

“Passion Movie”

By: Doug Warren

What do you think about Gibson’s film about Jesus?

Many folks are asking about the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. Of course, in asking a pastor most are not looking for a movie review, they have some level of curiosity/concern about one of the controversies that has been associated with this film. There are several, but for the sake of space I would like to address three: Is the film anti-Semitic? Is it too violent? Does it portray Jesus accurately?

I have noticed that people familiar with the account of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion in the Gospels often respond with bewilderment at the concern about anti-Semitism voiced concerning this movie. Let me start by saying that a great deal of the concern is justified, not so much by what is or isn’t in *The Passion*, but because of the tragic history of passion plays in general.

Before Christians can really discuss the legitimacy of the claim in this case, we must face the reality that great damage has been done using other dramatizations of the Passion. We must repent of the horrendous brutality that has been done to Jews by those claiming to be Christians. Before Jews can talk about this particular, they must first acknowledge that to characterize all of any class (passion plays included) based on the history of others of that class is to engage in the same kind of bigotry we *all* find so reprehensible.

The gospel accounts (and extra-biblical accounts for that matter) are all clear that there is plenty of blame to go around. Yes, the Sanhedrin (Jewish Temple Court) did hold a mockery of justice in sentencing Jesus to death. Yes, the Roman consul (Pilate) played by washing his hands, while at the same time ordering the scourging of a man he found to be innocent and then ultimately having him killed just to avoid political embarrassment. Yes, the Roman soldiers were unspeakably brutal in their mocking, beating, and murder of Jesus.

But the uncomfortable point of the gospel accounts that also in my mind comes through clearly in *The Passion* is that the horror that Jesus withstood was *my* fault. I have no room for blaming the Jews, or the Romans, or anyone else. He absolved all those involved in His execution as He prayed, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” The reason that Jesus underwent the scourging, mocking, and tortuous death is because *that is what I deserve*. Any application from the movie or the book that misses that central point is not a legitimate treatment.

This is of course closely related to the second question about the graphic violence in the film. Not only do we not want to take personal responsibility for Christ’s death, we don’t want to see the horror of the price that He paid. While the violence more than justifies the R-rating, it does little to represent the full extent of what Jesus suffered. When there

have been so many tepid portrayals of Christ, it is a necessary corrective to show the brutality for what it was.

What struck me as I watched the movie was that instead of feeling overwhelmed by shame for inflicting such wounds on my Savior, I was instead reminded of the redemptive power of His sacrifice. The foundation of the prophecy shown at the beginning of the film, “By His stripes we are healed” carried the hope and victory throughout the whole onslaught of gore. We simply cannot understand the good news of what He has done *for* us without staring squarely at the awful truth of what we have done *to* Him.

As to whether or not Gibson portrayed Jesus accurately, I have mixed feelings. Yes, he showed the central message of Christ’s sacrifice in a breath-taking work of art. Yes, he wonderfully captured some of the powerful humanity of Jesus that has been so lacking from many contemporary portraits. But no, he didn’t present the biblical Jesus completely. Some of the reasons for this have to do with the very medium of film itself; some have to do with Gibson taking the artistic license he did. Even using Aramaic, there are issues of translation going from the written word to the screen that fundamentally challenge a filmmaker’s ability to remain true to the Bible.

Another limiting factor is that the film is only presenting the Passion. Each of the gospels provide context for the Passion narrative. In any retelling of these events there are necessarily parts included and others that are excluded. Without sufficient introduction, it is very difficult for the depiction of the events to convey their meaning and significance. Gibson tried to compensate for this by using flashbacks and the effect was very moving, yet in the end, insufficient.

My prayer is that God would use this beautiful and yes, brutal portrait to move people beyond the picture to the reality of Jesus. No matter what you think of the movie, the last scene is the reality we must all grapple with. If this man is raised from the dead as He said that He would, then He really has conquered death. Then as now, there are those who mock Him and rage against Him and others who worship Him and adore Him as the only true God who died for our sins. What will you do?