores that Jesus takes it all on willingly. Indeed, that is precisely why the scourging is so protracted, and so brutal. When the first "round" of it has been completed, and even the soldiers are winded from their effort to make the lashes severe, Jesus pulls Himself back up "into position," ready for more and worse. He is no "suicide bomber," nor a reckless martyr, but the atoning Sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, and, and such, He is determined to bear it all.

The sight of Jesus, then, following the scourging, is truly ghastly and horrific-precisely as it was, and as it should be understood, as foretold in Isaiah 52:14ff. Yet, it is precisely at that point and in that way, that He is the King, as the soldiers mockingly hail Him, and as Pilate paradoxically portrays Him (even while His own people are rejecting Him). To see Him standing there before the crowds, His entire body riddled with deep stripes and wounds, more bloody-red than fleshly-white, crowned in thorns and dressed in the scarlet-purple robe, is to be confronted by the fact that He is the King by the way and the means of His Cross and Passion. That is the Theology of the Cross. Likewise, again, it is the truly horrible visage of Jesus upon the Cross-the most graphic portrayal of His distorted features-with which He declares to the one repentant thief, "Amen, I tell you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Throughout the ordeal, as Jesus is "betrayed" and "handed over" from one person to another, it is clear that He remains always the One in control of Himself and, ultimately, of what is happening to Him. He is voluntarily handing Himself over, according to the good and gracious will of His Father (and by His own divine will), for us poor, miserable sinners, for the atonement and forgiveness of our sins. Roger Ebert, at least, has perceived the point: "Jesus was made man and came to Earth in order to suffer and die in reparation for our sins. No race, no man, no priest, no governor, no executioner killed Jesus; he died by God's will to fulfill his purpose, and with our sins we all killed him" (Chicago Sun-Times, 24 Feb 2004).

"At each stage of Jesus' torture, we are reminded that he prophesied these very events and that he willingly and courageously gave himself up to them. With every new stage in his anguish, we are reminded that these punishments come as a response to his teachings about love and turning the other cheek" (Jeffrey Overstreet, "The Passion of the Christ," Film Forum, 26 Feb 04). Thus, for example, as Jesus arrives at Golgotha and is being nailed to the Cross, flashbacks to His Sermon on the Mount (from St. Matthew) and His Good Shepherd Sermon (from St. John) interpret what is happening and why: "I Am the Good Shepherd. I lay down My life for the sheep. No one takes My life from Me. . . . I lay it down willingly. . . . This command is from My Father. . . ." These are surely some of the most important Words of Jesus in the Gospels, and incredibly significant for the movie. And again, "Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, forgive. . . ." Appropriately, the familiar prayer of Jesus, "Father, forgive them," is then repeated twice: first, as the soldiers are nailing Him to the Cross, and then again (as in the Gospels) while He is on the Cross.

There is little doubt, in all of this, as to Jesus' identity as the Son of God; although that may depend on the catechesis and faith of the viewer. It was there for those with ears to hear!

The trial of Jesus before the high priest affords an opportunity for one of the clearest assertions that He is the Son of God, the Messiah (Christ). When He is asked point blank about this by Caiaphas, Jesus answers pointedly, "I Am. . . ." (as in the Gospel accounts). What is once more so beautifully ironic and paradoxical is to see and hear Him make that confession with an already beaten and bloody appearance. (There is not much "violence" shown prior to that point in the movie, but it is clear that Jesus has already been beaten and mistreated, and His face is already bloody and scarred, His one eye swollen shut.) It is precisely in His suffering that He accomplishes His purpose as the Christ, the Son of God, as He had previously made clear to St. Peter and the other disciples (in St. Matthew 16).

Of course, our Savior is not only true God, the almighty and eternal Son of the Father, but also true and fully Man, born of the Virgin Mary. For that reason, I have been impressed and pleased by the way St. Mary is portrayed as the Mother of our Lord. (That maternal emphasis was no doubt accentuated by the fact that the actress playing Mary was pregnant during the filming of the movie.) One of the most touching and emotionally moving scenes is when Mary races to Jesus, at a point when He is portrayed as falling under the weight of His Cross. As she runs to Him, she recalls (as we see by way of movie flashbacks) racing to Him when he was a young Child, after He had fallen and scraped His knee. None of these events are recorded in Holy Scripture (neither do they contradict Scripture), but they make a salutary point concerning the true humanity of our Lord, and the maternal relationship of His true Mother. The scene brought home those realities to me, in a way that I have not otherwise found except in Luther's homily on the Nativity of our Lord. It choked me up and brought tears to my eyes, as I considered the perspective of a parent's heart to Jesus' Passion. It suggested a small sense of that great "sword" that pierced the soul of Mary, as Simeon had foretold (in St. Luke 2:34-35).

For all of that, even as dear Mary races to help her fallen Child-in this case, the fallen Man, Jesus, on His Way to the Cross-despite all appearances to the contrary, it is not Jesus who needs to be helped, but He is, in fact, in the process of accomplishing salvation for the world by His bitter suffering and bloody Passion. Thus, "I'm here," says Mary as she reaches Him, but He looks up, His face little more than a bloody pulp by this point, and He marvelously declares, "See, Mother, I make all things new." Again and again, there is this clear confession and portrayal of the Theology of the Cross. In like manner, once more, at the foot of the Cross, Mary understandably cries out: "flesh of my flesh, heart of my heart, my Son, let me die with You." But no, that is not to be. St. Mary is not a co-redeemer. She has her role, beautifully portrayed in this movie, as the human Mother of God, and she suffers the foretold piercing of her soul precisely as His Mother. He alone, however, is the Savior and Redeemer.

That Jesus is "the Seed of the Woman" (the Son of Mary) is particularly important to Gibson's vision of the Passion. For it is fair to say that, along with Isaiah 53, the movie is also heavily dependant upon Genesis 3:15-18 (the first promise of the Gospel): that the Seed of the Woman will bruise-and crush!-the head of the serpent and the seed of the

serpent (that is, the devil and his brood of vipers). The movie begins, therefore, in the Garden (of Gethsemane), not only because that is typically where the Passion might be considered to begin, but because the fall into sin began in the Garden (of Eden). Hence, there is a dramatic theatrical scene with a snake slithering out from under the devil in the Garden, as a powerful way of recalling that original temptation of Adam and Eve, the deadly consequence of which Jesus has come to undo by His faithfulness unto death. Accordingly, as Jesus turns from His prayer of agony, in firm resolve to drink the Cup of suffering and do His Father's will, He stomps His heel solidly upon the head of the serpent. What Mel Gibson's movie has here displayed and illustrated, is the same thing we confess and praise God for in the Lenten Proper Preface of the Holy Communion: that whence death arose, thence also life might rise again, and that he who once overcame by a tree (in the Garden of Eden) might likewise by a tree (the Cross) be overcome by Christ.

As the scourging stands squarely and prominently at the center of the movie, as its thematic focus, it parallels that opening scene in the garden. So it is that Satan makes his reappearance at that point in the movie, moving amongst the soldiers and the on-looker crowds, watching, we may well suppose, to see if Jesus will bear the full weight of the entire world's sin. It is also at that point that Satan is shown carrying a grotesque "baby," of sorts, in a mock negative of the familiar "Madonna and child." The devil himself—actually played by an actress—is portrayed as an androgynous creature, almost beautiful in an unnerving sort of way, but a distortion and perversion of God's goodness. Here, then, is the face-off between the Seed of the Woman (Jesus, the Son of Mary) with the devil and his seed (as in Genesis 3).

The climax of the face-off, and the victory of the Passion, is signified by the falling of "tear" from heaven (like the bomb in the Pearl Harbor movie), when Jesus gives up His Spirit and dies. That touch may have been a bit too theatrical, but it is effective, especially as it begins a storm that roars fully into life at the death of the Son of God. "All hell" is broken loose, so to speak, as sin, death and the devil are defeated by this atoning sacrificial death. Hence the anguished howl of Satan in his pit of hell. At the same time, above, an earthquake rocks the temple, splitting the curtain and opening the holy of holies, all of which is now replaced by the sacrificed Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world by His death.

The victory of the Cross and Passion is not only for some, but for all, including those who were directly involved in putting Jesus to death. What is noteworthy, both at the scourging (in particular) and also at the foot of the Cross, is that the soldiers are sprinkled with the blood of Christ; His blood covers them, the very ones who have been scourging Him without mercy. This is the visual and theological equivalent of His Words from the cross (repeated twice in the movie): "Father, forgive them."

The same thing, ironically, is true of those words spoken by the chief priests on behalf of the crowds of Jews crying out for Jesus' crucifixion: "His blood be upon us and on our children" (which remains in the movie, in Aramaic, but without any English subtitle, due to pressures from various groups concerned about the supposed "anti-Semitism" of the movie). The irony is that, while the crowds meant it as a matter of responsibility for Jesus' death, it stands within the Gospel (St. Matthew 27:25) as a confession that the blood of Christ was also shed for them—and for us all—and that His blood covers us from

sin and guilt and punishment and death. Not as a liability, but as the atonement and cleansing of all sinners (all of whom are responsible for the death of the Christ). This same point is echoed in the Acts of the Apostles, on Pentecost, when St. Peter calls the crowds there in Jerusalem to repentance and to Holy Baptism, because the promise is unto them and to their children (Acts 2:39)!

The movie beautifully illustrates in various ways that every drop of Jesus' blood is precious, and priceless beyond worth. There is, for example, the touching way in which the women are portrayed soaking up the blood of Jesus (the great pools of His blood which cover much of the courtyard) when the scourging has finally ended. And again, there is the way St. Mary kisses the feet of Jesus as He hangs on the cross, and she pulls away with her mouth and lips stained with His blood-not unlike the way in which the blood of Christ in the Holy Communion touches your lips. It is, indeed, the same holy, precious blood that permeates the waters of your Baptism, and that is poured out for you in the Holy Communion. I believe this movie has the potential to help Christians make that connection, hopefully with the realization that His blood is poured out for our benefit, and for the many, for the forgiveness of sins.

This important "sacramental" character of the Gospel is well conveyed in the movie, especially in the intersecting of the Lord's Supper with the crucifixion, and then with the pouring of the blood and water from the side of Christ. Indeed, the intersection of the crucifixion with flashbacks to the Lord's institution of His Holy Supper is highly profound. It should not be interpreted in terms of the Roman "sacrifice of the Mass," but in the terms of Jesus' own Words concerning His death and His Supper. For it is in the Supper that He interprets His sacrificial death ("given for you"), and in the Supper that He gives the fruits and benefits of His Cross to His disciples: to you, for the forgiveness of your sins. It is in that same context, from Maundy Thursday, that one of the flashbacks includes the Words of Jesus, there is "no greater love than for a man to lay down His life for His friends," and "you are My friends." This is tantamount to Luther's comment in the Small Catechism concerning the words, "for you," which invite and require each and every heart to believe the Gospel of forgiveness of sins.

When the Cross-with Jesus nailed to it-is finally raised (104 minutes into the movie), at that very point, there is a flashback to His giving of the Cup in His Supper, then back to the blood dripping from Jesus on the Cross. It is reminiscent of a beautiful painting, in which the holy angels collect the blood of Christ directly from His dripping wounds upon the cross into chalices. Again the point is made, that the very same blood He shed for you on the Cross, He now pours out for you, and for the many, for the forgiveness of sin, in the Holy Communion. That may be the best scene in the movie. A close second best would have to be when the soldier pierces the side of Jesus on the Cross, instead of breaking His legs, in order to make certain that He is dead. From His side, there flows a shower of blood and water that washes over Mary and John (representing the church) and also over the Roman soldier (indicative of the universal atonement). One could hardly find a more compelling picture of Holy Baptism!

Shortly thereafter, when Jesus is lovingly removed from the Cross, His body is cradled by Mary in the familiar pose of Michelangelo's "Pieta," from which she looks up, straight into the eyes of the audience, with her hand upturned in presentation of her crucified

Son to the world. In this, she is pictured as an icon of the Church, entrusted with the sacred mission of the Gospel to all the nations.

## Conclusion

The Sacramental overtones and connotations of The Passion, along with the artistic "Pieta" shot, invite the audience into the life of the Church, which is where the Passion must finally be received, understood, and embraced in faith. It really does require the regular hearing and catechesis of the Word of God. Especially because The Passion of the Christ functions in much the same way as an icon or a crucifix function, as an artistic expression that can only be truly appreciated and properly understood by faith, "which cometh by hearing the Word of Christ" (Romans 10).

Now, I should say, in contrast to those who have maintained that The Passion of the Christ is practically devoid of any dialogue, that there is actually a fair amount of verbatim Holy Scripture throughout much of the movie, especially through flashbacks to the teaching and ministry of Jesus. It is not even the quantity of such Words, so much as it is their placement in conjunction with various points in the Passion, which make them so powerful and effective in conveying the theological significance of the Cross. Nevertheless, I don't expect the movie to "convert" anyone, although the Word of the Gospel is there, through which the Holy Spirit (where and when it pleases Him) may work repentance and faith in those who see and hear the movie. It seems more likely to me that it may raise questions and pique curiosity in folks, which could (by the grace and Spirit of God) lead them to seek out a Christian church and pastor from which/whom to hear the Word of God preached and taught. It may, perhaps even more likely, help to rekindle the faith and piety of lapsed or "lukewarm" Christians; though no such benefits will happen apart from the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, I recommend The Passion of the Christ as good and worthwhile viewing for well catechized Lutherans. I won't be taking my younger children, but mature teenagers should not be prevented from seeing it. Just be sure to come to church, especially during Holy Week, in order to hear the Passion (as it is most properly intended), and to receive the blessed fruits of the Passion in the Sacrament of the Altar.

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