

RECONCILIATION

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:16-21, RSV)

Well, I finally saw it. After weeks of people asking me if I'd seen Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*, I finally made it to the multiplex. Jimmy and I went together to see it, although I warned him that he would have to keep secret any uncontrollable weeping, panicked dashes to the restroom in order to be sick and any other symptoms of psychological trauma I might display after seeing it. You'll be interested to know that both of your ministers walked out of the theatre feeling the same way—assaulted, offended and generally confused over Gibson's intentions.

Speaking for myself, my first complaint (and I have manyⁱ) is that I found the movie lacking any kind of emotional center. This reaction was surprising to me, because the most important relationship I have is with Christ. Therefore, to watch a portrayal of Jesus on the screen and to feel little if any emotional connection with him was a new experience for me.

Gibson's Jesus has more in common with Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator than with humanity. In that mid-80's sci-fi thriller, the Terminator is a virtually indestructible killer robot. It is shot, blown up, smashed and beaten, but nothing stops it. In Gibson's film, Jesus' mission is peaceful rather than violent, but he moves with a similar machine-like determination. No matter how his body is destroyed, he just keeps on going. He is the Energizer Bunny of messiahs. The violence done against him is so extreme, that it passes the point of tragedy and unintentionally enters the realm of parody. There is simply no way that a human body could withstand what occurs in this film. Despite a few flashbacks to Jesus' life and ministry, Jesus is more of a prop than a character. I felt so little for him that I believe this is the coldest portrayal of Jesus I've ever seen.

I think Gibson has accomplished an amazing thing. He has created an intensely graphic representation of Jesus' suffering that offers little, if any, opportunity for its viewers to identify with, much less draw closer to, Jesus. The violence is the main character of this film rather than Jesus. I believe that there is so little "there" there in the movie that any viewer will walk out of it with his or her own presuppositions and expectations confirmed.

In my own case, I walked into the theatre already cynical about Gibson's motives, expecting to be bothered by the extreme violence and the portrayal of the Jews. I walked out offended by the violence, troubled by the portrayal of the Jews, and even more cynical about Gibson's intentions. I can imagine, however, someone coming from a different perspective than mine emerging from the theatre just as affirmed in their own beliefs. A person, whose theology places an extreme emphasis upon their own sin and dwells upon the punishment their sin deserves rather than the grace God provides, might come out of this movie feeling that it is the greatest Jesus film ever made.ⁱⁱ Nonetheless, I think that the film was so emotionally weak that viewers will by necessity attach feelings about Jesus to it which they already possess. Whether you find the Jesus you know or not, will determine if you like the film.

I wonder what a non-Christian would think about our religion after seeing this film. If you don't know Jesus, what Jesus would you find? I can't help but feel that a person with very little first-hand experience of Christianity would walk out of this movie thinking it was a sadistic possibly even pornographic religion. A person without experience of Jesus would leave feeling Jesus deserved credit for enduring torture rather than worship.

My second and main complaint is the film's utter neglect of Jesus' resurrection. After two hours of Jesus' being beaten, flogged, tortured, and killed, we receive at the end perhaps a two minute-long glimpse of Jesus in the tomb as the stone rolls away. Talk about a letdown! In the glimpse we receive of the resurrected Christ, Jesus looks ticked off and ready to kick some tail. The climax of the Gospel story is reduced to no more than an afterthought. The point of the Gospel—the good news—of Jesus Christ is that suffering and evil, although very real, do not have the last word. While I and many other leftward-leaning Christians may be guilty at times of not paying enough attention to Christ's suffering, I still believe that most of our attention must be upon the love, grace and hope that God provides to us in Christ. The resurrection provides the hope that enables us to accept the love and grace.

A key example of the film's failure to portray the Christ event as an act of God's grace occurs when Jesus dies. As the Gospels depict, dark clouds roil in the sky and an earthquake shakes the ground. Also, as the Gospels say, the curtain in the temple that separated the main sanctuary from the Holy of Holies was torn in two.

The Holy of Holies was the innermost sanctum of the temple, where only the High Priest could go and him only once a year on the Day of Atonement. This chamber represented a place where one could encounter God directly, provided such a person met all the requirements of purity and holiness. The tearing of the curtain that closed off this space from the rest of the building symbolizes the revolutionary results of Christ's death. The barriers between God and humanity are removed. Each and every person has the opportunity to interact with God directly. Christ's sacrifice has made us pure enough that such a meeting can happen anywhere at any time. Yet, in Gibson's film, the earthquake splits the temple in half and the high priest Caiaphas stumbles in the ruins. Although the

curtain is torn, it is just one more element of a greater destruction. The scene is portrayed as an act of revenge upon Jesus' arch-enemy. The grace of the event is lost and vengeance and judgment are all that remain.

In today's scripture passage, the Apostle Paul attempts to describe the radical nature of God's grace as revealed in Christ. He writes that in Christ we have been reconciled to God. The threat of vengeance and judgment has been removed. This is good news, because by means of our weaknesses and sinful actions, we have severed our relationship with God. God stands off not as enemy ready to do battle with us but more like a lover wounded by our unfaithfulness. No matter how much we apologize or reach back on our own towards God, a gulf remains between us. What's done is done. We cannot undo the past or wipe the slate clean. Yet, the good news of the Gospel is that, in Christ, God does just that. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God reaches the rest of the way. God wipes the slate clean. God restores our relationship.

Paul uses a strange phrase to describe what happens during Christ's suffering and death. He writes, "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin." For Paul and his contemporaries, sin was more than just an accumulation of individual acts or destructive behaviors. Instead, sin was a tangible power at work in the world, just like gravity.ⁱⁱⁱ This is Sin with a capital "S" rather than the lowercase "s" sins that we often think of. Sin with a capital "S" exerts force upon everyone and everything. Human actions that run contrary to God's desires result from the pull of Sin's power. Like an oil spill upon the ocean, Sin leaves a sticky smothering film upon humanity. No matter how hard we may attempt to scrub it away, it remains upon us. Thankfully, somehow, in some mystical way, the entirety of Sin attached itself to Christ and through Christ's death, Sin also died. At that moment, Sin's power over humanity was broken.

The result of all this, Paul says, is that anyone who is in Christ—who partakes of the Christ-event—is "a new creation." That person is restored to the person God intended them to be in the first place, the person God created them to be. God replaces whatever part of a soul that is broken, missing or lost. People broken in spirit are mended and made whole.

This is good news! The Gospel, after all, literally means "good news." To focus entirely upon Christ's suffering without dealing with what the suffering is for misses the point. For me, Gibson's film provided no good news. What should have been good news for its large audience was only bad news for Jesus.

Paul writes that, thanks to Christ, he no longer regards anyone from a "human point of view," literally *kata sarka* "according to the flesh" as opposed to *kata pneuma* "according to the spirit." To see Jesus as merely an executed criminal is to see him only through the eyes of our flesh. I would also argue that seeing Jesus just as a strong man who can endure any torture presented him is to also see him only through the eyes of our flesh. Jesus is more than just another action hero, more than just the Braveheart of the Palestine.

It is not because of his strength that Jesus' death is remarkable but because of his weakness. In Christ, the most powerful being of the universe takes the form of a

vulnerable human—despised, rejected, beaten and murdered. Seeing Jesus with the eyes of the spirit—from a spiritual point of view—means recognizing that paradoxically God’s weakness overcomes all the might of the world. It also means that God works elsewhere through weakness and vulnerability. God can even work through you and me. In the midst of a troubled world where suffering seems to hold sway, there is reason for hope. Violence does not have the last word. Oppression does not have the last word. Political and military power does not have the last word. Wealth does not have the last word. Death does not have the last word.

God has the last word, and God’s last word to us is one of grace, love and reconciliation.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Most gracious God, help us to see ourselves, our world and Jesus through the eyes of the Spirit. Grant us the ability to reject our culture’s lust for power and prestige. Instead, help us to be the people you created us to be. Help us to accept the gift of Christ’s suffering and the joy of Christ’s resurrection. Amen.

ⁱ Here are just a few of the problems I had with the film: the graphic NC-17-worthy violence, the sympathetic portrayal of Pilate verses the depiction of Caiaphas as the Shylock of the Promised Land, the rather strict attention to the “stations of the cross” and disregard of the conflicting views of Jesus’ last hours presented in the Gospels, the portrayal of Herod as a flamboyant drag queen reminiscent of a character in *Braveheart* that already got Gibson into trouble, etc. Oh, and did I mention that the violence was excessive?

ⁱⁱ I have the suspicion, however, that for many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, the violence was also offensive, but due to the way the film was marketed as a “Christian” movie criticized by left-wingers and atheists, there will be only be a defensive form of approval in those communities rather than an honest discussion of just how traumatic the violence was.

ⁱⁱⁱ See J. Christiaan Beker, *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul’s Thought*, Translated by Loren T. Stuckenbruck (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990): 109-111. Also, see Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985): 115-119.