Mel Gibson’s film The Passion of the Christ may turn out to be one of the more influential works of Christian art to come along in quite some time, and not only because of its staggering box office success. Gibson’s film has inclined the Christian community, and particularly the evangelical community, toward reconciliation with the film industry after a century of uneasiness. As the film narrative cuts to the theological center of the Christian faith, The Passion has provoked passionate response from all corners of a contemporary church struggling to retain its foothold in this postmodern age.

If one were to have predicted response to The Passion months before its release, Martin Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of the Christ (1988) might have proven a useful cross-reference, that film the last blockbuster which dealt directly with the story of Jesus. Scorsese’s film largely divided Christians between theological conservatives and theological liberals: the conservatives contested the license with which the director, screenwriter Paul Schrader, and Nikos Kazantzakis (who wrote the novel) took the Biblical accounts; the liberals applauded the imagination of a film which offered them a more “human” portrayal of Christ. In fact, while evangelicals picketed theaters, liberals hurried to write laudatory reviews. One might have assumed that Gibson’s film, as accurate as it was intended to be (right down to the Aramaic dialog), would similarly divide the faithful; this time with conservatives applauding the film’s detailing, while liberals decried its assumptions of fact.

Something akin to that did happen. Before its theatrical release on Ash Wednesday, 2004, representatives of the World Council of Churches and a significant number of other “broad tent” Christian bodies, like the United Church of Canada, issued statements warning that Gibson’s film might incite acts of anti-Semitism and further polarize Christians from believers of other faiths. The intention of the statements was apparently to try to keep people from theaters, a gesture perhaps only more civil in tone than those of picketers who shouted the Lord’s Prayer to patrons entering theaters to see The Last Temptation of Christ.

However, two months after the release of The Passion of the Christ, the film had already grossed over half a billion dollars internationally. People have gone in quantity to see it despite the warnings, and yet this seems to have caused no rippling in the waters of tolerance and understanding. As a result, critics have become conspicuously more silent as the weeks have passed. Rather than creating divisions, the film has created strange bedfellows—the Pope and Billy Graham, Lutherans and Primitive Baptists, Focus on the Family and cast members of Primetime Live. Reaction from viewers so spread across typical party lines that the film has prompted a mass-cultural debate on the basic terms of the Christian religion, played out over newspapers, chat rooms, and television sets.
The Passion of the Christ

The majority of critics who warned against the film grounded their case in a bias against the resurrection of a Christian worldview in contemporary culture (i.e., we ought not present Christianity in either/or terms). They were even joined for awhile by those in the business of distribution and marketing. Some theaters went so far as to post warnings at ticket counters that the film might not be appropriate for children. Of course, such warnings were not posted for Dawn of the Dead, the bloodbath horror carnival that eventually replaced The Passion as the nation’s top grossing film in the fourth weekend.

Other critics grounded their resistance in the wounded sense of “sublime” aesthetics. Religious art ought not be very bloody; Gibson’s film is very bloody. David Denby, film critic for The New Yorker, a journal considered a good barometer for what is “enlightened” and what not, called The Passion of the Christ “a sickening death trip, a grimly unilluminating procession of treachery, beatings, blood, and agony.”¹ His thesis, and many others have articulated it, is that Christians in a post-Christian age need to emphasize the ethical high-mindedness of the faith, not the outmoded “barbarism.” The Sermon on the Mount might be appropriated for detailed visualization, but not the scourging and crucifixion.

Ironically, the concern that Mel Gibson was somehow sliding our enlightened age back toward medievalism expressed itself in argument traditionally used by more conservative Christians wrestling with the depiction of the divine in graphic arts. For centuries, theologians from a range of traditions have discussed Christian art with an eye toward the First Commandment. When does artistic expression detract from the sublime object and become a stumbling block or source of intellectual idolatry? Debate over this question largely divided Christendom into East and West at the end of the first millennium, and still largely divides the two dominant strands of the Reformation, Lutheran and Calvinist. One can hear echoes of those older controversies when a critic like David Denby reacts against the graphic visualizations of the film and writes, “the central tradition of Italian renaissance painting left Christ relatively unscathed; the artists emphasized not the physical suffering of the man but the sacrificial nature of his death and the astonishing mystery of his transformation into godhead.” The suggestion is that Gibson’s film beckons us toward the pornographic, enticing us with a bloodletting at the exclusion of the transcendence of his teachings, and the power of his story to enlighten the unenlightened.

Paradoxically, very few conservative Christians have expressed this same concern with how Jesus is represented in the film. The box-office numbers have taken over the discussion, encouraging many evangelicals to think that a return of the days of old might still be possible, the days of the 1930s and 1950s perhaps, when Hollywood cranked out The Sign of the Cross (1932), The Crusades (1935), The Last Days of Pompeii (1935), Samson and Delilah (1945), Quo Vadis? (1951), David and Bathsheba (1951), The Robe (1953), The Ten Commandments (1956), and Ben Hur (1959)—all heavily financed Biblical spectacles. The success of The Passion of the Christ has encouraged many to think that Gibson or other Christian producers will begin like projects, but with more genuine piety—Biblical stories conveyed conservatively and realistically, and with high production values. Thus, while the film has been attacked for being too literal to Scripture from those who do not want literal renderings of Scripture, it has been praised for being literal to Scripture by those who want literal renderings of Scripture.

Perhaps at an historical moment still positioned within the era of “the culture wars,” such a polarized response is to be expected. Unfortunately, the larger questions of the artistic and theological merits of the film may go unanswered in the wash of enthusiasm for the film’s commercial success. It would be prudent for believers to remember that commercial success is hardly a measure of meaningfulness. The top-grossing films of the last decade include Jurassic Park (1993), The Lion King (1994), Independence Day (1996), Titanic (1998), and The Phantom Menace (1999), none of which promise to alter the intellectual and spiritual climate of Western culture over the next century.

This is not to say that The Passion of the Christ will not have such an effect. Rather, it is to suggest that the film invites larger questions than how many weeks it drew the largest weekend crowd at theatres, or “What is up with the ugly baby?” Does The Passion of the Christ keep an eye on those traditional Christian concerns regarding the application of the First Commandment? Does the film offer a complex portrayal of both our Lord’s divinity and his humanity? What about the fictional elements— as the film chooses to enhance the gospel accounts, does it do so with a measured hand? What is gained or lost by telling the story in large part from Mary’s point of view? Do we have enough information given in Scripture to warrant some of the more elaborate characterizations— like Mary or Pilate or Simon of Cyrene? Could this bit of “myth-making” become truth in the minds of the less-informed? How about the depiction of the miraculous, like the earthquake and the darkened sky? Might these special-effect scenes date the way the parting of the Red Sea has dated in DeMille’s The Ten Commandments (1965), and will that eventually discredit the presentation of the miraculous?

My guess is that Christians have thus far skirted such questions because they want the film to be better than it may be. Judgment can be distorted in the haste of a backpedaling retreat from a brimstone-doomed culture. Although many Christians over the past three decades have responded to the prodding of men like Francis Schaeffer or Mark Noll or Ed Veith, scholars who have encouraged evangelicals to respond to culture thoughtfully; many others, when facing dominant media forces like television and the film industry, have still tended to cry— “Save us, Oh Lord, and thy sacred trust, from the barbarous hordes that sweep over the land.” It was not all that long ago when many young believers in fundamentalist Christian colleges had to sign a pledge against drinking, smoking, dancing, and watching movies. The effects of that mindset linger on, as the majority of evangelical film critics still evaluate film according to the criteria of “family-friendliness,” rather than artistic merit and intellectual integrity. So, in the case of Gibson’s film, the jury has returned a rapid verdict of validity, based mostly on the evidence of mass appeal and emotional response; i.e., we want the film to be good because it will give us more credibility in the culture, and may make our children want to follow Jesus.

Of course, many of the critical questions cannot be answered with a single voice, as the Church remains divided on the appropriate forms for gospel presentations. Even within highly conservative Protestant denominations, both Lutheran and Reformed, one can find Pastor Jones insisting that all clergy wear collars and sing from the hymnal the approved material, while Pastor Smith wears a

2 Francis Schaeffer, How Should We Then Live: the Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture (Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 1983).
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pullover and encourages members to provide new lyrics to the latest praise chorus picked off the local Christian radio station. Put simply, one pulpit encourages the preservation of old practice, while the other the creation of new practice; one wants art to be safe, the other to be engaging. A point of agreement, at the very least, is that both sides intuitively understand that the art of the faith carries with it tremendous potential for evil (idolatry) or for good (identification and meditation).

Whether we take these debates within the camp as part of the ongoing battle between God and Satan, or simply the natural pendulum swing of human intellectual development, the average Christian layperson stands on shifting ground when trying to articulate a single response to an art like film. Some of this has to do with the nature of the medium. Film is, after all, relatively new. The first narrative film, Edwin S. Porter’s The Great Train Robbery, is only one hundred years old (1903). Add to this that film art is indexical—the performers and the world they occupy looks like my world. There are no signs outside art galleries reminding patrons that “these are only paintings.” Yet, one (rather poor) horror film from the 70s had as its tag line, “It’s only a movie.” A sales pitch, of course, but one rendered possible because identification with characters and events in a film can be profound.

Many Christians react defensively against the risk that a person might watch a movie and develop the notion that what is seen is real. When what is seen is Biblical material, the threat grows. It’s one thing for a film like The Godfather or a show like The Sopranos to portray the mob as a stable family, even if done tongue-in-cheek—bad for families; it’s another when Jesus fantasizes himself off the cross and into the arms of Mary Magdalene—bad for theologians.

That same pendulum swing that divides local pastors trying to choose appropriate worship music, serves to divide Christians who head for the local theater to see films with religious content. One group watches with pen and pad, expecting to find some theological transgression which can then be reported back to “the group.” The other is glad to have some opportunity to “talk about Jesus,” and is perhaps secretly pleased that theological transgressions are not among their pet sins.

In other writings, I have described at length the remarkable inconsistency all this has produced in the way Christians view film. The very basic question of how this film, The Passion of the Christ, relates to the First Commandment wouldn’t even enter the heads of most believers, whose heads would be more engaged with how Mel Gibson has “witnessed” in his interviews or how James Caviezel, as Jesus, separated his shoulder while on the set or how wonderful it is that more and more Jesus films (The Gospel of John came out about the same time as The Passion) are being made. We find some talking about the film as an evangelism tool, and some talking about the story of the making of the film, some talking about a Christian presence in the media, and some about the suspect theology of the scenes with Mary, some about the androgynous depiction of Satan, and all talking about how The Passion of the Christ made them feel—but we hear very few asking whether the film accomplished its intent, and whether or not that intent was worthwhile.

With any work of art, how well the artist realizes his vision ought to be a central question. In 1711, Alexander Pope wisely wrote, “A perfect judge will read each work of wit/With the same spirit that its author writ.” Then we might consider the approach popularized by the Victorian Matthew Arnold as the “Touchstone Theory”—how does this work measure up against and respond to similar works of the past? Further might be added, how well this work accomplishes its religious end

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of carrying viewers to a better place in their Christian pilgrimage. Call this the Romans 14 principle, “So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another” (v. 19 NASB).

The intention of Gibson’ film is obvious from the opening scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, to engage us in the suffering of Christ so that we might meditate on his brave love and be renewed. After an ominous opening shot of a full moon against a blue-black sky, we see Jesus from the rear as he prays for deliverance, and then participate with him in his resistance to Satan. The scene is visually intense with a heavy use of close-ups against a surrealistic background. The sound of Jesus’ emotional pleas in Aramaic against the eerie soundtrack enhances this. Punctuation occurs with Jesus stomping on the snake sent as a diabolic response to his prayers—this a reference to the proto-evangelium (Gen. 3:15), as well as a foreshadowing of the extreme violence to come.

The film narrative of The Passion of the Christ then proceeds accordingly as an animated visualization of the Stations of the Cross, a set of images leading Christians to contemplate moments in our Lord’s Passion, something more familiar to Catholics, but accessible to Protestants also who follow some form of lectionary through the progress of Lenten meditations that lead to the Easter service. The tradition of the Stations of the Cross evolved in the Roman Catholic Church of the fifteenth century as a way to replicate a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, without the travel. It became common to find the Stations in Catholic churches throughout the eighteenth century, after the Franciscan order received a special dispensation to erect the Stations in all their churches in 1694 and to proclaim indulgences upon those who followed this devotional way in 1731.

Some Protestants have reacted badly to the film’s dependence on such Catholic traditions as if the film is somehow a polemic for Catholicism, which it certainly is not. What Gibson seemed to do in The Passion is find in the patterning of the Stations of the Cross a structure for the screenplay, and a point of view for the camera. Many critics from a range of viewpoints have commented also that the film derives in large measure from Anne Catherine Emmerich’s devotional work The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, a collection of the visions of a mystic who lived among peasants in Germany from 1774-1824. However, if Gibson was influenced by Emmerich’s mysticism, the influence was principally on the structure of the film, as Emmerich’s visions take the form of a series of scenes describing the events of the Passion, and thus provide a nice resource for a filmmaker looking for shot sequences. Consider descriptions like:

their scourges were composed of small chains, or straps covered with iron hooks, which penetrated to the bone, and tore off large pieces of flesh at every blow. What word, alas! could describe this terrible—this heartrending scene!

However, for every instance in Emmerich’s devotional where Gibson might have gotten an idea for a visualization in the film, there are two more that he discarded or recast, like:

The dreadful scourging had been continued without intermission for three quarters of an hour, when a stranger of lowly birth, a relation to Ctesiphon, the blind man whom Jesus had cursed, rushed from amidst the crowd, and approached the pillar with a knife shaped like a cutlass in his hand. “Cease!” he exclaimed, in an indignant tone; “Cease! Scourge not this innocent man unto death!”
Emmerich’s meditation itself takes its point of reference from the accepted practice of meditating upon the Stations of the Cross, so the far safer case should be made that Gibson used a wide range of sources to create the visualizations he chose, but the base structure follows the universal practice, rather than anything specific to one writer.6

The film begins, as already discussed, with Jesus in the Garden wrestling in prayer. It ends with him leaving the tomb. In between are the fourteen Stations—Jesus is condemned, Jesus carries his cross, Jesus falls, Jesus meets his mother, Simon helps carry the cross, Veronica wipes Jesus’ face, Jesus falls the second time, Jesus meets the women, Jesus falls a third time, Jesus is stripped, Jesus is nailed to the cross, Jesus dies, Jesus is taken down from the cross, and Jesus is buried. Gibson weaves these together in a less rigid order than is traditional, but still grants special attention to each, with the film narrative slowing or altering its style to allow special consideration. The conspicuous exception is in the omission of our Lord’s burial, which would have introduced too much time into the climax of a narrative which followed chronologically the final hours.

Although the following of the Stations of the Cross has been attached to indulgences, for the majority of Catholics it is more practically a way to understand Christ’s sacrifice. As such, it is a guide designed to produce devotion and praise. One introductory prayer is “We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.” Gibson chose for the film epigraph a text from Isaiah with the same theme, “By his stripes we have been healed.” The intended effect upon the viewer is either repentance or praise. Dark as is the depiction of Christ’s suffering, so is the brief resurrection sequence bathed in light. Likewise, the flashbacks to Christ’s past tend to be amber-colored—his playfulness with Mary, or the warm glow around him as he breaks bread with his disciples. The experience of the film fails if the liturgy of the film fails to uplift people.

The Passion of the Christ, like most of the best religious films, moves in imitation of Christian liturgy; i.e., it describes and interprets the redemptive act sequentially, and it invites believers to participate. We are drawn into the experience of Jesus in the opening sequences and then follow him out of the tomb at the end. The film forces a confrontation with the atonement in a deeply personal way.

The stylistic manner of these significant moments in the final twelve hours of Jesus’ life follows the tradition of religious filmmaking that has quietly evolved over the past century—a move toward more formalistic manipulation of the camera and the soundtrack.7 When Jesus falls, slow-motion, point-of-view shots are introduced; when he meets his mother, the musical score becomes more prominent; when he dies the camera looks down upon his face, rather than up toward him. All these manipulations alter the established style of the film in order to suggest the divine presence in the narrative, the same manner in which violins played in a minor key become the cliché for suggesting the sublime in the Biblical spectaculars of the 1950s.

This “sacramental” technique is used to draw the viewer into the experience of Christ’s suffering, even the experience of the violence. As in a Flannery O’Conner story, Gibson makes the violence a kind of purgative. There is no means of escape—the sound of the Roman scourges, for instance,

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continues in real time, even when the camera moves off Christ’s flayed body as its subject. In most other films on the life of Christ, the violence is merely suggested or seen from a distance. Here, the blood actually splatters the camera lens and then sprays over one Roman soldier we have been led to identify with. His blood washes us all.

But is the film well-crafted? Does it rise to the level of its material, high as that is? And then, is the film true to its materials? Does it provide a deeper understanding of the world’s great redemptive tale, or is it like much in twentieth-century Christianity— heavy on emotionalism and subjectivity, light on substance?

What must be said at the very least is that Gibson succeeds marvelously in bringing to the film not only his own technical expertise, developed through two and a half decades in the industry, but a rich visual tradition derived from many decades of Christian art. Gibson instructed his cinematographer, Caleb Deschanel, to echo Caravaggio in his compositions, but perhaps with a little more blood, to remind modern women and men that Jesus was, indeed, not just a mythic figure who inspired high-mindedness. Numerous compositions in the film echo familiar iconography, down to the last shot of Christ looking heavenward in death, and Mary looking out at the camera after his death. What these visual references do is bring texture to the film that brings homage to the unfolding of the Christian artistic tradition. It allows point and counterpoint over time. Because we are familiar with Caravaggio’s “Flagellation of Christ,” the scourging scene from The Passion of the Christ encourages us to compare—the grotesque expressions of the Roman soldiers, albeit difficult to watch, resemble those offered by Caravaggio and other Renaissance painters. However, in the film, the physical beauty of Christ that one finds in those Renaissance painting of Jesus is stripped—he becomes the man from whom “we hid our faces.” Thus the scourging scene, to take the most notable example, brings with it a larger intellectual tradition, one which adds complexity to a subject that deserves complex treatment; and so, it draws us back to the Biblical materials from which all elements of the tradition originate.

The film likewise plays off other films in rather obvious ways, particularly the many lesser Jesus films that have been made through the years. In interviews, Gibson indicated that he viewed the majority of these before beginning The Passion, and his film’s emphasis on authenticity of detail comes as a bit of reproof to those older efforts.

The viewer of The Passion of the Christ is offered a feast of historical research, most evident in costume and background sets, but also evident in the manner in which the film chooses to stray from the path of the Scriptural narratives. All one has to do is compare The Passion with even the most successful films on the life of Christ— King of Kings (1960), Jesus of Nazareth (1977), or the Jesus film (1979)— to understand the length to which Gibson went to create Biblical verisimilitude, while also making informed nods to hundreds of years of Christian tradition. This is not set-shop Hollywood pageantry, nor picture-postcard Christianity; the Romans appear as scholars might draw them, as do the Jews of the Sanhedrin, and Herod in his Eastern-styled court. The costumes of Jesus’ disciples don’t look as if borrowed from the set of Gladiator. Background characters don’t stand in herds waiting to say, “Uhh” or “Yeahhh.” They do things that people might have done. Scripture does not offer us an image of Jesus making a table, but the film offers us that image with a rare combination of historical research, imaginative insight, and humor.

Likewise, Gibson appeals to the larger Hollywood tradition in subtle ways. When Barabbas is led out, he is ghoulish, a quirky reminder echo of Quasimoto from The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Charles
Laughton in the old film, who in both the film and Victor Hugo’s novel is himself mocked as a new Christ, robed and crowned. Or consider Gibson’s intentional omission of the centurion’s comment, “He must have been the Son of God,” a line impossible after John Wayne uttered it in one of the worst Jesus films ever made, The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965).

There is a great weight of thought and devotion in The Passion of the Christ. Gibson might not fare well as a director if compared to the talents of a Robert Bresson or an Andrei Tarkovsky, the great geniuses of the Christian film tradition, but his film evidences a significant technical expertise. In fact, through both the roles he has chosen as actor (Gallipoli [1981], Signs [2002]) and his directorial efforts (The Man Without a Face [1993], Braveheart [1995], The Patriot [2000]) there now exists a substantial body of work that suggests Gibson should be taken quite seriously as an artist. Still, this particular film, The Passion of the Christ, has very few immediate cross-references. There really exists only one great film on the life of Christ, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s The Gospel According to St. Matthew (1968), a film with tremendous immediacy and energy that follows the Biblical text literally, while choosing originality of presentation over cliché. Gibson actually paid homage to that film by choosing to shoot The Passion in the same area of southern Italy that Pasolini used. While it certainly can and will be argued that Pasolini’s film offers better art, Gibson’s film will appeal more to believers in its evangelical intention. Pasolini was an avowed atheist and Marxist who made his film after being inspired by the energy of the gospel of Matthew, which he read on the occasion of a papal visit to the town of Assisi where he happened to be staying. Most critics agree that The Gospel According to St. Matthew tends to celebrate the plight of the underclasses suppressed by corrupt regimes more than it celebrates the historical Jesus.

This steers us toward the issue of integrity. Unlike Pasolini’s film, or some more recent films on the life of Christ, like Jesus (1979) or The Gospel of John (2004), Gibson does choose to add fictional elements to the gospel story; or, at least, he takes substantial liberties with the gospel narrative in order to create continuity in the film narrative. Peter’s denials are bunched together, Judas is chased by demon children (real or illusory), Simon of Cyrene rebukes the Romans, one of the crucified thieves has his eye plucked out by a crow, etc. How we respond to these renderings in some measure goes back to our approach to religious art and the First Commandment. The film’s intention is obviously to add depth to the Biblical characterizations, and, arguably, all these additions are within the realm of the possible, and perhaps even probable. To put the best construction on things, the fictionalizations are designed never to take focus off the main subject of the narrative, Christ himself. In many of the Hollywood Jesus movies, like Nicholas Ray’s King of Kings, these side stories tend to overtake the main story, suggesting perhaps that what Jesus did is important largely because it affected so many others.

The prominence of Mary may be the most obvious of these enhancements, especially to Protestant eyes. To Gibson’s credit, he uses the character of Mary not to make a personal theological point, but to allow the viewer closer access to the sufferings of Christ. She becomes the principle recorder of the events, as well as the narrative guide. Her eyes mingle profound suffering with devotion and wonder. When she looks into the camera at the end of the narrative, her looks compels us not to consider her—she is off-centered on the screen—but to consider her son.

This gets back to the film’s intention. Throughout the narrative, scenes of great cruelty are redeemed when Jesus looks into the eyes of one participant who has come to understand, and believe. In the initial scene it is Malchus, then a eunuch in Herod’s court, then Simon, then the repentant thief.
Finally, it is us. Mary, the most identifiable figure in the Christian tradition after Christ himself, stares out at us.

Are these renderings an enhancement to the story or a distraction, will they lead to devotion or some new modern idolatry? These questions require time to answer. As skillful as Gibson’s film may be, and as positive a response as it may currently draw from various corners of the Church, its full effect on individuals as well as the culture has yet to be determined. Will it ease us toward a better place? Hard to say. As a tool used by Christians to advance the faith, if presented in the appropriate forum with some thoughtful discussion and if joined to “the rest of the story,” it should prove highly effective. As a work of Christian art that lives on its own, it still needs to pass through more hands. Until time offers that extra measure of scrutiny, the most positive comment that can be offered is that The Passion of the Christ has encouraged a much needed discussion of how the Christian faith intersects both the film community and mass culture.

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