

Jesus Christ in the Movies

*A Biblical and Reformed Response to Mel Gibson's
"The Passion of the Christ"*

by

Rev. Rodney Kleyn

This is a transcript of a Public Lecture given on March 26, 2004,
in response to Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*.

Rev. Kleyn is the pastor of Trinity Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan.

Audio copies of this lecture, as well as additional transcripts
are available by contacting the church.

Trinity Protestant Reformed Church
3385 Van Buren St.
Hudsonville, MI, USA, 49426
Phone: (616) 669 7024

You can also email us at trinityprc@iserv.net

Visit us online at www.trinityprc.org

On February 25, 2004, Ash Wednesday on the Roman Catholic Church calendar, the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, directed by Mel Gibson a staunch Roman Catholic, was released. This movie has become a block buster. The \$27 million project brought in more than \$200 million within 12 days of its release.

The liberal media has criticized the movie for its supposedly antisemitic (or anti-jewish) tone. In defense, Protestants and Catholic leaders have endorsed this movie. Not only has the Pope commented "It is as it was," but prominent protestant leaders like James Dobson, Billy Graham, Greg Laurie, Chuck Swindoll, Lee Strobel, Rick Warren and others have also promoted it with comments such as, "(It is) a film that must be seen" (Dobson), "a brilliant, biblical masterpiece" (Warren) "factually accurate," "a true representation of Jesus," and "close to the Scriptures."

The movie has been promoted as an evangelical tool. This was Gibson's intent, "I hope this film has the power to evangelize," and many protestant leaders have followed this lead, commenting "I believe *The Passion of the Christ* may well be one of the most powerful evangelistic tools of the last 100 years" (Laurie) and "*The Passion* will stun audiences and create an incredible appetite for people to know more about Jesus. I urge Christians to invite their spiritually seeking friends to see this movie with them" (Strobel). One Roman Catholic source said, "It is the best evangelization opportunity we've had since the actual death of Jesus" (Lisa Wheeler, Catholic Exchange). Churches have bought out movie theaters and transplanted their worship services to the theater, hoping to draw crowds and evangelize. One church bought as many as 18,000 tickets at seven theaters.¹

The question we face tonight is, What do we make of all this?

How should the serious-minded, Bible-believing, Christian respond? What should a Protestant, who traces his Christian roots back to the Reformation of the 16-17th centuries think of this movie? What does the Bible have to say?

I am not going to answer these questions by giving a detailed review of the movie -- I have not seen the movie and will not -- but by answering a more generic and more fundamental question or topic, "Jesus Christ in the Movies." What does Scripture have to say about this? When I have answered this question, I will say a few things about the recent movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, based on the large number of reviews that I have read.

It is my intention to show that the depicting of Jesus in a movie is blasphemy, and that the recent *Passion* movie ought therefore to be condemned and avoided by Protestant Christians.

Before I do this, though, I want to say a few things about the purpose of this lecture. Perhaps there are some here who have seen the movie and liked it, or who have come to this lecture because they do not like what our churches have said about this in the last month. I want to say two things to you.

1) I have made this lecture especially for you. Not because I want to be right, and want to show you that you are wrong, but because I want to show you what the Bible says, and what historic Protestant Christianity has said about this, with the hope and prayer that God will help you to see it as well. And, I want to do this in such a way that you understand the true passion of Christ, and where the proper understanding of that true passion is to be found.

2) My concern tonight is God's glory. The big questions are not, Is the movie antisemitic? or Is the movie historically and biblically accurate? or even Will the movie convert the masses? But the big question is, What does God and his word have to say about this, and what does a movie like this do to

¹Much more of what has been said by Christian leaders can be found on the internet at web-sites such as www.passion-movie.net/promote/comments.html

the biblical gospel set forth in the Scriptures?

It saddens me that I must do this. The modern church and modern Christianity are in a sad state of affairs, and this grieves me. One reviewer is right when he says that the movie *The Passion of the Christ* and its popularity are indicative of the "Poverty of the church." Not only are many ignorant of what the Scriptures have to say about such a thing as a movie on Christ, but many are ignorant of the true meaning of Christ's passion because they do not hear of it in the preaching, and so they look to a movie to discover its meaning. Doctrine, that is what Scripture teaches, has taken a back seat to feelings and emotions and experience.

It is wrong to portray the Person and Passion of Christ

The first thing I want to say in answer to the question of Jesus in the movies is that, based on the biblical teaching of the second commandment, all physical portrayals of Jesus are wrong, and that therefore the portrayal of Jesus by an actor in a movie is wrong.

The second commandment, as recorded in Exodus 20:4-5 is, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, nor the likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth below, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them." God further explains this commandment in Deuteronomy 4:15ff by saying, "Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire; Lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image. . ."

What is forbidden? Simply this, the making of any image as a representation of God. Why? Because we do not know what God looks like – "ye saw no similitude." God is not physical but spiritual (John 4:24) and so cannot be represented by images. Any image created by man as a depiction of God comes from the imagination of man and not from God, and so is "will-worship."

But now the question is raised, "But Jesus was a man; mayn't we represent him?" The answer is that Jesus was more than a man; He was and is the eternal Son of God who took to himself a human nature and body, which human nature is now glorified and different from the earthly. He is the "express image of the Father" (Hebrews 1:3). Because of this, we cannot make an image of Christ.

For one thing, no man alive knows what that body looked like so any re-creation of him comes again from man's imagination. But more, to create an image of Jesus is to limit Him to His human nature and to separate his human and divine natures. One of the reasons that Israel might not create images of God in the Old Testament was that God is infinite (Psalm 145:3) and that any representation of God limits him, does not express who God is in all His being (Isaiah 40:12-27).

To make an image of Jesus Christ does the same to Him. The New Testament has something to say about this in 2 Corinthians 5:16 when it says that those who knew Jesus Christ in the flesh (his disciples) do not know him that way anymore. To make an image of him is to limit him to his earthly human nature and to steal his divinity from him.

This is not a new theological question. This issue was dealt with very early on in the history of the church. In A.D. 451 the council of Chalcedon condemned the heresy of Nestorianism which divides the human and divine natures of Christ. Later, a council held in 753 affirmed what Chalcedon said and applied it to the use of images. This council said,

If any person shall divide the human nature, united to the person of God and the Word; and, having it only in the imagination of his mind, shall therefore attempt to paint the same in an image; let him be holden accursed. If any person shall divide Christ, being but one, into two persons. . . let him be accursed. If any person shall paint in an image the human nature, being

deified by the uniting thereof to God the Word; separating the same as it were from the Godhead assumed and deified; let him be holden as accursed.²

Of course, history shows us that the church soon departed from this. But, the protestant reformers returned to this biblical teaching. John Calvin says, "Every figurative representation of God contradicts his being" (Institutes, 1.11.2). He then applies this to images of Christ when he says that Christ is presented to man not by images, but by preaching (1.11.7).

The confessional statements of the Protestant churches, (i.e. all the churches that left the Roman Catholic Churches), show that this was the accepted and adopted position of the Reformation churches. Explaining the Second Commandment, the Westminster Confession says that this commandment forbids "the making any representation of God, of all or any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever" (Larger Catechism, Q&A 109).

Just as it is wrong to portray the Person of Christ in an image, so it is wrong to portray the Passion of Christ. By passion we mean the "suffering" of Christ. That is what the title of the movie means. To portray the passion of Christ visually is to do the same to his passion as to his person, namely, it is to separate his physical suffering from his spiritual suffering. It is true that Christ suffered immense physical suffering, and the Scriptures even have much to say about this. But, to make a movie of this suffering is to limit his suffering to what can be seen with the eye. Again, this limits Christ.

Christ's suffering was that he suffered at God's hand. He suffered the just wrath of God against the sins of his people. His suffering was unique. The uniqueness of his suffering was not in what he suffered physically. Many others have gone through similar crucifixion experiences, and worse torture. But, Scripture shows that his real suffering was anguish of soul under the heavy hand of God's wrath against sin. In Mark 15:33-34 we have the heart of his suffering expressed this way, "And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabbachthani? Which is being interpreted, My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

These verses show that when it was time for Christ to really suffer under His wrath God said to the world, "Thus far with the physical suffering, thus far with what man will do to Christ, now I will inflict a suffering on him far worse" and then God turned the lights out on the world and poured out all His wrath on Christ, and made Christ suffer all the bitterness of hell, so that He cried out "My God, My God, Why hast thou forsaken me?" Christ the Son, in his suffering, sent to hell and forsaken of the Father. This can never be portrayed in a moving picture. Christ's suffering points to the depth and cost of the atonement for sins, which He achieved for His people in his once-for-all-time sacrifice. Any message which portrays less than this great cost diminishes the gospel. The moving picture because all it can portray is the physical, limits his suffering to the physical thus taking from his true suffering.

The reformers of the 16-17th century recognized this as well. It was because they recognized that Christ's suffering cannot and may not be expressed in a physical image that crucifixes, that is crosses bearing a physical representation of the suffering Christ, were condemned and destroyed. The recent passion movie is nothing other than, as one author puts it, an "animated crucifix."³

It is Wrong to use Images of Christ as Teaching Tools

²Quoted from J. Marcellus Kik, *Pictures of Christ*, www.geocities.com/error_exposed/pictures

³See the helpful article by A.J. Webb, *Five Reasons not to go see the Passion of Christ*, www.providencepca.com/essays/passion.html.

Not only is it wrong to portray in physical image the person and passion of Christ, but the second commandment also condemns using these with the purpose of teaching.

In the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, the actor, James Caviezel, is an image of Christ. The film maker intends to give a physical representation of Christ in his suffering with the purpose of teaching the masses about Christ and His suffering. This is true as well of the other movies which portray Jesus, such as *The Jesus Film*, or more recently a movie called *The Gospel of John*. In these films the physical portrayal of Christ is intended to teach. They are not intended for entertainment, but are promoted as "great tools for evangelism." This is a sin against the second commandment.

The Heidelberg Catechism, another reformation creed, (the one that belongs to the Dutch Reformed tradition and is the creed of every church with "Reformed" in its name), tells us that it is wrong to use images to teach. After saying that the second commandment requires "That we in no wise represent God by images, nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in His word" because "God neither can nor may be represented by any means," the catechism asks, But may not images be tolerated in the churches as books to the laity? (By "books to the laity" is meant teaching tools for the common folk who perhaps could not understand all the Latin liturgy and could not read). This reformed creed answers, "No, for we must not pretend to be wiser than God, who will have his people taught, not by dumb images, but by the lively preaching of His word."

Here, many Protestant churches today have become very pragmatic. Someone who is pragmatic believes that an action is right or wrong based on its results. Churches today have ignored what God's Word, and their protestant creeds teach, for the argument that movies of Jesus produce conversions. But that is not God's standard for determining whether something is right or wrong. Rather, His Word, in the Scriptures, sets down what is right and wrong. It does that in regard to how God will have his people taught, as well. God does not just give us the content of what must be taught and known about Christ, but he also gives us the method for teaching it.

In 1 Corinthians 1, through the inspired apostle Paul, God tells his church that preaching is the way to convey the gospel and suffering of Christ. There, Paul calls preaching "the power of God" (v. 18), and contrasts it with the world's methods of teaching. The world's methods he identifies in verse 22, "The Jews require a sign, the greeks seek after wisdom." The Jews wanted miracles, they wanted the gospel preachers to do something spectacular like Elijah of old, and call down fire from heaven. The Greeks wanted wisdom, that is they wanted a method that would manipulate the emotions and the minds of their audiences, their philosophy and their acting guilds (drama is not new, the ancient greek world in which Paul preached was full of it). But Paul says, "No, God has not chosen the wisdom of the world. God has not chosen the miraculous, God has not chosen manipulation, God has not chosen drama, but God has chosen something foolish and despised, something at which the Jews stumble and the Greeks mock, God has chosen the preaching of the gospel to convey the message of the gospel and of Christ's suffering." Folly to the world. Powerless, ineffective to them. But, to them which believe, the wisdom of God, and the power of God unto salvation.

Where are you going to witness or see the Passion, the suffering, the crucifixion of Christ? Not on a movie screen, but in your local church where the gospel is faithfully preached. That is the meaning of Galatians 3:1, "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?" That is a remarkable statement. Christ was set forth before their eyes, and crucified among them. How? Did Paul get an actors guild together to perform the crucifixion? Did it take blood and gore and nails and weeping women for them to see Christ crucified? No, they heard the preaching, and they saw Christ crucified, not with the physical eye but with the eye of faith.

The clamoring among churches today for the *Passion* movie shows not only their disobedience to this God-ordained way, but also their lack of faith in God's appointed way. They do not believe God's word

in passages such as 1 Corinthians 1, or Romans 10:14-17 where we read that faith comes by hearing the word of God in the preaching. They don't like God's way. They think they have a better way, and so they resort to blasphemous images in the movie.

More Blasphemy

One other concern that we ought to have with movies about the life of Christ is the blasphemy involved in the acting. On the one hand sinful and fallen men are acting out the sinless Jesus Christ, and on the other hand actors are re-enacting the wicked deeds of Peter, Judas and Pilate and even playing Satan.

To demonstrate my point, I want to read a quote from James Caviezel, who acted Jesus, in the *Passion* movie. In an interview with Sean Smith of *Newsweek* Caviezel was asked about the long scene where he is scourged with metal lashes. He describes the scene this way,

There was a board on my back, about a half-inch thick, so the Roman soldiers wouldn't hit my back. But one of the soldiers missed, hit me flush on the back and ripped the skin right off. I couldn't scream, I couldn't breath. It's so painful that it shocks your system. I looked over at the guy, and I probably said the F-word.

Here we have the sinless Christ, suffering, led before his shearers as dumb, who opened not his mouth, and James Caviezel, acting Christ, and using profanities!

Besides this, there is in this movie Peter's denial of Christ, Judas' betrayal of Christ, the wicked deed of Pilate in condemning Christ to death, the Jewish mobs crying "Crucify Him, Crucify Him," and the Roman soldiers, those that passed by, and the thieves mocking the Christ. Also, the movie seeks to portray the miraculous in the healing of Malchus' ear and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These are not acts that men ought even attempt to re-enact.

It is the Easy Way

Before we leave the second commandment and get to the *Passion* movie itself, I want to ask and answer one more question. Why? Why do they do it this way and not the way of preaching?

The answer is that this is the easy way. The true worship of God through the speaking and hearing of His word in the preaching is difficult. Preaching good biblical sermons requires hours of hard work. Listening to sermons, learning the doctrines and teaching of Scripture, teaching your children these things, sitting through church services where a minister speaks God's word and trying, not only to stay awake, but to concentrate, these are all very difficult. True preaching does not appeal first of all to the emotions, but to the mind. True worship of God is a spiritual exercise; "They that worship the Father must worship him in Spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). True worship requires much effort. Images, which stimulate the visual and which appeal to the emotions are much easier.

This is at heart, the sin against the second commandment. God is God in heaven; exalted, transcendent, spiritual, greater than our thoughts can ever comprehend. Man is on earth, and earthy. He wants things easy, he wants things his way. He wants something physical and tangible, whereas in worship--God's way--we must transcend the earthly. And so in the Old Testament they erected golden calves, and images, and bowed down to them. That was much easier than trying to understand all the significance of the Jerusalem worship and sacrifices and so on, and one could have a moving religious experience much more easily that way. So today. The emotions, not the mind. The heart, not the head. The visual, not the oral and written. The fuzzy feel-good gospel rather than the truths and teachings of Scripture.

Sometimes, we get the idea that man in a Western civilized culture is different than men during biblical

times. We think that they wanted and worshiped idols and images because they were barbarian and that a Western man would never do that because he is civilized. This is a mis-conception. The same sin is in the heart of the natural man today as was in the heart of O.T. Israel when they had Aaron build the golden calf at Sinai. That sin is an inclination away from the spiritual and towards the physical and tangible. Just like them, man wants an image, something tangible, that he can look at, that stimulates his physical senses. And so you have image worship in the drama that is a part of so much worship in the churches today.

Some Things on *The Passion Movie*

Now I want to issue a warning to Protestant Christians against this particular movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. As I said, I have not seen the movie, so this will not be an in depth review. But, reviewers have pointed out definite elements that are worthy of our attention.

The movie is a Roman Catholic Movie. Mel Gibson, the director, says of it, "It reflects my beliefs." He is a Roman Catholic. His beliefs are not the same as the Protestant beliefs. Mel Gibson reads Scripture differently than the reformed believer. As part of putting the movie together he consulted a large number of high-ranking priests and theologians in the Roman Catholic Church.

That this movie is Roman catholic is clear first from the mode of instruction that it uses. It follows Roman Catholic method of teaching, with visual images and icons. Gibson's intent with this movie is to enrich the Roman Catholic understanding of the mass. He wants his audience to think of his movie whenever they see the mass taking place, to think that what they see in the movie is what takes place in the mass each time it is performed. The Roman Catholic mass is, as the Heidelberg Catechism points out, a "daily offering by the priest" of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine. The priest is repeating in the mass what was done to Christ in his crucifixion. This is a denial of the efficacious and atoning death of Christ, a sacrifice once made that made full satisfaction for sins.⁴

The movie is clearly Roman catholic also in its content. The script of the movie was drawn up from a composite of what is contained in the 4 gospels and two other documents that belong to Roman Catholic mystical writings, Mary of Agreda's "The Mystical City of God" and Anne Catherine Emmerich's "The Dolorus Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ." These extra-biblical writings provided not only the inspiration for Gibson to make this movie, but also provided much of the content of the movie. Emmerich's "The Dolorus Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ" is a record of a number of supposed visions that she received in which she reportedly received revelations about the events of Christ's suffering. This work reads something like a novel, adding much that is fiction to the account of Christ's suffering. Much of this content is included in Gibson's movie. One reviewer writes,

Reading through *The Dolorus Passion of Christ* after seeing the movie I was shocked by how closely the script of *The Passion of the Christ* follows this book. So much of what I assumed was artistic license was actually drawn from extra-biblical revelation.⁵

Let me list a number of things included in the movie that are not in Scripture, but come from Emmerich.

1. Satan's torment of Jesus in the garden.
2. Mary's awakening at Jesus arrest, with the premonition that something has happened to her son.
3. The soldiers throwing Jesus off a bridge as they bring him to the high-priest.

⁴For more on this see www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=49259

⁵See www.challies.com/archives/cat_the_passion_of_the_christ.html

4. Peter's running to Mary after he denies Christ, weeping and calling her mother.
5. The torment of Judas by Satan and many devils.
6. The setting for the scourging scene.
7. Pilate's wife giving linens to Mary to wipe up Jesus' blood.
8. Jesus stumbling many times as he carries the cross, and then having Mary run to his side to encourage him to go on.
9. Simon's rebuke of the mocking soldiers.
10. Mary's words to the dying Jesus, "Let me die with you."

And much more.⁶

All of this is extra-biblical material. All of it comes from a woman who claimed to have extra-biblical revelations. Just as we would condemn these writings of Emmerich and other Roman Catholic mystics as an adding to God's Word, so we should condemn the use of them in a movie which proports itself to be biblically accurate. "If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book" (Revelation 22:18).

Furthermore, these scenes import Roman Catholic theology into the film, particularly relics (the dabbing of Jesus face by a woman, which supposed cloth is now a relic) and Mary theology (she is the one who encourages Christ while Satan taunts him, she gives her approval to the Christ's atonement after he says "It is finished" with the word "Amen").

One other obvious Roman Catholic element in the film is the emphasis on Christ's suffering rather than his victorious resurrection, and his present glory. Of course, this glory should not be acted out, but Roman Catholicism emphasizes suffering at the expense of the glory and victory of the cross. The movie spends all of 12-15 seconds at the end on the resurrection of Christ. It also spends an inordinate amount of time on the flogging of Christ as though that was the heart of his suffering.

As I said, I was not going to review the movie. My intent is to point to obvious Roman Catholic elements that are ignored and overlooked by many Protestants. These elements ought not be over-looked. These differences are real and are significant. These differences are the things for which the Reformers lived and died in the Reformation of the 16-17th centuries. The serious minded believer will take them into consideration.

Many are not. These differences are being ignored by many as though they are non-existent or minor. This movie has crossed denomination lines from the Roman Catholic church and into Protestant churches. In its use there is no effort made to distinguish between denominations. What it teaches is accepted by Protestants and Catholics alike. This is dangerous. For Protestants to ally themselves with Roman Catholicism is for them to ally themselves to a false gospel and to deny the great truths of the Reformation. Satan claps his hands in delight as apostate Protestantism goes back to Rome. This is one of Gibson's goals as well. When a protestant reporter asked if he was disqualified from salvation because he was a protestant, Gibson replied, "There is no salvation outside of the Church" and affirmed it with "I believe it!" This movie will play large in the modern eccumenical movements.

Conclusion

I have said a lot. Let me conclude by pointing you, again, to the one place where you will see and come to know the suffering of Christ.

Philippians 3:10 speaks of our "fellowshipping in His suffering." That fellowship means that we are

⁶For more of the connections to Emmerich see www.challies.com/archives/000197.html

partakers of the suffering of Christ, the eternal Son of God, who died as a substitution for sins. That fellowship means that we do not need to pay or suffer for our sins at the hand of almighty God because Christ suffered in our place. That fellowship means we have the Passion of Christ as our own.

Where will you get that passion? You will get it in a true church, where the true suffering of Christ at God's hands as payment for sin is preached. You will get it when you believe that preaching.

NOTES:

1. You can hear an audio copy of this speech on-line at www.trinityprc.org
2. In preparing this paper I found the following web-sites especially helpful

http://www.challies.com/archives/cat_the_passion_of_the_christ.html

<http://www.letgodbettrue.com/TodaysWorld/passion.htm>

http://rsglh.org/proclaiming_the_true_passion_of_Christ.htm

<http://aomin.org/>