

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

Introduction

Mel Gibson's movie about the last twelve hours of Christ's life has created quite a stir over the last several months. It has been criticized and praised from both within and without the Christian community. The secular media has brought a great deal of attention to it for its supposed anti-Semitic message. Many within the Christian community, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, have hailed the movie as a panacea for ailing spirituality and a great evangelistic tool to bring throngs of people into the kingdom of God. And still others, most notably those within the Reformed community, have argued that the movie is a violation of the second commandment. In this review, we will attempt to examine all sides of the issue. First, I will review the movie. Second, I will address whether the movie violates the second commandment. Third, and last, we will explore the question of whether it is a useful evangelistic tool. Let us therefore turn to the first matter for our consideration, namely a review of the movie.

A review of the movie

For several years Gibson was convicted about the need to tell others of the story of Christ, particularly of his crucifixion. Without a doubt, he has created the best cinematic portrayal of the crucifixion of Christ to date. Gibson has not repeated the saccharine versions of Christ's crucifixion that have dominated the cinematic landscape. There is no European-blond, blue-eyed, Jesus who speaks in a feigned British accent. Gibson has portrayed the life of Christ in an accurate representation and snap-shot of first-century Palestine. The only thing that is missing from the gritty portrayal of first century life is the smell. To capture the first century setting, in addition to the excellent attention to costume, make-up, and casting of Mediterranean actors, Gibson utilized the original languages of the time: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin. At many points in the movie it feels as though the viewer has stepped back into first century Jerusalem. Though, Gibson's motives for using the original languages were not entirely bound to his desire for realism. More will be said about this below. Cinematically, then, Gibson deserves high marks for creating a realistic historical picture of first century life. What about the biblical accuracy of the movie?

The biblical accuracy of the movie is something for which Gibson has drawn criticism both from within and without the Church. The secular media, in its efforts to discredit the movie, have drawn attention to any deviation Gibson takes from the Gospel accounts. To be sure, there are certainly deviations from the Scriptures. Like any cinematic rendition of a book, there are always deviations and use of artistic license to fill in gaps. Many film makers face the challenge of condensing a book, which has hundreds of pages, into two hours. In contrast, Gibson has to expand what takes only minutes to read into two hours, some sort of artistic additions are to be expected. The question one should ask is, "Has Gibson added to the events of Christ's crucifixion in a way that detracts or supports the Gospel narratives?" The answer to this question is mixed. There are some points that are thoughtful, such as when Mary, the mother of Jesus asks, "Why is this night not like every other?" This question comes from the Seder, the celebration of the

Passover. This is perhaps a legitimate cinematic addition, especially considering that Jesus is the true Passover Lamb (1 Cor 5.7). But there are other cinematic additions that are questionable and reveal Gibson's Roman Catholicism.

Viewers may or may not be aware that Gibson has filled in many of the gaps with material from a 19th century Roman Catholic mystic, Anne Catherine Emmerich. There are several scenes in the movie, such as the scourging of Jesus in the presence of Caiaphas, the high priest, that are most likely informed by Emmerich's supposed visions. Additionally, Roman Catholic doctrine colors many of the scenes. Throughout the movie Mary, the mother of Jesus, is called, "Mother," by Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and some of the disciples. In other words, they saw Christ's mother as a revered and important figure, something that is common to Roman Catholic doctrine but absent from the Scriptures. At one point, Jesus falls down and says, "I am your servant and the son of your handmaiden," words that the Gospels never attribute to the lips of Christ. The film also contains the "Fourteen Stations of the Cross," a Roman Catholic tradition that teaches that Christ: (1) was condemned to death, (2) given his cross, (3) falls for the first time, (4) meets Mary along the path to Golgotha, (5) meets Simon of Cyrene, (6) has his face wiped leaving an image of his face upon the towel, (7) falls a second time, (8) meets the women of Jerusalem, (9) falls a third time, (10) is stripped of his garments, (11) nailed to the cross, (12) dies on the cross, (13) is taken down from the cross, and (14) is raised from the dead. Now some of these "stations" simply reflect what the Gospels teach. At other stations, however, there is the clear veneration of Mary as well as the use of images or icons of Christ. For example, in one scene when Peter betrays Christ, he immediately seeks the forgiveness of Mary, and says, "Forgive me Mother, for I betrayed him three times." Given this data, like many movies that are made from books or historical events, the movie should have been prefaced with the disclaimer, "*Based* on a true story." These deviations are not the only problematic elements within the movie.

Throughout the movie we see the presence of the demonic, Satan and demons. To be sure, Satan appeared to Jesus in the Gospels (Luke 4; Matt 4) and demons littered the landscape of first century Palestine (Matt 8.28-34). So it is not the presence of demons or Satan within the movie that is problematic but when and where Gibson chooses to place them. Satan appears, for example, in the Garden of Gethsemane to tempt Christ away from being crucified. This does not appear in the Gospels. Rather, when Christ prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Gospels imply that Christ fears undergoing the wrath of God on the cross (Matt 26.40-46; cf. Phil 2.5-11; Heb 5.8). After Judas betrays Christ, Gibson has children who turn into demons, torment Judas, and drive him to utter despair. While this is within the realm of possibility, the Scriptures mention nothing about this. Lastly, after the crucifixion of Christ the picture cuts to a close-up of Satan's face as he screams, implying that he has been defeated. Yet, this gives the impression that the crucifixion was merely to defeat Satan and that it was not an atonement for sin. The only thing that reminds the viewer that the crucifixion is ultimately an atonement for sin is at the beginning of the movie when the screen flashes Isaiah 53.5: "But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed." Aside from this one verse, it is fair to say that the movie is virtually devoid of the message of the Gospel. More will be said about this below.

Overall, Gibson's movie is perhaps the best Jesus film to date given its gritty reality and attention to historical detail. The movie is, however, not a documentary. It is based on a true story but contains much that has been added. What has been added comes from Roman Catholic doctrine, which is contrary to Scripture. As a movie, I would give it a B+. As a proclamation of the Gospel, I would give it a D. I will address its Gospel value below when we examine the question of whether it is an effective evangelistic tool. For now, let us turn our attention to the second issue, namely, what about the second commandment?

What about the second commandment?

There have been many, particularly within the Reformed community, who have refused to see the movie based upon the second commandment: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them" (Exo 20.4-5). In addition, many have also appealed to the Westminster Standards in this regard (Lg. Cat. qq. 107-09). Let us first make sure we understand the nature of the second commandment. The second commandment involves two forbidden things: (1) making an image of the invisible God, and (2) worshipping that image. A prime example of the violation of the second command is Israel's worship of the golden calf (Exo 32). Given the context of the command, the movie does not appear to violate it. How so? We must consider that a film that represents a historical person is not a sin. A person should be able to make a film about Napoleon, George Washington, and yes, even Jesus. It is important that we protect the historical reality of the incarnation of Christ as a real person who walked the dusty roads of first century Palestine. We can too easily fall into the trap of the heresy of docetism, denying that Jesus was a real person. The docetists taught that Jesus only appeared to be human—they denied his incarnation. If someone had a camera in the first century and took a picture of Christ, they would have captured him on film. If Christ were to appear today, because he is fully human, he could be captured on film. The historicity of the incarnation, however, does not automatically mean that we are free from the dangers of violating the second command.

If one is able to watch the movie and leave the images of the film behind in the movie theater, then he is not guilty of violating the second command. If a person, however, carries the images of the movie into worship and thinks of those images of Christ while worshipping or taking the Lord's Supper, then he has violated the second command. As qq. 108-09 of the Larger Catechism explain, the second command is ultimately about maintaining the purity of worship. If we bring mental images of Jesus into worship, we may sin by worshipping an image rather than Christ. So, then, it depends how a person uses the movie that determines whether the second command has been violated. This brings us to our next question, namely, what about the movie as an evangelistic tool?

Is the movie a good evangelism tool?

One of the things that has marked the evangelical response to this movie has been a great enthusiasm for its potential as an evangelism tool. Numerous organizations and Christian media outlets have offered movie paraphernalia to promote the movie. The idea is that people will go see the movie and be overwhelmed by its powerful message. In the wake of this experience, churches can be ready to respond to the supposed flood of inquirers.

Some have even gone as far as to say that this movie will be the greatest evangelism tool since the advent of Christ himself. Others even encouraged their congregations not to attend worship services the weekend it was released but instead to attend the movie. Yet, there are significant problems with seeing this movie as a great tool for evangelism. As previously stated, there is little Gospel in the movie. Aside from the brief reference to Isaiah 53.5 at the beginning of the movie, the viewer is left wondering why the man depicted on screen was being tortured and then crucified. For Christian viewers with a knowledge of the Gospel, the story will make sense. For non-Christians, the story will undoubtedly make little sense. Bill O'Reilly, the noted conservative television commentator, reviewed the film and called its message, "A film about love and doing good to others, even those who are your enemies." While this is certainly a Christian maxim, it is not at all the Gospel. I also question the viability of the message of the Gospel in the arena of entertainment. There are two other significant problems with seeing this movie as a great tool for evangelism.

The Scriptures are quite clear that the message of the Gospel comes through preaching, not movies: "How are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" (Rom 10.14). Some might respond that Paul could not have possibly envisioned the powerful medium of motion picture. On the contrary, one must not forget that drama was a part of the first century culture. The Greeks had long been practicing the art of open theater. Why, if drama was so popular, would not Paul have said that the Gospel should be dramatized rather than preached? Preaching must embrace the whole counsel of God, the sinfulness of man, the justice and wrath of God, the need for atonement, and the sacrifice of Christ on behalf of those who place their faith in him. This is something that is virtually absent from the film. There is no explanation as to why Jesus is crucified. There is no explanation of the need for faith. There is no explanation of the concept of atonement. The absence of the Gospel is more evident when one considers what reasons Gibson gave for filming the picture in the original languages. Gibson wanted to present a visual picture of Christ's suffering apart from the use of language. He was borrowing from the Roman Catholic mass, which was originally spoken in Latin, something in which Gibson strongly believes in his own Roman Catholicism. He argues that though a person does not understand the mass in Latin, he still is able to perceive what is occurring. Likewise, he wanted to portray the crucifixion in a manner that would transcend language. Again, Paul states: "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom 10.17). Now some might argue that this point is invalid because Gibson elected to employ subtitles. True. Yet, I challenge viewers to scour the script for one clear statement of the Gospel. There is still one last matter that is problematic for the movie as a tool for evangelism.

In Paul's own ministry he sought to offer the Gospel for free (1 Cor 9.18). This was not necessary, as he had right to payment. Indeed, Paul elsewhere reminds Timothy that elders who preach should be paid for the labors (1 Tim 5.17). Yet, Gibson's movie has done far better than taking care of his financial needs. While he is to be commended for being willing to front \$30 million of his own money to make this film, it appears as though the movie will earn ten times that in box office receipts in this country alone. It could well be the highest grossing movie ever with its international release. There is also all of the movie-associated products such as "The Passion" coffee table books and

miniature replicas of the nails that were driven into Christ's hands. If Gibson has made a movie, then as an entrepreneur he has every right to profit from an investment. If Gibson has set about to propagate the Gospel, then one should ask, What will happen to what might become \$1 billion in profits? To whom will this money go? Profiteering is at odds with the Gospel. The Gospel is free.

Conclusion

When we consider Gibson's movie one must decide what he hopes to gain from it. In other words, is it a movie based on a true story that gives us a window into what Christ's suffering might have been like? Or, is it a motion picture rendition of the Gospel? As a movie, it is well done. As a message of the Gospel, it is a failure. For the person who goes to see it like any other historical docu-drama, it is worth the ticket price. For the one who goes hoping to capture a glimpse of Christ, it is sin. What determines how the movie is viewed? The conscience of the person sitting in the seat. Whatever is not of faith is sin (Rom 14.23).