

## **“The Passion of the Christ”: Confusing the Gospel Message**

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Mel Gibson’s film “The Passion of the Christ”—apart from its unrelenting gore—is its uncanny ability to distort the judgment of people who should know better.

Indeed, like children coming off a roller-coaster ride, Catholics and Protestants alike seem to be laboring under a kind of disorientation as they extol the extreme experience offered by Gibson’s film. They declare the film’s violence largely unwatchable, but recommend that even young children see it. They celebrate the film’s “accuracy,” but admit being deeply affected by invented details of suffering and humiliation. They acknowledge the film’s narrow focus on “how” Christ died, and then proclaim it the best explication of “why” He died. This mental chaos has typified the response of most Christian leaders to Gibson’s singularly violent version of Christ’s last hours. Only a few church officials—such as the Very Rev. Demetri Kantzavelos, chancellor of Chicago’s Greek Orthodox diocese—have seemed capable of comprehending the film’s blatant shortcomings. “It distorts the gospel message,” said Kantzavelos in a warning letter to church members. “The errors that deviate from the gospel are profound.”

Meanwhile, the reaction of secular detractors has been largely blinkered as well, with most critics unable to see beyond the “official” controversy surrounding Gibson’s film. Indeed, despite the obvious deviations from Scripture in the film, liberal commentators have repeatedly echoed Jewish leaders and

Jesus historians in locating the problem of “The Passion of the Christ” in the New Testament, a tactic that has only fueled the “Passion” juggernaut and played into Gibson’s strategy of disabling any criticism as “anti-Christian.” It was the rare movie critic who, like Jonathan Rosenbaum of the Chicago Reader, had the clarity of vision to see, as it were, the bigger, more troubling, picture. In his capsule review, Rosenbaum wrote, “The charges of anti-Semitism and homophobia being hurled at the movie seem too narrow; its general disgust for humanity is so unrelenting that the military-sounding drums at the end seem to be welcoming the apocalypse ...If I were a Christian, I'd be appalled to have this primitive and pornographic bloodbath presume to speak for me”

That Christians—particularly evangelicals—are instead buying out entire theatres suggests the strange power of “The Passion of the Christ” to confuse even the most conscientious religious minds. Ticket sales notwithstanding, Gibson’s film is far from the ultimate expression of Christian theology, as its most ardent supporters claim. Nor is it an example of biblical literalism taken to the extreme, as many of the film’s secular critics would have us believe. What the “The Passion of the Christ” *is*—as a piece of cinema, a religious statement , a cultural signpost—is much harder to say. It is easier, and perhaps more useful, to describe the film in terms of its strangely prismatic tendency to refract the true message of the Gospel into multiple fallacies, ones that even Biblically literate believers have trouble detecting.

### **Fallacy 1: Gibson's film is a truthful and accurate retelling of the Gospel accounts.**

Consider, for example, what has to be the most patently false claim made for “The Passion of the Christ”: namely, that it is, above all, an “accurate” version of the crucifixion according to the evangelists. This idea was planted by Gibson himself, who spent the months before the film’s release prefacing its graphic violence with assurances that he was only capturing the “truth” of Christ’s suffering. “I wanted to bring you there,” he said. “I wanted to be true to the Gospels. That has never been done before.”

Paradoxically, however, Gibson found that being “true” to Scripture required going outside the New Testament accounts of the crucifixion. Consulting the writings of an anti-Semitic nun and his own directorial proclivities, Gibson added details of suffering and humiliation not found in any of the Gospels. Thus, in his film, Christ is thrown off a bridge and left to dangle momentarily by His chains; later, He is given a swollen right eye. “I didn’t want to see Jesus looking really pretty,” he said. “I wanted to mess up one of his eyes, destroy it.” That such a tactic might strike some as being “untrue” to the Gospels seems not to have occurred to Gibson. Just before the film’s release, during an interview with ABC’s Diane Sawyer, Gibson softened his claims somewhat, admitting that the film was actually his “interpretation” of biblical events. But later in the same interview, he again put his film on equal footing with the Bible accounts. “You know, critics who have a problem with me don’t really have a problem with me and this film,” he said. “They have a problem with the four Gospels.”

Shockingly, many of the film's more ardent critics have cooperated with Gibson's strategy of promoting his film as a chunk of narrative lifted straight from the pages of the Bible. The New Yorker's David Denby, for example, attributed his disgust with the film to Gibson's "literal-mindedness" and referred to "historical research" to refute the director's presumably Bible-based vision. Similarly, The Nation's Stuart Klawans stated that Gibson's odious "textual literalism" is aggravated by the fact that "he bases his work ... on a text that he takes to be inerrant." If the text Klawans is referring to is the Bible, he is clearly missing the ample evidence of Gibson's own cavalier attitude toward his sacred source material; if Gibson thinks the Bible is inerrant, he certainly doesn't think it's complete. Slavish devotion to the "text" is patently not Gibson's problem. Interestingly, the effect of such off-target reviews has been to confirm the value of the film among conservative Christians, who see liberal attacks on Gibson's "literal-mindedness" as reassurance that he is one of their own.

Perhaps secular-minded critics simply lack the theological acuity to see through Gibson's deceptive pre-release positioning of his film, but one should be able to expect a little more discernment among reviewers who profess the Christian faith. For the most part, though, believing critics have simply echoed the blind adoration of the Christian masses who have experienced Gibson's film. In his positive review in the National Review, Ramesh Ponnuru points out several departures from Scripture and historical logic in Gibson's film, but defends them by insisting that "these elements contradict neither the letter nor spirit of Scripture." One might accept such an easygoing assessment if the film were

being promoted as one man's personal interpretation. But a film that purports to depict the "truth" of the crucifixion cannot be glibly excused for its reliance on "pious traditions" and extra-biblical sources, particularly when such additions feed almost exclusively into a relentlessly sadistic vision.

It was precisely Gibson's embellishments that led one of the film's early opponents to predict that evangelicals would reject the film. In an article in *The New Republic*, Paula Fredriksen wrote, "evangelical Christians, in my experience, know their Scriptures very, very well." But after several pre-release screenings at mega-churches across the country, it became clear that evangelicals were rallying behind the film with the fervor of new converts.

"In the kind of world we live in today, people need to come to grips with the reality of who [Jesus] is, and why he did offer his life for them as individuals," says Rick Pierson, a pastor at the Evangelical Free Church of Naperville in Illinois. "We'll never know the full extent of the pain that occurred that day, but this definitely makes it a lot more realistic," says Dan Kuiper, associate pastor of Suburban Bible Church in Highland Indiana. "To see the character literally crawling to the cross knowing what was going to happen just tells me how much he loves me."

What Fredriksen failed to anticipate was that evangelical leaders would be so willing to accept the film's visual "realism"—the convincing images of a Roman crucifixion as it might have occurred in first-century Palestine—as a proxy for truth and accuracy. If the Gospel accounts say nothing about Christ crawling to the cross, that's beside the point; the humiliating detail adds to the "reality" of

Christ's ordeal. In the eyes of evangelicals and other Christians, Gibson isn't altering the Gospels by inventing images of Christ suffering; he is enhancing them in a way that is consistent with the "spirit" of the Gospel writers. But just the opposite is true.

### **Fallacy 2: The violent imagery in Gibson's film is faithful to the spirit of the Gospels.**

The plain fact is that Gibson's film is not guided by the Gospels in any positive sense, and least of all in his graphic depiction of Christ's physical suffering.

Gibson has defended his blood-drenched representation by reminding his critics that a crucifixion is a horrible, bloody event that "really" happened to Christ. "It was pretty nasty stuff," he said. But it is plain wrongheaded for him (and his supporters) to assume that the Scripture's spare declarations—"He was scourged" or "They crucified Him"—give him a license to recreate Christ's torture and execution in cinematic strokes more appropriate for a "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" sequel.

Indeed, "Passion" supporters reveal a curious double standard in their defense, crediting Gibson's excessively violent treatment as a deliberate "artistic" effort to be true to the Gospels, while failing to attribute any rationale whatsoever to the narrative reserve of the evangelists. If the Gospels were written by apostles who witnessed the actual crucifixion—as many of these Christians believe—then what does the restraint of Matthew et al tell them about the value believers should place on the precise make-up of Christ's agony? Is it merely accidental, for example, that the fact that Christ was nailed to the cross must be

inferred from the skeptical Thomas's insistence on seeing Christ's wounds after the Resurrection?

One could suggest that the Gospel writers merely favored a less prolix style, or that crucifixion didn't need to be described to early Christians, who succumbed to that end themselves on occasion. But it would be much more reasonable to assume that the evangelists consciously eschewed explicitly violent imagery in their description of the crucifixion. After all, the Gospel writers understood themselves to be contributors to a pre-existing scriptural tradition, and that tradition certainly didn't value detailed accounts of cruelty.

Given the countless wars and other instances of inhuman behavior recounted in its pages, it may seem disingenuous to assert that the Hebrew Bible disdains elaborate tableaux of violence, but this is undeniably the case. When violence occurs, the reader is given facts, not images. In those rare instances when gruesome details of an individual's affliction, murder or death are supplied, it is usually to reinforce our sense of the victim's wickedness or unworthiness (e.g., Jezebel's blood being licked up by dogs). But even in such cases, there is nothing that is textually equivalent to Gibson's unflinching portrayal of Christ's scourging, with every single strike of the whip captured, sometimes in slow motion. Thus, the Old Testament scribes may tell us that David brought Saul the foreskins of 200 Philistines, but they make no effort at all to satisfy the reader's clinical curiosity about how such post-mortem circumcisions might have been accomplished. With this "just-the-facts" approach as a model, the evangelists could hardly justify describing the crucifixion in more graphic terms. As it is, their

restraint is totally consistent with the lack of sensationalism in the Hebrew Scripture.

Yet even if the Old Testament were filled with extended disembowelment sequences and actuarial accounts of floggings, the Gospel writers still would have felt compelled to limit the violent imagery in their description of the crucifixion. Why? Because Christ Himself had already established a representational precedent for their mission, and it wasn't one that privileged His suffering.

Most Christians promoting "The Passion of the Christ" fail to reflect on the very pertinent fact that Christ Himself was the very first "interpreter" of His crucifixion and death. On the night before He died, as all Christians know, He told His followers exactly how to remember His Passion: with the sharing of bread and wine. The design of this memorial sacrament has more than an incidental bearing on discussions of Christ's suffering. Consider what He accomplished: He took the "literal" facts of His death—His broken flesh, His spilled blood—completely severs their connection to the precipitating acts of violence, and transforms them into symbols of life-giving sustenance and community. The eloquent symbolism of Communion is clearly structured to frustrate idle preoccupations with "how much" Christ suffered and focus participants on the life-giving result of His sacrifice. With Christ Himself establishing this priority, it's easy to see why the Gospel writers would hesitate to indulge in blow-by-blow accounts of Christ's last hours. Their restraint in describing the violence Christ

endured is not a weakness that was waiting for Gibson's correction, but a representational choice that flows necessarily from Christ's own instructions.

Yet addled by their own emotional response to Gibson's triumph of violent excess, Christian leaders are now asserting—against the New Testament's own internal logic—that it is “imperative” for Christians (and even nonbelievers) to visually comprehend every lash Christ endured. If this mental chaos has a positive side, it is the confirmation of Christ's prescience in designing a memorial that contained no literal images of violence. For Gibson's film amply demonstrates the power of visualized brutality to overcome Christian reason and exploit the appeal of theologically unsound notions and traditions, particularly the belief in the sacredness of Christ's particular suffering.

### **Fallacy 3: The nature of Christ's suffering is unique and redemptive in and of itself.**

In Gibson's defense, it must be acknowledged that revering images of Christ's suffering is nothing new; crucifixes with the Corpus Christi on them are a part of many Christian households, especially Catholic ones. Yet it is equally true that the representational reduction of Christ to a man dying on a cross is not an original practice of the faith. In fact, the cross did not come into common use as a Christian symbol until the fourth century, when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Even then, the cross remained empty—as an indication of Christ's resurrection—for centuries. The fascination with Christ's suffering, and the attendant return of the body to the cross, did not

become normative until the Middle Ages, as James Carroll explained in the *Boston Globe*:

It was only in the medieval period that the Latin church began to put the violent death of Jesus at the center of faith, but that theology was tied to a broader cultural obsession with death related to plagues, millennialism, and the carnage of the Crusades. Grotesquely literal renditions of the crucifixion came into art only as self-flagellation and other “mortifications” came into devotion. Good Friday began to replace Easter as the high point of the liturgical year.

The cult of the physical suffering of Christ has been a submovement within Catholicism ever since, with its adherents finding a reliable source of pious exhortation in the details of the Passion. But Gibson exceeds even the typical “Passionist” fixation in seeing Christ’s suffering as not merely a commendable object of contemplation, but a matter of supreme theological importance. As *Chicago Tribune* film critic Mark Caro noted:

Gibson isn’t just showing us “as it was”—he’s focusing our attention on what he finds most meaningful about the story: the excruciating suffering that Jesus experienced.

And American Christians—Catholics and Protestants alike—seem to agree with this perspective. In fact, to argue for the merit of Gibson’s film, (as priests, pastors, and Christian editors across the nation have done) one is almost forced to claim that the precise quantity and make-up of Christ’s agony—not the mere fact of it—has special theological significance. After all, if the details of his

suffering don't have meaning, the act of watching a Christ figure bludgeoned mercilessly (and often in slow motion) would be morally problematic. But by claiming a unique value for the specific program of torture inflicted on Christ, Christian leaders give themselves the freedom to acknowledge the repugnant violence of "The Passion of the Christ" and, in the same breath, recommend the movie without feeling the least bit inconsistent. "It is the most sadistic and simultaneously holy thing I have seen," wrote Steve Beard, editor of *Good News Magazine*, demonstrating this complete escape from conflictedness.

The extension of Christ's holiness to the sadistic representation of His torture may sound as counterintuitive as, say, extending Jessica Lynch's patriotism to a realistic reenactment of her sexual assault in Iraq. But such a comment is typical of the bizarre thinking enabled by a belief in the "sacredness" of Christ's suffering. To be sure, once you attribute holiness to the physical assault Christ endured—rather than his willingness to endure it—the theological implications fly in every direction, justifying even the wildest conjectures. Should we assume, for example, that the extent of Christ's "holy" torture exactly reflects the cost of saving humanity from sin—e.g., one lash equals 10 million souls? Or should we see the vicious Roman executors as partners with Christ in crafting a crucifixion experience that contained just the right amount of suffering to redeem mankind?

The Gospels never make a claim that Christ's suffering was unique or that the quality of His torture was in any way redemptive. Gibson and his supporters frequently cite the Messianic prophecies in Isaiah to argue otherwise, particularly

Isaiah 53:5, which states, “By His stripes we are healed.” Yet it is obvious from Isaiah that the redemption enabled by the “Servant” is accomplished not simply by His submission to the whip, but by His taking on “the iniquity of us all.” Clearly, it was Christ’s divinity that made His sacrifice redemptive, not the gory particulars, and this is a theological truth that is too easily obscured by Gibson’s bloody spectacle.

The New Testament also contradicts the idea that the value of Christ’s suffering resides in its supreme severity. As the Gospels tell us, two other men were crucified that day, and though we don’t know if they endured scourging before crucifixion, as Christ did, we do know that they had their legs broken to hurry on their exit from this world (John 19:32-33). Significantly, Christ expired before this act of brutality became necessary, thereby fulfilling the Messianic prophecy that “not one of his bones shall be broken” (Psalm 34:20). This detail is key, for it signals that the Messiah’s redemptive act was never intended to be a function of how thoroughly his body was crushed. Again, it was His divinity that enabled his sacrifice to achieve “intercession for the transgressors.”

This is not to say that the violence of Christ’s death has absolutely no meaning for Christians; it does. But far from being a touchstone of holiness, his torture and crucifixion reflect the utter wickedness of this world and its hatred for divine truth. His suffering represents the temporary victory of evil that He completely reverses three days later when He rises from the tomb. Which is why Christians up until the Middle Ages placed the resurrection, and not the passion, at the center of their faith. It is Christ’s victory over humiliation and death that

justifies our faith, the image of his risen body that deserves the foremost place in our minds. As Frederica Matthewes-Green wrote on the Beliefnet Web site, to dwell on His suffering:

...would be as odd as welcoming home a wounded soldier, and instead of focusing on the victory he won, dwelling on the exact moment the bayonet pierced his stomach, how it felt and what it looked like. A human soldier might well feel annoyed with such attention to his weakness rather than his strength. He would feel that it better preserved his dignity for visitors to avert their eyes from such details, and recount that part of the story as scantily as possible to focus instead on the final achievement

In a case of throwing out the sacrificial lamb with the blood, however, Matthewes-Green aligns herself with other “Passion” critics in denying any atoning significance in Christ’s death. Although certainly appealing in light of the prevailing “Passion” mania, this assertion flies in the face of Old Testament prophecies that clearly prepare for a sacrificial perspective, as when Isaiah says that God made “His soul an offering for sin.” It also fails to acknowledge the frequent reiteration of this viewpoint in the New Testament, for example, the “propitiation by blood” that Paul attributes to Christ.

Saying that his crucifixion was intended to atone for man’s sin does not make God a sadist, as some “Passion” critics have suggested. To borrow Matthewes-Green’s military analogy, an army captain who sends a soldier on a suicide mission that both know will save countless lives is not a monster. How exactly Christ’s death accomplishes salvation is a mystery, but as C.S. Lewis

pointed, “Theories about Christ’s death are not Christianity; they are explanations of how it works.” What we do know about Christ’s atoning sacrifice is that it was His divinity—not the degree of torture he endured—that made it possible. This is an element of Christ’s life that can only be perceived by considering the whole of His ministry, and this is something that Gibson’s film, with its narrow emphasis on Christ’s last hours, cannot do.

#### **Fallacy 4: Christ’s suffering is the best evidence of his humanity.**

In light of the centrality of Christ’s divinity to the meaning of his death, it is hard to comprehend Gibson’s apparent belief that the crucifixion provides the best window into Christ’s human side. “I want to show the humanity of Christ as well as the divine aspect,” he said. And many Christians who have seen the film tend to agree with Gibson’s instincts. “‘The Passion’ draws us toward Christ’s full humanity like no film before,” wrote Peter T. Chattaway, film critic for Christianity Today. “Jesus was fully human as well as fully God and the agony that he endured was his humanity,” said Pastor Rob Bugh of Wheaton Bible Church.

Based on such comments, one might assume that the Gospels depict Christ as an ethereal creature who floats about like a butterfly, spouting profound thoughts, until He is finally captured and pinned to the cross for verification of His species. But nothing could be further from the truth. The Gospels provide plentiful examples of Christ’s humanity prior to the crucifixion: We see Him crying at the news of Lazarus’s death; We see Him flying into a violent rage at the temple; We see Him rejoicing when his disciples return with good reports from their initial

foray into preaching; We see Him showing unfathomable humility when he washes his disciples' feet; And, of course, we see Christ trembling with fear and doubt in Gethsemane. All of these actions reveal a decidedly human heart, but for some Christians (and certainly for Gibson), the spear is the most conclusive way to penetrate Christ's human side.

Indeed, to view the crucifixion as the supreme proof of Christ's humanity is to align oneself unconsciously with his enemies, not his followers. For the hooting crowd, the soldiers, and the Pharisees, the crucifixion was the definitive way to prove Christ's humanity, which, of course, was concomitant with denying His divinity. When the onlookers jeered, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God," they delighted at seeing him revealed as just a flesh-and-blood man. And it is this perspective that "The Passion of the Christ" reinforces with its fixation on blood and flayed skin. If Gibson's graphic depiction of torture and crucifixion makes Christ's fraternity with mankind manifest, it is only in the most clinical sense, demonstrating that the self-proclaimed Messiah possessed arteries, veins, and, yes, fully functional nerve endings.

Moreover, Gibson and his supporters fail to recognize the essential paradox of their position: It is Christ's divinity—and only His divinity—that makes it possible to claim a humanizing value for the humiliation and torture He endures. For any other person, such experiences would be comprehended as patently "dehumanizing." Thus, for the individual who truly believes Christ is God (as Gibson and his supporters claim to be) the crucifixion cannot be perceived as

an event that isolates His humanity; rather, it is an event that reifies His divinity at every moment. After all, we cannot attribute the valor of voluntary sacrifice to Christ if we do not credit Him with the God-like ability to stop His own crucifixion at any point along the Via Dolorosa. Gibson's film recreates the surface perspective of the Passion, showing a mere human dying on the cross. But the truth of the crucifixion, as believers understand it, is that Christ was exercising his divinity throughout His ordeal by choosing, second by second, not to end it. A Christian looking at Gibson's brutal images might be excused for forgetting the inherent Godliness of Christ's suffering, but to praise the images as "humanizing" is to accept unthinkingly the contradictory and crude premise that Christ's profuse bleeding constitutes some kind of theological revelation.

In now way does the New Testament suggest that the crucifixion was part of a divine plan to obviate Christ's humanity to anyone, not to future believers and certainly not to the witnesses at Golgotha. To argue otherwise is to indulge in anachronism. The fact of the matter is that Christ's humanity only became a matter of speculation after He died and rose from the dead. During His ministry, Christ's greatest challenge was not proving he was flesh and blood, but trying to convince people he was the Son of God. By asserting that Christ's humiliating and painful last hours were uniquely expressive of his humanity, "Passion" supporters are superimposing theological significance on the crucifixion that makes absolutely no sense in the context of the actual event.

Evidently, the appeal of Gibson's film depends in no small part on such irrational theological musings. On the New Yorker's online message board, one

man defended the humanizing aspect of Gibson's film by saying, "I have heard countless people say in no uncertain terms that Jesus did not really suffer because he was God and could just make the pain disappear." One might ask whether it is a good thing that Gibson's film is perceived to have potential influence on people who believe Christ was God, but think He was lying when He said he would "suffer many things."

More importantly, such comments invite one to ponder why people would think Gibson's film can settle any theological issue pertaining to Christ. "The Passion of the Christ" after all, is not a documentary, but a cinematic interpretation of events that occurred nearly two thousand years ago. If one was inclined to doubt the Bible's assertion that Christ suffered, why would one trust Gibson's visual confirmation. Indeed, if Jim Caviezel can fake agony convincingly, a skeptic might ask, why not Christ? Special effects and dramatic skill notwithstanding, faith is still a matter of choosing to believe what we have not seen.

The truth is, when Christians make extravagant claims for "The Passion of the Christ"—either in terms of its accuracy or truth or theological value—they are merely indicating that the film's images match their own representational needs. Consider the comments of that same New Yorker forum participant on why he favored Gibson's vision over Franco Zeffirelli's "Jesus of Nazareth."

The Jesus in Zeffirelli's film is essentially stoic during the crucifixion and looks almost bored on the cross.

Gibson's Christ, he says, is preferable mainly because the images of pain and suffering are more convincing. Later in his post, he explains this predilection by saying:

I will continue to maintain that a crucifixion without suffering has negative spiritual value—it implies that Jesus simply did not feel what we feel and makes the cross merely symbolic.

There is something inherently spongy about this rationale. Neither Gibson's movie, nor Zeffirelli's, can retroactively affect the actual suffering that Christ endured, so one wonders how the images can have any spiritual value one way or the other. It also seems bizarre to suggest that Christians should feel cheated by film depictions of the Passion that don't rise to Gibson's level of gore. In fact, one could argue that Zeffirelli's crucifixion, though less "realistic" than Gibson's interpretation, is closer to the "spirit" of the Gospels, which certainly fall short of Gibson's specificity in terms of pain and violence. Clearly, Christians who admire "The Passion of the Christ" lapse easily into incoherence when they try to justify their response with theological arguments when something simpler is probably at work: namely, an unconscious desire for violent images.

**Fallacy 5: The response to "The Passion of the Christ" is strictly religious in nature.**

The unconscious desire for images of suffering has always underwritten the appeal and advocacy of Passion dramas, and Gibson's film is continuous with this tradition. Images of violence and sadism, forbidden in other contexts, have historically been sanctioned in the Passion play because of their association with

Christ. In this way, dramatizations such as “The Passion of the Christ” have always served to implicitly redeem the spectacle of human suffering, even as they explicitly convey the sacrifice by which Christ redeemed us on the cross. “It would be tough to eat popcorn and drink a Coke through this movie, but if you want an image of violence in your mind, you should have this one,” said Naperville pastor Pierson, describing how even images of nauseous viciousness can be redeemed as long as Christ is the brunt of the brutality. “It’s something that is not exploitative. It’s not in any way entertaining ... It’s like, ‘He did this for me?’ That’s what I came away with, that he took that kind of beating, that kind of punishment for me. And I don’t want to forget that image.”

Pierson’s quote provides a hint as to how Passion dramas overcome the Christian’s higher instincts and lead him to value graphic depictions of Christ’s suffering. Specifically, the pastor’s description of an experience of violent images that is to be desired, but not consciously enjoyed, suggests the mechanism to be a form of catharsis. Aristotle coined this term to describe the powerful emotions and sense of spiritual betterment brought on by watching depictions of heroic men suffering defeat and torment. However, early church father Augustine had seen his share of classical tragedies and finally came to see the cathartic experience as unhealthy and self-deluding:

Why is it that a person should want to experience suffering by watching grievous and tragic events which he himself would not want to endure?

Nevertheless he wants to suffer the pain given by being a spectator of

these sufferings, and the pain itself is his pleasure. (*Confessions*, Book III, Chapter 2)

To make an obvious comparison between Augustine's theatregoers and the Christians who support Gibson's film is not to imply that anyone, least of all Christian pastors, would consciously experience crucifixion scenes as pleasure in any normal sense. Nor is Augustine describing normal pleasure. What he is deprecating is a person who calculates a positive value for an experience based on "tears and agonies" rather than on sound spiritual or theological principles. And in this respect, Augustine's tragedy buffs is clearly a precursor of today's "Passion" fanatic.

It is precisely this overt reliance on emotions to justify Gibson's film that concerns Eugene E. Lemcio, professor of New Testament studies at Seattle Pacific University. "I am disturbed by some of the reported comments by those who have [seen the film]— those that go along these lines: 'There was not a dry eye in the house,' and 'People sobbed throughout.' Is this what makes a film successful and important—that we can all have a good cry?" he said. Of course, what's so frustrating for critics like Lemcio is that Gibson's film locks its audience into an impenetrable feedback loop that defies critical examination, either internally or from the outside. The violent images inspire powerful emotions associated with Christ, and the "sanctified" emotions validate the violent images. A viewer trapped in such a self-perpetuating exchange will find it nearly impossible to detect that what he is experiencing is not simply a pure unalloyed religious response of the heart to Christ's enormous sacrifice. To be sure, the

Christian viewer brings genuine sympathy to the experience of watching a Christ figure suffer and die. But the response also consists partly—perhaps even mostly—of a simple reaction to watching a man flayed on screen. It may be impossible to partition the “Passion” experience into neat percentages, but there’s no denying that the emotional “punch” of the film is not entirely attributable to the person of Christ. It’s worth noting, for example, that other films—most recently, Philip Saville’s “The Gospel of John”—have depicted the same events (and in a more expansive context) and failed to inspire the ardent support among evangelicals that Gibson’s movie has. Clearly, then, the higher value claimed for watching Gibson’s film does not arise merely from watching Christ suffer (an experience available in other movies) but from watching Christ suffer *spectacularly*; it is the superior representation of brutality that elicits the strong response.

**Fallacy 6: The experience of “being there” at the crucifixion is something Christians should desire.**

The insidious self-validating nature of Gibson’s graphic images has led to the perverse situation of Christians celebrating the opportunity to feel, as Billy Graham said, as if one had “actually been there” at the crucifixion. Indeed, to listen to Gibson’s evangelical supporters, one might infer that mega-churches are only waiting for the advent of time travel to begin scheduling group trips back to Golgotha. But why being present at the torture and execution of Christ would be desirable is never articulated adequately by any of the religious leaders promoting Gibson’s film. One can extrapolate from their early reviews a crude

implied argument that humans cannot truly “appreciate” Christ’s sacrifice unless they have “seen” the suffering He endured in all of its sadistic detail.

Film critic Roger Ebert has discerned the same idea—“ that it is necessary to fully comprehend the Passion if Christianity is to make any sense”—at the core of Gibson’s film. But such a theological position is simply not supported by the Gospel writers, who, as we have seen, were fairly stingy with the graphic details. It’s also telling that in the Synoptic Gospels, the followers of Christ are described as watching the actual crucifixion unfold “from afar,” rather than fighting for the front seats that Gibson’s film affords. Whether this distancing was from fear of association or from sheer horror, we don’t know. We do know that Mary, John, and Mary Magdalene did not gather at the foot of the cross to better “appreciate” Christ’s sacrifice, but rather to comfort Him in His darkest hour. By contrast, those watching the “The Passion of the Christ” are, in Augustine’s terms, “not excited to help, but invited only to grieve.”

Predictably, the self-indulgent nature of “Passion” mania escapes the comprehension of those caught up in the phenomenon. But it’s obvious to people on the sideline who read, with disbelief, comments such as those made by mortgage banker Sandra Correa. After viewing Gibson’s film, Correa enthused to a journalist from U.S. News & World Report, saying, “I could see it 10 more times. It’s hardly more graphic than the junk many adults allow their kids to see on TV. And this violence has a purpose.” A charitable reader would grant that a first viewing of Gibson’s film might have some utility. But to argue for multiple viewings betrays a vulgar conception of the crucifixion as a spiritual amusement

park ride. If Gibson succeeded in his effort to “bring [us] there,” then surely one viewing should suffice for a lifetime. Certainly, Mary and the Apostles would not have desired a repeat performance of Christ’s darkest hours. Yet on the strength of its visceral impact, Gibson’s film has insinuated its own supreme value into the hearts of many Christians, precluding sober reflections of what “enthusiasm” for a Passion experience might imply about one’s internal motives.

As the Bishop of Hippo clearly understood, violent spectacles are effective only in increasing the viewer’s appreciation of violence, even if the viewer is made to feel that something more ennobling is taking place. So we shouldn’t be surprised that Gibson’s film—pronounced the “most violent movie I have ever seen” by critic Ebert—has been elevated to a “must-see” event by well-meaning Christians. What’s worse, these same Christians will probably run out to buy “The Passion of the Christ” DVD when it becomes available, never stopping to consider that the people who witnessed the original crucifixion—at least those who loved Christ—would have wanted those images of torture and suffering erased from their memories, not called to mind periodically as a spiritual charge-up.

### **Fallacy 7: The fact that Christ died for our sins makes us his murderers.**

Indeed, what’s perhaps most troubling about Gibson’s film is the subtlety with which it transforms its well-meaning Christian viewers into active consumers of sadism. Certainly, “spectator” is too passive a term to describe the privileged

perspective of the crucifixion afforded by Gibson's camera, with its close-ups and relentless fixation on the violence being performed on Christ's body.

This effect, as it turns out, is not an unintentional side effect; Gibson has said that he wanted to place the viewer close to the action. What's more, he has let it be known that it is his hand that holds the nail in place while the camera captures the downward swing of the hammer. This gesture, he tells us, is his way of accepting his own responsibility for Christ's death, and it has resonated with many believers. Ponnuru of *The National Review* defended Gibson's "obscene" use of violence by saying, "That's the point: What we did to Christ was obscene." If Christian viewers like Ponnuru aren't made uncomfortable by Gibson's sadistic perspective, it's apparently because they see a theological "rightness" in seeing the crucifixion through a blood-splattered lens. They are murderers, they are sadists.

This tradition—of claiming a direct hand in Christ's death—has a long history, with many distinguished proponents. In a sermon on Christ's sufferings, Martin Luther admonished Christians to "deeply believe, and never doubt the least, that you are the one who thus martyred Christ." But this belief has always distorted the Bible's perspective on the crucifixion. Yes, Christ died for our sins, but the Gospels never tell believers to think of themselves as Christ's murderers. Christ Himself described His relationship to His followers as that of a shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Gibson, and apparently many other Christians, would have us think of ourselves as the bloodthirsty wolves that take

the shepherd's life. Christ's sacrifice was meant to redeem us from sin, not implicate Christians (or Jews, for that matter) in His murder.

**Fallacy 8: The crucifixion of Christ is an ongoing, eternal process.**

Gibson's glorification of Christ's suffering reinforces other theologically flawed traditions—for example, the sentiment that Christ's crucifixion is an eternal process. The Nation's Ponnuru expressed just such a perspective when he concluded his review by saying, "We will remember that He is being crucified, and doing his saving work, every day, ever moment, as I write, as you read." This desire to imagine Christ frozen in his suffering seems intended to keep Christians in a constant state of sympathy for Christ, but it is theologically problematic for a couple reasons. For one thing, it pays short shrift to the greater importance of the resurrection. As Paul reminded the early Christians, it is the resurrection, Christ's victory over the humiliation of the cross, that is the cornerstone of the faith:

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. (1Cor:15:13-14).

More importantly, the position exemplified by Ponnuru is totally inconsistent with the New Testament's own argument for the superiority of Christ's sacrifice. The fact that Christ died "once for all" is reiterated throughout the Epistles, and is a linchpin of Christian apologetics. As the writer of Hebrews explained:

...every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.

(Hebrews 10:11-14)

It is clear from this passage that Christians are not supposed to imagine their Savior as eternally pinned to the cross, working His salvation by a continual act of suffering. We are to envision Him as already victorious over pain and awaiting still greater glory in the future. To think of Christ trapped in the most horrid day of his pre-Resurrection life is to deprive Him of the supreme uniqueness of his sacrifice and to ignore the majesty and glory that surround Him even now, "as I write, as you read." Yet to imagine a glorious Christ seated at the right hand of the Father is exactly what Gibson's film does not inspire one to do. In all fairness, it is probably beyond Gibson or any human director to convey what Christ in His glory looks like. But Gibson's blood-encrusted Savior should not become our default image of Christ just because it is ready-made and easier to obtain.

Christ is most assuredly not being crucified in time; He was done with the crucifixion as soon as he left the tomb and appeared to his disciples. To imagine Him back on the cross is to deny the profound reality of His resurrection and its glorious implications for believers.

**Fallacy 9: “The Passion of the Christ” is a must-see experience for Christians.**

Despite the confused theology engendered and reinforced by Gibson’s spectacle of violence, Christian organizations across the country are touting Gibson’s film as a witnessing “opportunity” and a highly effective proselytizing tool. “Were getting involved [with promoting the film] because we believe Mel Gibson’s movie ... will cause people to ask the most important question of life, which is, ‘What was Jesus doing on that cross?’” said John Miller, pastor of evangelism at Wheaton Bible Church.

But many believers and nonbelievers who see Gibson’s film might find themselves asking other important questions, among them:

- Is Gibson’s narrow, brutally graphic film really the best explication of Christ’s saving mission?
- Are evangelicals signaling their belief that Christ’s humility is ultimately less compelling to contemporary Americans than His humiliation?
- Are Gibson and Christian leaders unconsciously pandering to a culture whose appetite for violence is now matched by its hunger for degradation and cruelty?

No Christian doubts the supreme importance of Christ’s death and resurrection for humanity. But it does not follow that realistic images of the crucifixion are, by extension, something Christ would want us to pursue. The value of Christ’s suffering is not to be measured in lash marks and pints of blood lost, but in the eternal result: Through His supreme sacrifice, all sinners have been given the opportunity to put on His righteousness. Consequently, it’s hard to fathom why

Christian leaders want so desperately for Christians to put on—if only for two hours—the blood-splattered robes of those who watched, or worse, carried out Christ’s murder. But apparently thousands do, and what this suggests about American Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is finally far more disturbing than anything in Gibson’s film.