

Using Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* To Explore the Heart of Your Faith—A Discussion Starter

First United Methodist Church, Boulder, CO

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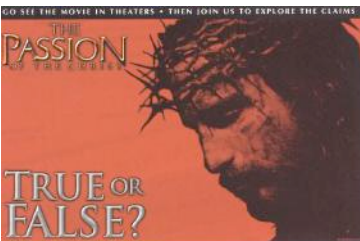
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Keith Thompson, Co-Pastor

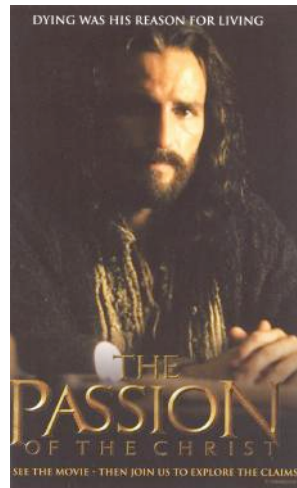
Here we go again! A new Jesus film—*The Passion of the Christ* by Mel Gibson—is causing heated controversy. Every film ever made about Jesus has caused some level of controversy. Yet the intensity of the responses to this one has captured the attention of people all over the world, and has provided a rare opportunity for everyone to examine and share the heart of his/her own faith in relation to those who see things from very different faith stances.

Yet there's been such a flood of information and opinion through every kind of media, that it's difficult to sort through it all and get a handle on the essential factors that are leading people to have such radically different responses to this film.

“What's all the fuss about anyway?” say many Christians who believe that this film is the greatest evangelistic tool to come along in some time. They see things like these two promotional cards for it from *Outreachmarketing.com* as right on target, and can



hardly believe that there are Christians who claim to have serious problems with this film.



On the other hand, many other Christians say, **“How is it possible in our post-Holocaust, post-Vatican II world for Christians not to see this kind of passion film as a harmful retrogression?”** It seems to ignore the hard-won lessons of the last 50 years on Christian-Jewish relations and the nature of the scriptures. Even some evangelicals are beginning to challenge long-held theories about the unity and infallibility of the gospels (presupposed by the card on the left) and about the meaning of Jesus' life being effectively reduced to his death (presupposed by the one on the right).

The Goals of this Discussion Starter

- To help people on all sides of this controversy better understand some of the most essential reasons why others disagree with them
- To encourage dialogue with people from other parts of the theological spectrum (Christian and others) as a means of reexamining the heart of one's own faith and growing spiritually

Getting to Some Essential Differences

In order to stimulate discussion, the next two pages contrast a few typical Christian responses to the film from different parts of the theological spectrum. Some conservative positions are found on page 2 and some liberal ones are on page 3. (It's helpful to place these pages side by side.)

Want to Go Deeper?

On page 4 there is a list of some of the key resources that you can use to learn more about the various positions mentioned here (numbers in text refer to these).

This Discussion Starter and other resources are available on our website.

My Personal Stance on the Film—Keith Thompson

I see the differences between Mel Gibson and myself as grounded in our quite different religious experiences, values and beliefs. My way of identifying my own position on the theological spectrum is that I am a postmodern, Wesleyan, evangelical liberal Christian. I see Gibson as a modern, pre-Vatican II, ultra-traditionalist Roman Catholic Christian. With respect to the film, I am basically in agreement with the liberal positions on page 3. Here are a few additional comments:

- I do believe this film arose out of Mel Gibson's personal, deeply moving religious experience of having his wounds healed by the wounds of Jesus (see 10, p. 35). It wasn't made just to generate controversy or make money. Also, as a film lover, I appreciate the excellence of his filmmaking and the acting in the film.
- However, his interpretation of this very sensitive subject strikes me as taking us backward toward some highly regrettable aspects of our past rather than forward toward what I believe God wants most from the

(Continued on page 4)

As you experienced the film (or reacted to what you've seen and heard about it), are you closer to these views of Christians from **the more conservative part of the theological spectrum** on the following questions? Or—— (see next page)

(The text boxes with bold borders are foundational positions that are so deeply held that they are usually discussion stoppers if questioned. In order for a spiritually fruitful dialogue that goes beyond surface issues to come from this controversy, these positions need to be on the table.)

A. Did it have a positive impact on the heart of your faith? Yes!

Many say that this film experience really helped them feel much more deeply the suffering that Jesus had to go through in order for their sins to be forgiven and for them to receive the gift of everlasting life. It has greatly increased their devotion to Jesus (see 10, p. 35). The heart of their faith is **what Jesus was able to accomplish** for them **with his death**; the essential parts of his life and teachings are related to the cross. How could any Christian have problems with this faith inspiring film?

B. Was its level of graphic violence really necessary? Yes!

The extreme violence was hard to take, but as Mel Gibson indicated, since our wounds (and the wounds of all humanity) are only really healed by the wounds of Jesus, the only Son of God, his wounds had to have been greater than any other human being could have possibly endured. It's the sacrificial blood of Jesus that heals (see 6), and it helps to show that for our sake he held none back. The extreme bloodiness of Jesus' actual passion, the "enormity of the blood sacrifice," as Gibson calls it, is essential; one should cherish it, not be repulsed by it (see 10, p. 35). Thus, it seems that Mel Gibson picked scenes from his sources based on what would add to sum total of Jesus' suffering, not to be anti-Semitic, as some critics have charged.

C. Did Jesus (God's Son) really have to suffer and die in order for God (his Father) to forgive our sins? Yes!

This doctrine of "substitutionary atonement" (see 6) has been the heart of the Christian faith from the very beginning, as shown in the New Testament, and God's holiness and justice could not have been satisfied without it (see Witherington in 1, and 11). Therefore, it was o.k. to frame and shape this entire interpretation of the passion story with many scenes proclaiming this view that are not in the gospel passion accounts themselves. The bottom line is that the only answers that really count to the question "Who killed Jesus?" are the theological ones—(a) all of us and (b) God. Jesus suffered and died as a **innocent victim** willing to take on himself the sins of all humanity and be punished for them by God in our place (a), and it was God who sent him specifically to do that mission which only he could accomplish (b).

D. Was it faithful to the New Testament gospels? Yes!

The basic elements of the story are taken directly from the 4 gospels. Other material from the long Roman Catholic devotional tradition of the Stations of the Cross and from the visions of two nuns (one from the 17th century and the other from the 19th century, see 6 and 8) are used to fill in the story in an entirely consistent way with the scriptures. Mel Gibson says, "(Critics) really don't have a problem with me if they have a problem with this film; they have a problem with the gospel, because it adheres pretty well to the gospel." (Reader's Digest, March 2004 and several T.V. interviews—see also 3.)

E. Was it historically accurate? Yes!

Since the Bible is the literal, infallible Word of God, Christians should believe that everything in it has to be historically accurate. Scripture is the final authority for Christians (see 3), its human authors were eye witnesses to the events described and were inspired by God's Holy Spirit. The 4 gospels may differ in a few minor details, but they are consistent on the basics. For Mel Gibson, one cannot really question the historicity of his portrait of Pilate arguing for the innocence of Jesus with the Jewish leaders, for example, without "denying the Bible" because it's in each gospel account in some form.

F. Are criticisms that this kind of passion film can help generate new waves of anti-Semitic hatred unfair? Yes!

As long as the basic story line comes directly from selections from the 4 gospels and only details are fleshed out from other sources that are consistent with it, there shouldn't be a problem (see 3). Of course, it's still a personal interpretation, as Gibson has said, but within the rights of any Christian to tell the story as he/she sees it (see 10). This is especially unfair because he has persistently denied that he is anti-Semitic and that he didn't intend his film to be so either. Moreover, since God and all of humanity are the ones really responsible for Jesus' suffering and death (C, above), any concern about the details of how the Jews and the Romans are portrayed is totally irrelevant. If anti-Semites don't get that, it's their fault.

As you experienced the film (or reacted to what you've seen and heard about it), are you closer to these views of Christians from **the more liberal part of the theological spectrum** on the following questions? Or— (see preceding page)

A. Did it have a positive impact on the heart of your faith? No!

Many say that this film left them pretty frustrated and spiritually empty. A key factor for them is that, except for a few brief flash backs, it focuses entirely on the last 12 hours of Jesus' life. Their most important saving religious experiences are **being touched and transformed** by God's radically surprising kind of love and justice **through Jesus' life and teachings**. The heart of their faith is not centered on the after-life but rather on a Christ-like way of life in this world empowered by God; turning ones back on it is living death (see 5).

B. Was its level of graphic violence really necessary? No!

The inner logic of what seems to be one of the main assumptions of the film—that the more physical suffering, the greater the sacrifice—is flawed and morbid (see Crossan in 1, and 2 and 9). This was not the central focus of interpretations of Jesus' passion in the first 1,000 years of Christianity, and still isn't in Eastern Christianity (see 2 and 9). It's ironic that Mel Gibson may be historically right about the brutality of crucifixion as he showed it (except for the scourging, which was beyond what any human being, including Jesus, could survive) and yet be so blind about why the gospels downplay it (see 2).

C. Did Jesus (God's Son) really have to suffer and die in order for God (his Father) to forgive our sins? No!

Compassion and forgiveness are essential parts of God's character; God doesn't require any sacrifice or death to stimulate it (see Crossan in 1, and 4). This is shown by Jesus' life and teachings, such as his forgiving people in God's name during his ministry and his subverting of conventional religious wisdom about God requiring punishment to satisfy divine justice with parables like the Prodigal Son. God didn't send Jesus to die for us but rather to bring us into an abundant way of life. Far from being central in the gospels, this atonement theory (only one among many—see Crossan in 1 and 15) didn't come into Western Christianity until the 11th century (see 2). Even some evangelical theologians are questioning its appropriateness for imaging a loving God. Also, to theologically assign responsibility to all humanity and God has been challenged as a diversion from Jesus' prophetic critique of all political/economic oppression throughout history (see 1 and 4). The main reason Jesus was "executed" was because of his non-violent, prophetic challenges to the political and economic oppression of his own Jewish people by the Roman empire and its Jewish collaborators. He was prepared to die for the Kingdom of God as a **martyr**. This is quite different from seeing him as an innocent victim of Jewish leaders who, for purely "religious" reasons, coerced the Romans to kill him (see 5).

D. Was it faithful to the New Testament gospels? No!

The question itself is flawed; it is impossible to be "faithful" in the strict sense to the passion in all 4 gospels, because they tell such different stories (see 12, 13, 15, 16). Anyone creating a film using segments of more than one gospel, including Mel Gibson, can be questioned about why he/she has chosen certain things and not others (see 12). Also, many of the extra-biblical sources used in this film have been used anachronistically to import a much later theory of salvation that is not in the biblical passion accounts themselves, and have amplified in dangerous ways the evil of Jewish leaders and the relative goodness of Pilate. What critics have a problem with is not the gospels, but Mel Gibson's interpretation of what they are.

E. Was it historically accurate? No!

The Word of God comes to us through the Bible in powerful, life transforming ways. However, the words of the Bible itself are not infallible. It is best understood on its own terms as God's truth for us as received and interpreted by the human, fallible authors in their unique contexts (see 8). The "anti-Judaism" seen in some gospels (which did help lead to Christian anti-Semitism in later times) comes from these later contexts of their authors, not from the time of Jesus. To assume that all biblical truth is historical truth is to impose an modern, alien criteria on it. Each of the 4 very different passion accounts is powerfully true for us, even though they cannot all be historically true (see 16). Yet, it is especially important to get as close to the historical truth as possible for these passion stories (see 13). The historicity of some gospel accounts of Pilate, the Jewish trial, and Jewish "crowds" have been questioned for many good reasons (see Crossan in 1, and 7 and 8 and 12).

F. Are criticisms that this kind of passion film can help generate new waves of anti-Semitic hatred unfair? No!

The long history of Christian anti-Semitic atrocities is grounded in the idea that the Jews as a people are "Christ killers." Passion dramas have inflamed that hatred by how they portray the Jews and the Romans of the time (see 14). Thus, regardless of one's "theological" position on Jesus death, one must always be especially sensitive to "historical and artistic" issues when creating a passion drama (see 12, pp. 72-81). Not to do so should bring forth severe criticism, as it has in this case. What's irrelevant from this perspective is determining whether a writer/director is or is not personally anti-Semitic.

Resources for Going Deeper

For the easiest next steps, there are many good articles in *The Passion* section of the *beliefnet.com* website.

Here are the ones I would recommend first:

1. *Scholarly Smackdown: 'The Passion'*—A liberal professor and a conservative professor debate Mel Gibson's movie, the Bible, theology and more, John Dominic Crossan and Ben Witherington III
2. *What Mel Missed*—There's a reason why the gospels don't dwell on the blood and gore of the crucifixion, Frederica Mathewes-Green
3. *You Can't Whitewash the Events of the Bible*—Mel Gibson's movie 'The Passion' is faithful to scripture, and that's why critics are angry, Darrell Bock
4. *Who Killed Jesus?* by John Dominic Crossan
5. *Something Between Cover-up and Censorship*, John Dominic Crossan
6. *Frequently Asked Questions About Mel Gibson's 'Passion'*

Also recommended first are these articles in other sources:

7. *Facts, Faith, and Film-Making: Jesus' Passion and Its Portrayal*, The Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations at Boston College, *bc.edu/csg*
8. *Who Really Killed Jesus? What History Teaches Us*, Jon Meacham, Newsweek cover story, 2/16/04
9. *The Meaning of Christ's Suffering*, Frederica Mathewes-Green, Books and Culture, March/April 2004 (an expansion of 2)
10. *The Passion of Mel Gibson—Why evangelicals are cheering a movie with profoundly Catholic sensibilities*, David Neff, Christianity Today, March 2004
11. *The Good News of God's Wrath—At the heart of the universe, there is a just and gracious God*, Peter Jensen, Christianity Today, March 2004

Some of the most important book-length resources that have informed my stance are:

12. *The Bible, the Jews and the Death of Jesus—A Collection of Catholic Documents*, U.S. Office of Catholic Bishops, *uscbb.org*
13. *Who Killed Jesus?—Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*, John Dominic Crossan
14. *Constantine's Sword—The Church and the Jews*, James Carroll
15. *The Challenge of Diversity—The Witness of Paul and the Gospels*, David Rhoads
16. *A Crucified Christ in Holy Week—Essays on the Four Gospel Passion Narratives*, Raymond E. Brown

(Continued from page 1) *My Personal Stance on the Film*—Keith Thompson

followers of Jesus today.

- I believe a good deal of the criticism of his film, including much of mine, would have been greatly reduced, if he would have just presented it as **his very personal witness of what Jesus' passion means to him, strongly shaped by his own highly selective choices from biblical and extra-biblical sources**. Unfortunately, he has chosen to describe it as faithful to the Gospels and historically accurate, implying that other interpretations can be easily "shown to be false" in a modern, absolutist sense. I react strongly to his unwillingness to deal seriously with criticism that comes from people with different, well thought out views of the gospels and their interpretation, and that they can be just as honestly witnessing to their experience of the guidance of God's spirit in their criticism as he is in the making of his film.
- I don't think it's fair to call Mel Gibson anti-Semitic. Theologically, he places the blame for Jesus' suffering and death on all of humanity, and he didn't intend for his film to bring any harm to the Jewish people.
- However, I do think it's fair to hold him responsible for the setback in Christian/Jewish relations that I think his film has caused. For me, the specific choices he made about what to select and what not to select from biblical and extra-biblical sources unconsciously resulted in highlighting their most anti-Jewish parts and can, therefore, fan the flames of anti-Semitism. To my knowledge, before starting this project he didn't seek out any views from the more moderate and liberal parts of the Christian or Jewish communities that could have helped him avoid these problems without having to give up the basic thrust of his interpretation. As a Christian, it saddens me that what first came to mind after seeing this film was Chagall's 1938 painting, *White Crucifixion* (right), with its powerful image of Jesus the Jew on his cross with the horrors of the long history of Russian Christian and Communist persecution of his fellow Jews swirling around him.

