

Is Mel Gibson's Movie Okay for Christians?

By Dr. Shelton Smith

In my mail today (February 12), I received a letter from a sincere, well-intentioned brother in Melbourne, Florida. His letter and my response to it are given here.

To the Editor:

You have missed the boat. God is moving in *The Passion of the Christ*. You encouraged people not to see the movie. If Jesus is being preached to all nations (like He has never been preached before), then how dare you tell people not to go see it?

Media drives our society. We are out of the media, but we live with it and communicate with it. It's relevant to our culture. Because of its relevancy, it has the potential to be a powerful tool for God's kingdom. Our congregation is using *The Passion* to evangelize the unchurched in our area. We have bought out the theater for five showings.

Peter knew how to reach the people at the day of Pentecost. He spoke to the Jewish population by connecting Jesus with the prophecies of the Old Testament. We now have a movie that preaches Jesus that can connect to our culture. I will gladly use it for God's kingdom.

I encourage you to change your view.

R. M.

My dear friend,

Thank you for your letter! Your expressed opinion is always welcome, but your rationale is apparently unresearched and, in my opinion, unacceptable.

As a matter of principle, I do not encourage folks to go to Hollywood's theaters for any reason. No matter how good the popcorn and cotton candy, it is not a place with which Christians should cultivate acquaintance.

When you stand in line to get in, the passersby have no idea which movie you are going to attend. Your presence there lends your influence to Hollywood. That, my brother, is a short-term motive with a long-term negative influence. I want my family and my Christian friends to view the theater as off-limits, just like they do the tavern and the dance hall.

Now as to Mel Gibson and his film, let me add some comments and documentation to see if we can get a clear picture of what's happening with it.

Dr. Larry Rogers from Jonesboro, Arkansas wrote:

I wanted to pass along a copy of this interview of Mel Gibson in Australia in case you had not seen it. Of course, as you know, when he says, "There is no salvation for those outside the Church," he is talking about the Catholic Church. It amazes me that any Bible believer would want to see a "Christian" movie made by someone that believes only Catholics can be saved. Yet many, many so-called conservative pastors, Baptists included, are renting theaters and encouraging people to go see it. You addressed this issue a little back in November 2003. How about giving it another dressing down?

So here is the report from MSNBC on the Australian interview.

Mel Gibson has come under fire for being hard on Jews in his film *The Passion of the Christ*—but apparently, he feels that Protestants are also doomed to damnation. In fact, it looks like Gibson, a conservative Catholic, believes that his Episcopalian wife could be going to Hell.

Gibson was interviewed by the *Herald Sun* in Australia, and the reporter asked the star if Protestants are denied eternal salvation. "There is no salvation for those outside the Church," Gibson replied. "I believe it."

He elaborated: "Put it this way. My wife is a saint. She's a much better person than I am. Honestly. She's, like, Episcopalian, Church of England. She prays, she believes in God, she knows Jesus, she believes in that stuff. And it's just not fair if she doesn't make it—she's better than I am. But that is a pronouncement from the chair. I go with it."

I also received an assessment of this movie from David Cloud of Fundamental Baptist Information Service in Michigan:

After a private showing, Billy Graham praised it. Mission America Coalition plans to use the movie for evangelism. Campus Crusade is promoting it. Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in southern California purchased 18,000 tickets. The Evangelical Free Church of Naperville, Illinois purchased more than 1,000. Two members of Wheaton Bible Church in Wheaton, Illinois have offered to buy out two screenings of the movie at a local theater. After Gibson showed part of the movie to a convention of the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship, he received a standing ovation. Afterward, the daughter of the organization's president laid hands on Gibson and asked Jesus to "bind Satan, bind the press, we ask You, Lord" (Peter Boyer, "The Jesus War," *The New Yorker*, 9/15/03). *Worship Leader* magazine for February 2004 offers a free guide to Gibson's movie and says, "There has never been a film like it! Powerful, life-changing, an unprecedented opportunity for evangelism and discipleship." Robert Schuller of the Crystal Cathedral was given a private showing and afterward proclaimed, "It's not your dream; this is God's dream. He gave it to you because He knew you wouldn't throw it away. Trust Him."... Ted Haggard, president of the National

Evangelical Association, called Gibson “the Michelangelo of this generation.” The Catholic League purchased 1,200 tickets at \$9.75 apiece and will make them available to members for \$5. The film was shown to members of the Vatican Secretariat of State, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and all of them expressed unanimous appreciation and approval.

A positive review of the movie is making the rounds via e-mail under the name “Paul Harvey’s Comments on *The Passion*,” but it was actually written by Roman Catholic apologist Keith Fournier.

Gibson belongs to a traditionalist Catholic group that performs the mass in Latin, abstains from meat on Fridays, eschews ecumenism and [is characterized by] other such things that were changed at the Vatican II Council in the 1960s. Gibson built his own Catholic chapel, called Holy Family, near his California home. During the filming, Gibson attended a Catholic mass every morning with the misguided desire “to be squeaky clean.” The script was translated into Aramaic and Latin by Jesuit priest William Fulco.

When asked by a Protestant interviewer if someone can be saved apart from the Roman Catholic Church, Gibson replied, “There is no salvation for those outside the Church” (*The New Yorker*, 9/15/03)....

The movie is not based solely on the Bible but also on the visions of Roman Catholic nun-mystics Ste. Anne Catherine Emmerich and Mary of Agreda.

Of the visions of Emmerich, Gibson said, “She supplied me with stuff I never would have thought of” (*The New Yorker*, 9/15/03).

Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824) was a German nun....During the last twelve years of her life, she allegedly ate no food except the wafer of the Catholic mass. Her visions on the life of Christ were published in 1824 under the title *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*. They are still in print and were consulted by Gibson. An advertisement for Emmerich’s *Life of the Virgin Mary* says, “This book is filled with unusual, saintly descriptions that are not recorded in the Gospel story—descriptions that supplement and illustrate the Biblical narrative....” Thus, these alleged visions go beyond the Bible. According to Emmerich’s visions, Protestants also go to purgatory, but they suffer more than Catholics because no one prays for them or offers masses for them. She taught that it is more holy to pray for souls in purgatory than for sinners who are still alive. Her deceptive visions on the suffering of Christ describe His scourging and crucifixion in great detail, giving many “facts” which do not appear in Scripture. For example, she claimed that Christ “quivered and writhed like a poor worm” and that He “cried in a suppressed voice, and a clear, sweet-sounding wailing” as He was being beaten....

Mary of Agreda (1602–1665) was also a Catholic nun and visionary mystic....She was given to trances and even claimed that she could leave her body and teach people in foreign lands. Her book *The Mystical City of God* is about Mary. Like the visions of Anne Catherine Emmerich, those of Mary of Agreda go far beyond the Bible. For example, she claimed that though Joseph ate meat, Jesus and Mary seldom did.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Gibson’s film contains errors when judged by the biblical account. For example, after Christ’s arrest and as He is being escorted to the high priest’s residence, He is beaten, knocked down and thrown off a bridge. After Christ is whipped, Mary gets down on her knees and wipes up the blood. Mary is shown assisting Jesus on the way to the cross, with Jesus telling her, “Behold, I make all things new.”

Jim Caviezel, who plays Jesus in the Gibson film, is also a staunch Roman Catholic. *He prayed to St. Genesis of Arles and St. Anthony of Padua for help in his acting career.* He has visited Medjugorje to witness the site where Mary allegedly appeared to six young people. *One of the things that Mary allegedly told them is that the pope “should consider himself as the father of all people and not only the Christians.”* Caviezel said, *“This film is something that I believe was made by Mary for her Son”....* Caviezel also said that his goal with the movie is to “bring mankind back together.” *Caviezel said that he was given “a piece of the true cross,” which he kept with him all of the time during the filming of the movie.* He also had relics of “Padre Pio, St. Anthony of Padoua, Ste. Maria Goretti, and Saint Denisius, the Patron saint of Actors.” *He prayed the rosary to Mary every day.*

...The Jesus in Mel Gibson’s movie is depicted in the typical fashion with long hair, whereas the Bible is clear that Jesus would not have worn long hair (1 Cor. 11:14). Gibson got his inspiration for the longhaired Jesus from the Shroud of Turin. He attempted to re-create the face depicted on the shroud.

So, dear friend, let me urge you to rethink your position on this. It is right to do all we can do to win people to Christ, but it is wrong to distort scriptural facts, no matter how well intentioned the motive.

Furthermore, we are never wise when we compromise our presentation by our associations and our methods. We’ve also noticed that no matter how big the crowds or how many “decisions” come out of a compromised platform, when the dust settles, the results are typically very little.

Personal soul winning and preaching the unvarnished truth of God’s Word still work for those who are willing to work them.

Let me say in conclusion that I believe there is legitimate reason for concern anytime

- (1) there is a close tie with Catholicism;
- (2) that Billy Graham, Rick Warren, Robert Schuller, the Vatican, the Full Gospel Businessmen’s Fellowship and the National Association of Evangelicals all agree.

Call me what you will, but I believe there is sufficient cause to sound the alarm and advise folks to steer clear of this whole ado. ■