

## **Should Christians Endorse / See Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*?**

Bill Vaughan 2/24/04

It seems the only question I'm being asked these days is, "Should Christians go see Mel Gibson's new movie *The Passion of the Christ*?"! That's an excellent question! Let me tell you what I know and then I'll tell you what I know about what I know.

First, the movie originates with Mel Gibson. It is co-written, financed (\$25Million), and produced by him also! Second, there are four sources for the movie: the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* by Anne Catherine Emmerich, *The Mystical City of God by St. Mary of Agreda*, and Gibson / his co-writer. Third, the movie portrays the last 12 hours of Jesus' life. This is the time of His crucifixion in Jerusalem. The movie includes flashbacks to his childhood, the Last Supper, etc. The movie is spoken in Aramaic, Greek, Hebrew (and some even say Latin!) with subtitles in English. Although it is considered excellent movie-making, it has earned an R-rating for its extreme violence. It opens this Wednesday, 2/25/04 (Ash Wednesday for Catholics). **I'll now tell you about what I know about these three areas: The Producer, The Sources and The Movie.**

**The Producer.** Mel Gibson is an ultra-conservative Catholic. He is pre-Vatican II. That is, he rejects the outcomes of Vatican II. Because of this he attends the Latin-only mass and does not participate in ecumenism. He is also a sede-vacantist. This means he believes the See of Peter is vacant, i.e. there is no legitimate Pope in Rome. For Mel Gibson, the only way to heaven is by being a Catholic like him. According to Mel himself, his Episcopalian wife of 24 years does not have eternal life. One other very interesting point that will segue us into the next section is that Gibson carries a relic of the venerable Anne Catherine Emmerich. She is a nun from the early 1800s. "Venerable" means she is in the process of becoming a saint. Carrying a relic is supposed to be a means of extra grace for Catholics. So, who is Anne Catherine Emmerich? To answer that, let me tell you about the sources of the movie.

**The Sources.** The New Testament Gospels are the backbone for the story line of the movie. BUT, Gibson and his co-writer have taken poetic license fill in the narrative details that God has not given us in Scripture and to add to the movie things like the character of Satan – an asexual person with serpents / snakes around him. But, most importantly, Gibson drew upon two other sources for the details of the movie that cannot be found in the Bible. The first of these is *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* by Anne Catherine Emmerich (notice: this is the same person whose relic he carries around).

Let me tell you the story. Gibson bought a library from someone at \$1 per book. He went to the shelf to pull down a book and as he pulled it, the cover of that book caught the cover of another book. That other book was Emmerich's. He calls this a divine incident. This book is a compilation of her detailed visions of the physical suffering of Christ. Emmerich was a nun who died in 1824. She had a lifetime of extreme visions of Christ's passions and of Mary's involvement in the suffering and sacrifice of her Son (she considered Mary a co-redemptrix and called her "Queen of the Martyrs"). Emmerich was also a stigmatic. A stigmatic is a Catholic

designation of a person of extreme spirituality who has been “supernaturally” granted to bear the wounds of Christ on their body. The wounds continually bleed and never heal (can you say demonic?). She bore the marks of the crown of thorns, the lance wound in the side, the nail marks on her hands and feet and had a cross on her chest (I don’t remember Christ having one of those!). She spent the last twelve years of her life in bed unable to eat regular food and only drank water and took communion. To be honest, I’d be having visions too if I ate like that! ☺ Her visions were recorded by an acquaintance and published in 1833. She’s nothing more than a Catholic mystic. **Here’s the key: Gibson says that this book was the inspiration for his movie and a key source.** Obviously, none of this material is biblical.

The second book source was *The Mystical City of God* by St. Mary of Agreda. Here are two partial quotes from Catholic book sites. “A...monumental 2,676-page, 4-vol. life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as seen in mystic vision by Venerable Mary of Agreda (1602-1665)...overflows with enthralling information about Our Lord and Our Lady, about the creation of the world, the meaning of the Apocalypse, Lucifer's rebellion, the location of Hell, the hidden life of Jesus, etc. Reveals that St. Joseph ate meat, but Our Lord and Our Lady seldom did. Makes Christ's hidden life really come alive. Acclaimed by Popes, cardinals and theologians, this is one of the greatest Catholic books ever!” “This can be called Our Lady's Autobiography because it was Mary herself who revealed it in mystic vision to its author - the Spanish Franciscan nun - Mother Mary of Jesus from Agreda. A spiritual classic which has been acclaimed by Popes, cardinals and theologians. ...Our Lady reveals that she never appeared older than 33; that she ate fruit, vegetables and fish, but no meat, that the very presence of the Christ Child cured the sick and exorcised demons; plus much, much more. "Just as I have told you that he who knows Me knows also My Father, so now I tell you that he who knows My Mother knows Me," - Vol. III page 765. Pope Innocent XI in 1686 was the first Holy Father to give approval to this work and on April 29, 1929, Pope Pius XI added his when he stated "We grant the apostolic benediction to all readers and promoters of the "Mystical City of God." Four volumes...2,676pp.” Again, not a biblical source.

Mel Gibson, himself, was a source. His theology has already been described and it is not Christian. Also remember his “theatrics.” This man is one of the most graphically violent entertainers in Hollywood today. What do these movies have in common: *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Patriot* and *Braveheart*? Answer: they are all extremely violent, high action movies where you check your brains at the door, not your guns. What kind of movie do you think you’re going to get from this toxic mixture of theology and theatrics? The answer is that you’re going to get a movie that focuses on the most gruesome, bloody, violent hours of Christ’s ENTIRE LIFE! You’re also going to get a movie where the co-star is Satan – the murderer from the beginning. The presence of Satan is the ONLY theology in the movie and the way he is written into the Script is not biblical. He appears as an asexual person in several scenes and is always there with serpents/snakes. Do you remember seeing this in the Bible? I don’t. The bottom line question is this: How much do you trust a Catholic, violent movie maker to create a biblically accurate movie with the right focus on Christ’s purpose on earth? Do you believe 1 Cor 2:14-15 is true?

If you put all of these sources together in a blender, what kind of movie madness do you think you’re going to get? The problem is that leading evangelical thinkers believe that you can

get something that is greater than the sum of the parts - something biblical that won't be spiritually harmful to the audience.

**The Movie versus the Gospel.** So, no, nothing greater can come out of the blender than what went in. Let's compare the movie with the gospel through a couple of questions.

**Does the movie focus on (1) a Movie death of Jesus or (2) the Message of the Death of Jesus? Answer: The movie focuses on a movie death of Jesus.** The movie is about how Christ died, not why Christ died. One of the biggest spiritual problems with the movie is that it provides NO SPIRITUAL CONTEXT (the second big problem is the non-biblical sourcing). In other words, the movie does not give the purpose for the atonement of Christ. It does not tell us why Jesus went to the cross. It doesn't tell us the glorious outcome of His victory over sin and death! The joy set before Him! The gift we now receive freely! The eternal difference! Jesus Christ goes to the cross and the audience is not told why. Also, the movie does not present the crucifixion as the predetermined plan of God. Many may think Jesus is a victim in this movie. However, God sent Jesus to the Cross (Acts 2:23). Christ gave His life on the cross (John 10:17-18), it wasn't taken from Him. And, Christ died PRIMARILY to satisfy God (Rom 3:25-26 "propitiation" which means "satisfaction" of God's righteousness). Yes, the Jews were guilty, the Romans were guilty, you and I were guilty but the idea, the plan, and execution of the plan (pun intended) originated with God before time began!

This movie is nothing more than R-rated violence and is not G-rated Gospel (pun intended again!). It is an extreme depiction of Roman death and not the extreme depiction of the wrath of God that Christ endured in death on our behalf. In all honesty, this movie only portrays a typical Roman execution that occurred tens of thousands of times in Roman history. Think about this. How many times have you given the gospel and focused 99% of your presentation on the physically violent death of Christ?! Rather: how many times have you given the gospel and focused 99% of your time on sin and the need for a Savior and the spiritual reasons Jesus Christ had to be that Savior?

Is the movie emotionally-focused or cognitively (thinking) – focused? Answer: The movie is emotionally-focused. The movie is entirely made to hit your emotions EXTREMELY HARD and give you nothing to think about spiritually. The biggest comment by everyone who sees it is that this movie is one of the most emotionally-charged movies ever seen – "you experience it, you don't watch it...it took me days to come down from the experience...still feeling it weeks later..." The tragedy is all those emotions and nowhere to land them! It would be better if they had an honest gospel presentation that led to EXTREME CONVICTION and they could land in the joy of a risen Savior! Unfortunately, this is exactly where the Christian-Lite, purposeless-driven church is going today. Stir the emotions with emotional worldly junk and then bait-and-switch them into Christianity! As the church becomes more like the world, this is the common ground they are finding – emotionalism. BUT – what is Christianity? It is cognitive. It takes thinking. Facts THEN feeling. Obey then biblical joy, peace, etc. (the real emotions come from deep within as given as a fruit of the Holy Spirit).

Do you know what the real irony of the movie is? Gibson majored on the minor stuff. No matter how gory and graphic and painful the physical death of Christ was, it does not even

compare to the immensity of the of the wrath of God that Christ endured in death for our sins! Gibson told the easy part! The real suffering was (1) God carrying out HIS WRATH ON JESUS until He was satisfied for all sin and (2) God turned His back on His Son - the only time in eternity that there was separation in the Trinity! I couldn't make a movie on the real suffering of Christ because I can't even fathom how great it was. I do know that the wages of sin is death and that anyone who does not accept Christ as Lord and Savior will spend ETERNITY SUFFERING IN HELL as payment for that sin. How do I even begin to fathom what Christ went through to pay the penalty for all those whom His blood saves? How do I fathom separation in the Trinity when John 1:1 tells us the Father and Son spent eternity past "face-to-face" in an intimate love relationship? I can't. Bottom line: Physical death is emotional. Dying for our sins is cognitive and convicting and goes right to the heart where it hurts for the right reasons – unto salvation.

**Is this movie theatre or theology? Answer: this movie is theatre.** The bottom line is: this movie adds to Scripture. Yes, the Gospels are the "backbone" of the plot line. BUT these mystical, visions books and Gibson's additions are the meat and flesh put on the bone. Remember what Scripture says about adding to Scripture: Revelation 22:18 "I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book." We often preach the gospels saying "I need a good Holy Spirit novelist to fill in the complete story with all the nuances of real life narrative." But, we don't go there ourselves and create a story that God chose not to give us. We focus on what God focused on – always and only! We never add to Scripture for any reason because of Revelation 22:18-19. The other reason we don't is the sufficiency of Scripture – we don't need to (2 Peter 1:3). God didn't say "wait for the movie!" Peter also told us that he had seen the transfiguration but that we had "the prophetic word made more sure" – that is, we are better off with the word of God than he was seeing the transfiguration (2 Peter 1:17-21).

In addition, the theology is incomplete because of the earlier discussion about the lack of a spiritual context to the movie. There is not enough gospel in this movie to save anyone. Gibson, himself, said he gave twelve hours to the suffering and only twelve seconds to the resurrection. And, this incomplete theology is Catholic theology! It is wrong theology! The movie purposefully ties Christ's sacrifice on the cross to the last supper by using flashbacks to go back and forth. What do Catholics believe? They believe that at the last supper, Jesus actually changed the bread and wine into His physical body and blood (called "transubstantiation"). They believe that this very same thing happens at communion at every mass ever said. Gibson said that the sacrifice at the altar in mass and the sacrifice of the cross are the same. The Catholic Jesus did not die ONCE for sin! He dies again and again and again and... They don't believe Hebrews 9 and Hebrews 10 that tell us that Christ's ONE-TIME sacrifice was sufficient and need never be repeated. No priest in the Temple ever sat down because the work was never done (hence, no chairs). But Christ sacrificed once and sat down. The work of the cross is finished. Also notice when the movie starts! Ash Wednesday (beginning of Lent). Lent comes from the Babylon mystery religions going all the way back to the tower of Babel! This is pure pagan religion.

The last consideration concerning theology is the Second commandment. Many are not going to this movie because the Second commandment says that we are to make no images of God. There is a debate about whether the purpose of this commandment goes beyond worship to include artistic representations of God. But, the fact is that Gibson intended this movie to be an act of worship. His are the hands of the Roman soldier who holds the nails while the Jesus character is nailed to the cross. He said he was doing an act of penance!

**Is this movie Entertainment or Evangelism? Answer: It is entertainment.**

Evangelism is entirely biblically-based. This movie is not. Evangelism has a message with a context. This movie does not. Evangelism has a complete message. This movie does not because it does not give the purpose of the death of Christ. Catholics and evangelicals alike will leave this movie assured in their theology. Evangelism confronts false gospels – Catholics shouldn't leave with any assurance!

This movie focuses on emotions as all Mel Gibson movies do. Evangelism moves from conviction unto salvation with a complete message of who Jesus Christ is and why he came to die. Gibson wanted to provide gruesome entertainment and apparently did so extremely well. Unfortunately, as said before, he majored on the minors. In his entertainment, he doesn't come close to the reality of the death of Christ and what really happened on that cross in terms of the major suffering when He took on the wrath of God against sin.

**With all this said, what is God's way?** God's way is the Book (i.e. the Bible) plus evangelism. His way is not this movie. Here are my recommendations. Some of these overlap and/or are corollaries to others, but I'm trying to cover all of the bases clearly!

1. Do not endorse the movie. **HOWEVER**, do not alienate unbelievers in your non-endorsement (Titus 3).
2. Do not encourage Christians to view the movie except for equipping for evangelism. Do not encourage unbelievers either – it is better they get the truth of Scripture from you 1-on-1.
3. Do not encourage for Christian edification. This is R-rated and most of us don't go to R-rated violent movies. Since all this portrays is a Roman-style execution without a context, it is just another violent movie.
4. Do not encourage new or immature believers to go for equipping. The extremely violent emotionalism may hurt them (1 John 2 :12-14 – where are they spiritually?). Only those spiritually strong can withstand the emotional attack.
5. In general, do not send young adults (since it is R-rated they have to be at least 13 to get in anyhow). If you believe there is a necessity for their equipping, see it yourself first (like we should for any questionable movie). Also, be sure you know why they must be equipped with this given the risks. Do they really even know their Scripture well enough to answer the questions that will arise from their peers?
6. Do not encourage those concerned about the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment to go see it. We are never to violate our consciences (1Cor 8,10; Rom 14).
7. If you do go to be equipped be ready for what you will see! Do not let yourself be emotionally manipulated. Know that this was the lesser suffering of Christ. Focus on that to keep perspective on how much greater the atoning death which incurred the wrath

of God was – the payment for sins through the wrath of God in death (not in the suffering up to death) and the separation from God.

8. Do deal with this movie. Do not run from it. God uses sin to draw people. This movie will cause questions and discussion. Wouldn't you rather people got biblical answers than worldly ones? God can use you!
9. Do not be surprised that you will be persecuted by the Christian Liberal / Lite crowd for your stand on this movie. Respond to them gently and biblically. Do not have a "holier-than-thou" attitude. Ask questions about their knowledge of this movie. Don't just tell them they are wrong. If they can't answer your questions, go to the Bible for answers!
10. Read the Following:
  - a. *Who Murdered Jesus?* John MacArthur
  - b. *The Gospel According to Jesus* John MacArthur
  - c. *The Gospel According to the Apostles* John MacArthur
  - d. *The Passion of Jesus Christ* John Piper (the 1<sup>st</sup> 5 chapters are available on the internet to download at [desiringGod.com](http://desiringGod.com))
11. Know the True, Full Gospel and EVANGELIZE!

Unfortunately, many evangelicals are cheering "Yeah, Mel!" instead of saying, "Hey, Mel, let me share the gospel with you!" This movie, *The Passion of the Christ* is not Christian, is not biblical, is not edifying and is dangerous. It plays to your emotions, bypasses the brain, and plays up the lesser suffering – the physical death rather than price Christ paid when He incurred the wrath of God for our sin. As a part of the body of Christ, we cannot endorse the movie. We cannot encourage the movie for any positive spiritual reason.

Finally, as is often the case with movies, the Book (the Bible) is much better. In this case the Bible is infinitely better. Of course, that was known long before the movie was ever conceived!

God bless,

Bill