"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." John 20:29

Mel Gibson’s The Passion of The Christ has brought the sufferings of Jesus right into the media spotlight and countless thousands of cinema-goers have been brought face to face with the agony of the crucifixion. How should we respond to it?

Let me state a position and then try and spend the rest of this article defending it: the film might possibly have evangelistic potential but is useless for evangelical spirituality.

In other words, it might be worth seeing it to be prepared if many of your non-Christian friends see it; but if the film had never been made, Christians would have suffered no loss whatsoever and we do not need it to enrich our relationship with Christ in any way. Perhaps this seems a very obvious point to make; however, in some circles the film has been hailed as a ‘life-changing’ moment for evangelical Christians. I want to be clear that actually what I’m most critical of is not so much the film itself but the reaction of evangelical Christians to it. The film has had a massive impact on sections of (American) evangelical spirituality, or at least revealed the existing spirituality, and it is this I want to think about. This not a review of the film as such but rather an attempt to think critically about the two issues of spirituality and evangelism in the light of the film.

1. The Passion and evangelical spirituality

What do I mean by ‘spirituality’? Louis Bouyer suggests that whereas Christian dogma or theology refers to the objects of belief (God, Christ, the Spirit, the cross, and other central tenets of the Christian faith), spirituality is related to the reactions which these objects arouse in the religious consciousness. In other words, an evangelical spirituality is concerned with the way evangelicals respond to God, Christ, the Spirit, the cross, and the way in which evangelicals express that response. The point emphasised by Bouyer is that a dogmatic or systematic theology must precede and thus shape spirituality - a spiritual theology must respond to a true understanding of all the central objects of belief. Of course a key reality in the postmodern world is that the reverse happens: spirituality begins to shape our systematic theology. In other words, people start from an experience of God and use this to conceptualise their beliefs about God.

My suggestion is that some evangelical reactions to The Passion are examples of how a powerful emotional experience can obscure important theological questions about the person and work of Christ. The word ‘experience’ has been central in a lot of the hype surrounding the film. In the USA, one expectant Christian cinema-goer was interviewed in the queue by The Daily Telegraph: ‘I’m expecting a world-changing experience’, said Cindy Hawkswell. And this is exactly what it has been for many. The same Telegraph article told us about Don Stover who was unable to speak for a time due to sobbing so much after the film. Decision, a magazine published by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, reports how many pastors and un-churched viewers have responded along the same lines: ‘The film was a powerful experience. I will never be the same again. It has changed my life.’ Sections of the American Christian media suggest that stories like these have been replicated wherever the film is seen and what I want to ask is whether these sorts of experiences are reflections of a truly
evangelical spirituality. My argument is that the film does not actually afford any kind of ‘world-changing’ experience that it is not possible to have from a proper understanding of the Bible. This film is not in any way needed to generate genuine experience of God and it has the potential to create very misleading experience. Why do I say this?

(i) The death of Jesus is an interpreted event

At root here is the issue of what shapes experience in spirituality and the role images should play in it. One of the more worrying aspects of evangelical reaction to The Passion is the shift away from a spirituality of the Word, something which has characterised evangelical spirituality at its best throughout the centuries.

In his recent book, Hearing God’s Words: Exploring Biblical Spirituality, Peter Adam refers to what Jacques Ellul calls ‘the humiliation of the word’ - today image is everything and words have been humbled, reduced to being puffs of insignificant air. Similarly Os Guiness has written:

_We are part of the generation in which the image has triumphed over the word, when the visual is dominant over the verbal and where entertainment drowns out exposition. We may go so far as to claim that we live in an age of the image which is also the age of anti-word and potentially is the age of the lie._

Why might it be the age of the lie? One reason could simply be that images need interpretation to render their true meaning. They obviously contain some meaning as a bare image, but they cannot tell us their full significance and therefore cannot tell us the full truth. For example, Susan Sontag says about photography: ‘Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy. Only that which narrows can make us understand’ (my emphasis). This is the significance of the Bible: it contains words from God in narratives about God, and words from God in narratives about us, the world, and God’s actions in the world. Words interpret reality and tell us what it really means.

Within a biblical framework, the death of Jesus with all its horrendous suffering and agony is not an event with an automatically self-evident meaning. The death of Jesus needs interpretation to tell us what it really means. My basic point here is that the model of revelation offered in the Bible is both word and act - God acts and then also speaks to tell us the meaning of the action. Sometimes the words of the individuals interpret their own actions; sometimes in a narrative the narrator comments to interpret the action. The big question about The Passion is: do we lose some of the interpretation provided by the whole Bible and the Gospels that are needed to explain the images? I think we do - and quite drastically. My over-riding impression at the end of the film was one of great uncertainty as to why Jesus actually died, simply because so many of the narratives and words used to make sense of the death of Jesus are absent.

It’s important to be clear that there is interpretation in the film; this varies from Isaiah 53:5 on the screen at the start, the depiction of the Devil as an androgynous being visible only to Christ and his mother, and an array of ‘flash-backs’ (probably Gibson’s main interpretive device) to earlier moments in Christ’s life. But evangelical theology would want to ask questions both about the correct-ness of these individual interpretations (in my opinion they range from being helpful to very misleading), and about the sufficiency and clarity of the overall interpretation given. In both of these regards, evangelical Christians have to reckon with the major interpretive influence on the film of Gibson’s strongly Roman Catholic theology. This has been well documented both by Gibson himself and various other sources. The point here is that Gibson is clearly aiming to interpret the event in line with his theology and this means that we need to be clear what we are responding to emotionally. I would argue that we are being asked to respond to an event being interpreted in ways that are not in line with the way the cross is presented and interpreted in the Gospels. So for instance Rick Warren of Saddleback church says: ‘In a culture where visual imagery is the main language for many, [this film] is the perfect post-modern evangelistic tool. It doesn’t preach; it just tells the story in an unsanitized and authentic way’. On two counts this is theologically naïve. It firstly suggests that images are self-interpreting and meaningful when in reality they are not, they need to be interpreted; and secondly it does not seem to reckon with or raise any questions about the particular way Gibson has interpreted the story. This assumes that the Gospel narratives as we have them in our Bibles are not preaching to us, ‘they just tell the story’ - I would argue that the Gospel narratives are preaching to us. Similarly, Gibson is trying to preach to us in The Passion and we need to realise this.

Over against the use of images in spiritual devotion, evangelical spirituality has classically been a spirituality of the Word. This has not been an arbitrary decision but a theological one:
we hold God to be a speaking God who has used words to reveal himself and to explain his actions in his world. Even here though a Word-based spirituality is not an end itself but is rather the means to the end of having a gospel-spirituality - in other words, our experience of God must be an experience of God and his grace as we encounter it in the gospel. We’re not meant to ‘experience the Bible’ as if it is some kind of mystical book; rather we’re meant to experience God through the Bible. And this is precisely why words matter - they tell us what the gospel actually is and point us to the source of a true knowledge of God. For this reason the stress in the New Testament is on the ‘message (literally ‘word’) of the cross’ (1 Corinthians 1:18). What the gospel holds out to the world is not an image of the cross but a word, a message, which explains what the cross means.

This emphasis has its roots in the way that the apostle’s own direct visual experience of Jesus was in time to give way to the trustworthy and reliable apostolic testimony about Jesus. Because they saw him, we can know him - and it is not necessary for us to see him to know him. This is the meaning of Jesus’ words to Thomas ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’ (John 20:29). Although Thomas is granted personal sight of the risen Christ he had been told by the other disciples ‘We have seen the Lord!’ (20:25) and the point of Jesus’ words is that that should have been sufficient for Thomas because one day it is all the world will have: the testimony about Jesus by people who saw him and heard him. Jesus’ words to Thomas point to the day when his followers would no longer have direct access to a ‘visible’ Jesus and in so doing these words actually elevate a ‘textual’ Jesus, the Jesus of apostolic testimony, as sufficient and worthy of belief. For this reason, evangelical spirituality is Word-based spirituality because only through this Word can we have access to Christ and his gospel.

(ii) The death of Jesus provides salvation from God’s wrath

The point of my argument above is to raise a question against whether a film can actually penetrate to the heart of the message of the cross and I have tried to raise some cautions against assuming it can. Here my point is to question the particular way The Passion interprets the cross and whether this interpretation is in line with evangelical theology and its spirituality. I want to suggest that a film of this kind with lengthy scourging scenes and explicit violence, intended to draw out the nature of the suffering Christ experienced, runs the risk of presenting a deficient theology of the cross. The extensive focus on the physical sufferings of the cross exposes the film to the risk of presenting what has been called the ‘moral influence’ theory of the cross, often associated with Peter Abelard (1079-1142). This view holds that the atoning value of the cross lies in its demonstration of God’s love. The power of the cross is seen not so much in its objective achievement (averting God’s wrath from sinful humanity) but in its subjective inspiration and thus moral influence (as we see how much Christ suffered and thus how much God loves us we are moved to change our attitudes and actions). Gibson himself has expressed at least some of this thinking in his rationale for making the film, albeit combined with Catholic emphases:

> Life is hard and we all get wounded by it. I was no exception. I went to the wounds of Christ to cure my wounds. And when I did that - through reading, studying, meditating and praying - I began to see what He really went through. I began to understand it as I never had before, even though I had heard the story so many times. It was the sacrifice - seeing how much Jesus suffered, not for His own sake, but for my sake. If He loved me that much, how could I not have hope in Him? My wounds were healed by His wounds; I had to tell the story of those wounds.

The moral influence view errs most seriously by the fact that it does not in itself explain just how the cross displays and demonstrates God’s love. What is there in the cross that reveals love? The cross can only really be an act of love if in his death and suffering Christ performs a saving action. Jumping off a building while shouting to my wife ‘I love you - let me show you how much’ is not an act of love but of lunacy, unless my death benefits her in some way. And the biblical portrayal of the cross is of Jesus’ death providing rescue from hell by his dying to satisfy God’s wrath and bear the penalty for sin in our place.

I am not suggesting that the cross is not an act of love. It is vital to stress that the Bible presents the cross in a variety of ways and the problem with the moral influence view is not so much what it affirms but what it excludes. J. I. Packer points out how there have been three main interpretations of the cross in church history: firstly, the account which sees the cross as having its effect entirely on men by revealing God’s love (moral influence); secondly, the account which sees Christ’s death as having its effect primarily on hostile spiritual forces; and thirdly, the account which holds that Christ’s death had its effect first on God, whose wrath was thereby satisfied, and only because it had this effect did it also reveal God’s love and overthrow dark powers. He comments: ‘The third type of account denies nothing asserted by the other two views save their assumption that they are complete.’ The moral influence
view has also tended historically to confuse the effects of the cross by neglecting the
significance of the subject of the cross. The glory of the atonement lies in the fact that it is the
God-Man who pays for sin and this is what secures the efficacy of the cross: it is God in Christ
who takes our place and who is therefore uniquely qualified to mediate between God and
man. In The Passion I could see little or no indications which explicitly revealed Jesus to be
both God and man, and the fact that the person of Christ is effectively rendered subservient to
the work of Christ is a serious deficiency.

My criticism of the way the film portrays Jesus’ death is that it is not a complete explanation,
and therefore a potentially misleading explanation. The film majors on physical suffering as a
revelation of love but in and of itself tremendous suffering and physical torture is not a sign of
love. It can, however, be extremely moving - especially when portrayed with the very best that
cinematic art has to offer - and this means that the film runs the risk of causing us to be
moved simply at the horrific images of Christ’s suffering. My point here is that this is all the
camera can show us. It cannot penetrate the objective achievement of the cross: it cannot
show us the Father who turns his face away, it cannot show us Jesus’ grasp of the cup of
God’s wrath that he drained in his dying, it cannot show us the horror of the Son’s separation
from the Father as sin is paid for. We need to be aware that the camera can be an enemy not a
friend - it can obscure reality.

The Passion runs the risk of making us locate our emotional engagement with the cross more
in the sufferings of the cross than the achievement of the cross - in short, we will engage with
what we can see (the suffering), not with what we can’t (the achievement). The film intends
this to be the point of engagement precisely because the scourging and sufferings are
invested with immense theological significance in Catholicism. For instance, commenting on
the scene in the film, A Guide to The Passion explains:

The scourging of Jesus is not something we should turn away from or avoid; it is a
powerful reality we should meditate on. One fruitful way is by praying the Rosary,
which is a meditation on the life of Christ. This fruitful prayer is divided into twenty
“mysteries.” The sorrowful mysteries focus on key events in the Passion of Jesus
… Praying these mysteries will open your heart to experiencing the profound
meaning of Christ’s Passion and help you apply it to your life.

It is beside the point to argue that of course many un-churched or non-Catholic viewers will be
oblivious to the significance of the scene in Catholic theology, and hence the film still has real
value in exposing them to the reality of Christ’s death. Whether we know the intended
significance of the scenes we’re watching or not, we are still being asked to respond
emotionally to an event being portrayed out of step with the way the Bible portrays the death
of Jesus and hence to a misleading representation of its meaning. To argue that a scourging
would actually have been like this and all the film is doing is making us realise it is irrelevant -
the Gospel writers knew what it would have been like but chose not to describe it and we
need to ask why they didn’t. The particular interpretation of the scourging in the film is
strongly Catholic with Jesus heroically standing after one flogging to endure another one, as if
there is value and efficacy in a particularly prolonged and violent scourging.

The fact is that whereas evangelical spirituality focuses on the death of Christ, this film majors
on the sufferings of Christ. Although evangelical theology of course embraces the exemplarist
aspects of the cross and Christ’s sufferings (John 13:12-17; Philippians 2:5-11; 1 Peter 2:18-
25), it has not delineated certain moments of Christ’s passion as separate stages of devotion.
Indeed, it has tended to stress the unity of the cross-resurrection-ascension as being part of
one salvific act which pays for sin, triumphs over death, announces victory and ensures
Jesus’ exaltation to glory at the Father’s right hand. This means that the shape of the
Christian life (spirituality) is different in evangelicalism. Rather than looking back to the
detailed agonies of the cross and drawing out meaning from them individually, evangelical
theology has followed the biblical stress on the completed event (Hebrews 10:11-14) and
finds this to be the source of our joy and gratitude to God, as well as our model of patience in
suffering and self-abasement in service. Developing the different ‘stages of the cross’ has led
Catholic theology to value images as a means of visualising the stages, whereas evangelical
theology holds that they are wholly unnecessary. As J. I. Packer says: ‘The use of a crucifix
as an aid to prayer has encouraged people to equate devotion with brooding over Christ’s
sufferings; it has made them morbid about the spiritual value of physical pain, and it has kept
them from knowledge of the risen Saviour.’

The true meaning of the cross and its objective achievement is not clearly portrayed in The
Passion and I would argue this makes the kind of experience it generates potentially very
misleading. It exposes the vast gulf between evangelical theology and Catholic theology and
the difference between their respective spiritualities. It is easy to see why Catholic spirituality
would embrace a film like this. Evangelical theology would seriously question whether we
should even be making a film at all, and we should be unashamed in saying that evangelical spirituality is enhanced not one bit as the final credits roll. However, if the film offers nothing to evangelical Christians in terms of spirituality does it at least afford us a unique opportunity for evangelism?

2. The Passion and evangelism

My opinion here is that any evangelistic potential lies not so much in the film itself but simply in the fact that something as mainstream as The Passion necessarily generates discussion and debate, and we will do well to be ready and informed to answer questions. It may well mean that conversations about Christ and the gospel which otherwise would be very difficult to initiate are now easy to introduce and I am sure the film will provide many opportunities. However, let me make two points here.

Firstly, we need to be aware that the evangelistic value of the film in and of itself is extremely low, simply because of the excessive violence and the lack of proper interpretation given to the story. On the day the film was released in the UK, I read four separate newspaper reviews and not one expressed any proper awareness of why Jesus died, with the reviews ranging from great appreciation of cinematic art to cynicism and outright bewilderment. One reviewer wrote that the film ‘is difficult to understand as narrative and that isn’t just because it’s in Latin and Aramaic. Gibson is so busy preaching to the converted that he forgets to address the questions that might pop up in the minds of a sceptical audience not steeped in the Gospels.’ Of course Gibson himself may never have intended the film for sceptics, but the point is that we need to be aware of this and be rather reticent about hoping the film will have some kind of ‘effect’ on people who simply don’t understand the story. I don’t think we should be at all surprised if some see the film and think that Christians are even weirder than they thought they were.

Secondly, I think this means that for evangelical Christians to regard the film as ‘one of the greatest evangelistic opportunities for two thousand years’ is a serious misjudgment which again says more about the type of theology, spirituality and approach to evangelism that dominates so much of our thinking. Brian McClaren comments on the particular evangelical sub-culture that approaches evangelism in this way:

Modern American Christians can be trusted to bounce and bound like golden retrievers from one silver-bullet “outreach opportunity” to the next-seeking single source shortcuts to complete our mission, which we hope to finish as soon as possible, I guess so we can all get to heaven so the world and its troubles are left behind. Maybe it’s a boxed set of books and videos, mass rallies, radio/TV/satellites, the Internet, PowerPoint, or seeker services. Or else it’s adult contemporary praise music, electing Republicans, or a new booklet or tract. Maybe it’s candles! Or a new model (take your pick from traditional-modern, contemporary-modern, or postmodern-modern) for “doing church.” Or a new film.

I’m obviously not against churches thinking clearly and creatively about the film and how they can best respond to it as something which may create an opening for the gospel. This seems to simply be part and parcel of our calling and our need to show that the gospel connects with the contemporary world and can engage with the culture, whether it’s a religious film, a brilliant novel, or a dramatic news story. And some things at different times in culture will provide more opportunities than others. I’m all for tracts and booklets and other thoughtful devices which may use the film to explain the gospel. What I’m worried about is, firstly, the film being regarded as an adequate explanation of the gospel in itself, and secondly an approach to evangelism divorced from the hard work of long haul relationships in the hope of a quick fix which will suddenly work wonders and miraculously remove objections to the gospel.

In conclusion, I would want to suggest that The Passion, at least in America, has revealed a profound malaise in the evangelical soul by exposing a spirituality that is drifting further and further away from its classical moorings. It shows that evangelical understanding of the cross is weak enough to be happy with a broadly moral influence conception mixed with strong Catholic emphases, and that evangelical spirituality is sufficiently non-Word based to feel it has been immeasurably enhanced by a visual medium. In time The Passion will simply become cinematic history, as even the very best films do, and perhaps I may be greatly over-reacting to seek to analyse what it shows of the evangelical world. On the other hand, perhaps at least some of our response to cultural waves like this shows that if we haven’t lost the heart of biblical Christianity we’re at least heading in that direction.

Endnotes
even greater psychological resilience. Losing My Religion. In the interests of full disclosure, I’ll admit I’ve had this post in my drafts folder for some time now. As always, standard caveats apply with regard to my

be the de-converts’ personality and psychological state prior to losing their religion. If they were more extraverted and had adequate psychological resources, losing their faith seemed to be an opportunity for growth and

Psychology of Religion and Spirituality is among the first to investigate this question systematically and over time. The findings, which are focused on Protestant Christians, paint a complex picture. A key factor seemed to

A firm atheist, on the other hand, might see the potential positives – perhaps the “deconvertâ€

B. McLaren, Passionate - but Not for Mel’s movie

Of course, this is not the only possible interpretation. Some critics suggest that Gibson simply has a penchant for using violence to entertain and has a good idea of how a hero should behave. This view probably has merit. However, I have simply tried to take Gibson at face value as his public comments about his motivations have had an overwhelming religious bent.


I have only touched on one or two aspects of the film’s Catholicism. But it is extremely pervasive and therefore stunning to read evangelical analysis which regards the film as a pretty accurate representation of the Gospel narratives! See A Guide to The Passion for

Carson, The Gagging of God, 557


Decision, March 2004, 8. See too the (largely) enthusiastic and extensive coverage of the film by Christianity Today. In an e-newsletter on 16 March 2004, Melody Pugh states in the editorial: ‘As I’ve been reading about the movie and talking with many whom I love and respect, I’m encouraged by the number of people who have found the movie a powerful and enduring spiritual experience’ (www.christianitytoday.com).

P. Adam, Hearing God’s Word: Exploring Biblical Spirituality (Leicester: Apollos, 2003), 139


See for instance A Guide to The Passion: 100 Questions About ‘The Passion of The Christ’ (Caterham: Catholic Exchange, 2004). This is a popular level evangelistic book from a Roman Catholic perspective which explains much of the Catholic emphases in the film. For an evangelical perspective on the film’s Catholic theology, with extensive quotes from Mel Gibson, see Andrew J. Webb, ‘Five Reasons Not To Go See The Passion of The Christ’ (www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?567). Although Mel Gibson represents a particular ‘strand’ within Roman Catholicism (one which rejects Vatican II), I will refer to the film’s Catholicism in general terms as there seems to be very little about the film that is unacceptable to post-Vatican II Catholics.


See the helpful discussion in Carson, The Gagging of God, 566-569

John Stott, The Cross of Christ (Leicester; IVP, 1986), 217

Decision, March 2004, 8


Stott, Cross of Christ, 133-163

There are further theological objections which could be levelled. Reformed theology has articulated the efficacy of the atonement in terms of Christ’s passive obedience in willingly going to the cross, and his active obedience in righteously fulfilling the demands of the law in his life. Of course, it could be objected that, after all, the film is called The Passion and simply cannot provide a totally comprehensive picture! This is a fair point; however, my argument is concerned with the evangelical reaction which has viewed it as comprehensive.

For a helpful brief treatment of the objective achievement(s) of the cross see John Piper, The Passion of Jesus Christ (Illinois: Crossway, 2004). Although this book does not mention the film it has clearly been produced to coincide with it as a way of explaining the cross, but it is not really clear whether the book is aimed at Christians or non-Christians. My own opinion is that it is much more suitable for Christians.

A Guide to The Passion, 37

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Christopher Tooke, Daily Mail, 26 March, 2004, 53


B. McLaren, Passionate - but Not for Mel’s movie
policy on posts about religion, politics, and socioeconomics. I don't delve into the particulars of these subjects, but I will dissect how they coincide with intersexual dynamics. I remember hearing a very well known evangelical leader tell a story about how his wife freaked out and started smashing all their dishes. What was his point? That she did this because he had been neglecting her. I think this article begins to broach the periphery of the minefield that religion and race is to the manosphere. Take a spin over at Le Chateau… going on for years… Loading