

***The Passion of the Christ***  
**A guide for Presbyterian viewers**  
By Edward McNulty

“O sacred head now wounded, With grief and shame  
weighed down;  
Now scornfully surrounded With thorns, Thine only crown;  
O sacred head, what glory, What bliss till now was Thine!  
Yet, though despised and gory, I joy to call Thee mine.”  
—Attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux

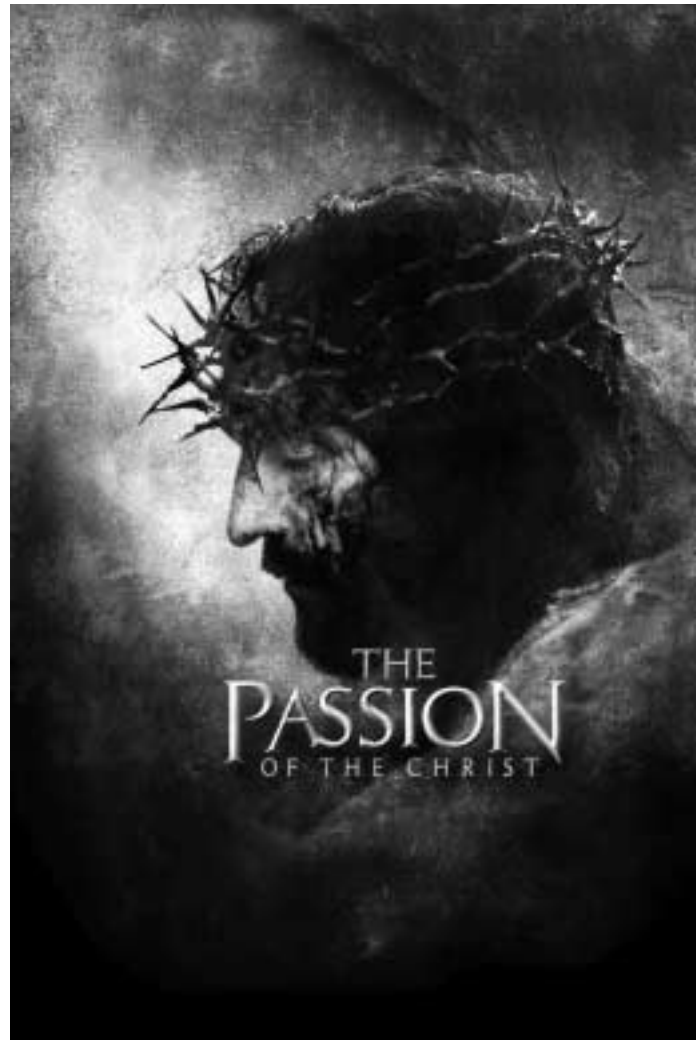
Never in any films about Jesus has that “sacred head” been wounded more than in *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson’s gory saga of the last 12 hours of Jesus’ life. Not in the crude 1914 *Passion of Our Savior*, or Cecil B. DeMille’s 1927 potboiler *King of Kings*, or the overblown spectaculars of the 60s—*King of Kings* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*—or the more recent revisionist films *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Jesus of Montreal*. Most films about Jesus set the last hours of his life in the context of his ministry of preaching, healing and relating to his disciples. They depict the trials, scourging and crucifixion of Christ almost as discreetly as do the sparse texts of the gospels.

Not so in Mel Gibson’s film. This is not a film for the sensitive—and *definitely* not for children. At a little more than two hours in length, the film has plenty of time to indulge in exploring virtually every blow, real or imagined, inflicted upon Jesus. Borrowing from the imaginings of a German nun who lived and wrote some 200 years ago, Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich, Gibson even has the enchained Jesus thrown over a bridge. He dangles helplessly in the air above the water, and then the guards haul him up like some large fish.

During his interrogation by Caiaphas and the other priests, Jesus is struck repeatedly until one of his eyes is swollen shut. From Sr. Emmerich’s book *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* Gibson’s script (co-written with Benedict Fitzgerald) takes the scornful words Pontius Pilate addresses to the priests when they haul Jesus before him in the movie, “Do you always punish a man before you judge him?”

After a fruitless attempt to dismiss the case against Jesus, Pilate turns Jesus over to his soldiers, who conduct the prisoner to the courtyard for scourging. The officer in charge indifferently (he’s seen what is about to happen hundreds of times) orders his burly underlings to begin the whipping. These goons, with their hulking bodies and cruel faces, look as if they stepped out of a Hieronymus Bosch painting. In Bosch’s “Ecce Homo” and “Christ Carrying the Cross” the features of Jesus’ brutal captors and mockers are so distorted that they almost become caricatures of Evil.

The scourging tears away pieces of Jesus’ flesh, especially when rods are replaced by flails with bits of iron and stone tied to the ends of the leather straps. The fallen Jesus struggles and then manages to stand up. The crowd is awed at



this great effort and courage, but the guards are upset, interpreting this as an act of defiance.

When the battered prisoner is brought back to Pilate, every inch of his body bruised, scarred and bloodied, the governor is startled that his orders to punish the prisoner were exceeded so greatly. He then tries to wiggle out of condemning Jesus. But the priests, and the mob they lured to come out by paying them bribes (another of Sr. Emmerich’s fabrications), will not allow it.

Then begins the long, tortuous carrying of the cross, the guards flailing at Jesus almost every step of the way. Simon of Cyrene is forced to help carry the cross. A compassionate young mother wipes Jesus’ face with a cloth and tries to give him a drink of water. Mary, Jesus’ mother, along with Mary Magdalene and the apostle John, try to keep up as they make their way through the watching throng. All of the seven last words are included, beginning with “Father forgive them” as Jesus is nailed to the cross.

### Is the film anti-Semitic?

Thus far controversy over *The Passion* has focused on whether or not the film is anti-Semitic. The answer will probably vary from viewer to viewer. Certainly this is a film that could be used by bigots to arouse prejudice. But so could a film like *Jesus Christ: Superstar*, in which the nature

of the priests is even more negatively biased.

Gibson follows the Gospel writers—especially John, who definitely blames Christ's death on Caiaphas and his allies. In Gibson's film two members of the Sanhedrin object to the way Jesus is being treated, but Caiaphas uses his authority to expel them so he can get on with his agenda.

The Romans come off as the real sadists: in the scene of Jesus' scourging the priests become so sickened by the brutality of the Roman guards that they turn and walk away. Pilate knowingly allows an innocent man to be killed when he gives in to the voice of the priests and mob. It is fair to say that Gibson's film pins most of the blame on the Romans, which is where it should be. Only they had the power to inflict the death penalty.

### Too much graphic violence?

Now that the film has opened in theaters, I suspect the controversy will move on to its violence. *The Passion* stretches the R-rating category more than any other film I've seen. I suspect 20 years ago it would have been awarded an X-rating.

Should every detail of Jesus' ordeal be shown so graphically (at the crucifixion there is literally a shower of blood when a soldier pierces the side of Jesus with a spear)? This question will, and should, be debated. Some evangelical reviewers say, "Yes," because it shows how much Jesus loves us—that he was willing to endure such torture at the hands of his barbarous captors. Maybe, but I have felt the same thing from viewing films with much less graphic violence.

On the other hand, gory depictions of the crucifixion can serve a purpose, as in the artist Mathias Grünewald's "Isenheim Altarpiece," which might well have provided a model for Gibson. In Grünewald's painting of the crucifixion every inch of Christ's body is scarred, with some of the bits of steel and thorns still embedded in his flesh. Grünewald painted this for the chapel of a hospital. The patients, most of them victims of terrible skin diseases, reportedly took great comfort from the gruesome painting, realizing that their Savior had shared in suffering similar to theirs.

### Filling in the gaps

Those who plan to use the film for evangelism are going to have to provide for many people the context or "back story." Someone not familiar with the Gospels is bound to wonder why the priests hated Jesus so much. Flashbacks to the Last Supper, intercut with Jesus' crucifixion, do a brilliant job of conveying the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass as being a sacrificial meal—but non-Catholics may not get it.

More effective for all viewers is the flashback to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: As the nails are driven into his hands we see him teaching that we must love our enemies.

Perhaps the most touching flashback takes place when Mary

sees Jesus fall under the weight of the cross. She thinks back to a time when he fell down hard as a boy and she rushed to pick him up and comfort him. Now she can only watch helplessly. Such artfully placed scenes are helpful, but not nearly enough to convey to a non-believer the scope of Christ's reconciling ministry.

### Positive contributions

Church leaders wrestling with the question of whether to take a youth group to see *The Passion* should see it themselves before deciding. While the film is certainly worth seeing, it is not for everyone.

Christians can be grateful for all the discussion it has provoked. Christians and Jews have come together in some cities to discuss issues raised by the film—during a time when there are signs of a growing anti-Semitism in this country and in Europe. The film also provides an opportunity for believers to talk about the nature of the Gospels. Gibson approaches them uncritically from a Catholic fundamentalist stance. For that matter, so did many earlier filmmakers, ignoring contradictions among the four Gospels as they tried to blend them into a harmonious whole.

Whether or not you like the film, *The Passion* can be the occasion for much good. All the debate and discussion surrounding its release shows the power of movies to shape our culture—and even more, that the church's message of a Savior is still relevant in a post-Christian age.

---

### Actor James Caviezel:

#### *A Catholic Jesus with Presbyterian connections*

In interviews actor James Caviezel, who portrays Jesus, has alluded to his experiences of spiritual awakening before and during the filming of *The Passion of the Christ*. Apparently, even though the young man grew up Catholic and still attends Mass regularly, Presbyterians have contributed to his growth as a Christian.

When the young Caviezel was a student and basketball player at the University of Washington in the late 1980s he was ministered to by Rod Handley, a staff member at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Wash., which had a strong outreach to student athletes. According to David Hackett, executive director of Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship, Caviezel also attended the church's Tuesday night fellowship group for students, called The Inn. In an e-mail passed on by Hackett, Handley reports on a recent conversation with Caviezel, in which the actor asked Christians to pray for Mel Gibson and others involved in making *The Passion*.

Caviezel is the talented actor who played Pvt. Witt in Terrence Malik's philosophical World War II film *The Thin Red Line*. Interestingly, in that film his character searches for light and meaning amidst the violence and chaos of war. He engages in a spiritual battle with his cynical sergeant, eventually becoming a Christ figure as he sacrifices his life

so two of his comrades can escape from the pursuing Japanese.

Caviezel's performance in *The Passion* suggests he would have made an authoritative, compassionate Christ had the film included more of Jesus' early ministry. What stands out (amid the violence) in this film's Jesus is his incredible endurance and refusal to give in to the desire to call down vengeance upon his tormentors.

---

### Questions for reflection/discussion

- What were your feelings and thoughts when the film ended? What message do you think Gibson wants to convey? Do you think the message was overwhelmed by the film's graphic violence?
- Does the film include enough about Jesus' life and mission for viewers to understand why he was so hated by his enemies? What would you have added had you been the director? What would you have left out?
- Do you think the film is anti-Semitic? Compare the way the priests and the Romans are depicted—which are the more cruel? Are there passages in any of the four Gospels that could be used to promote anti-Semitism?
- Is this Christ a victim or victor? What does the final scene contribute to understanding him and his mission? Is it enough? Are there any hints in the film that going to the cross was Jesus' own decision?
- What details in the film do not appear in the Gospel accounts? What do these contribute to the story?

### Suggestions for discussion leaders

You may want to have on hand reproductions of the paintings mentioned in this review, as well as various other artists' depictions of events from the last 12 hours of Jesus' life. (Your church school picture file is a good place to search, as well as the many art books on the life of Christ.)

You might plan a Jesus Film Festival for summer or next Lent using clips from the dozen or more Jesus films available on video. Do an overview at the first session, followed by viewings of several of the films in their entirety. Check with Christian Video Licensing ([www.cvli.org](http://www.cvli.org)) for a license to show films in a church or other public setting.

---

### About the author:

Edward McNulty, a Presbyterian minister, is editor of *Visual Parables*, a journal of film and theology ([www.visualparables.net](http://www.visualparables.net)). For a sample copy send three 37¢ stamps (or 83¢ postage) to: Visual Parables, P.O. Box 370, Walton, KY 41094.

### Other recommended "Jesus" films

Check your local video store for some of these other high-quality films about the life of Jesus:

#### 1. *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*

Pier Paolo Pasolini's black-and-white film featuring a fiery Christ in conflict with the authorities is faithful to its source.

#### 2. *Jesus of Montreal*

Actually a "Jesus Transfigured" film, this provocative work by French-Canadian Denys Arcand tells the story of an actor who writes and stars in an iconoclastic play about Jesus, earning the displeasure of the priest who commissioned him.

#### 3. *Jesus of Nazareth*

At over six hours, this NBC miniseries includes a great many episodes from the four Gospels and especially shows Jesus as a consummate storyteller.

#### 4. *Jesus: the Miniseries*

This film about a peacemaker Jesus, which aired on CBS, inserts much fictional material—such as a scene in which Jesus argues with Barabbas about violence and nonviolence and a scene in Gethsemane in which Satan tempts Jesus to forsake the cross.

#### 5. *The Miracle Maker*

This is a wonderful retelling of the story of Jesus through the eyes of the young daughter of Jairus. The artistry of claymation makes it appealing to adults as well as children (and yes, the crucifixion is shown, though not in gory detail).

#### 6. *The Gospel of John*

This beautifully filmed version of the complete text of the Gospel of John from the American Bible Society's Today's English Version has been showing in theaters this year. The 3-disk DVD set will be a marvelous aid for those studying this Gospel. The third disk includes short features providing historical and theological background, as well as the usual "making of the film" features. For information go to [www.gospelofjohnthefilm.com](http://www.gospelofjohnthefilm.com).