

Preparing for the Movie, The Passion of the Christ

By Pastor Andy Aikens

Before you see the movie, The Passion of the Christ, there are two cautions I believe you should think about. The first has to do with the power of images in matters of faith. The second has to do with being careful about the things that influence your theology.

Have you ever wondered if a picture of Jesus transgressed the second commandment? I certainly think it is possible, but not automatic. The reason a picture of Jesus does not automatically break the second commandment is because in the incarnation Jesus took a true human form. Those who followed Jesus in the first century could see Him and touch Him. Also, after His ascension these followers were able to remember what He looked like. None of these experiences was a breaking of the second commandment. Therefore, when we ponder the physical appearance of Jesus, it is not a given that we are breaking God's law either.

But, we are treading on slippery ground. We are treading on slippery ground because we do not have the historical image of Jesus to contemplate. As a result, when we depict a supposed image of Christ on canvas or stage or film, we are saying things about Christ that may or may not be true. This in itself is not an insurmountable problem. Pastors wrestle with saying things about Christ that may or may not be true week in and week out. However, the problem with the image lies in its power. Because of the power of pictures, it is possible for any speculation of Christ's image to totalize our understanding of who He is.

Therefore, we must be aware of this danger and guard against it. Why? It's not simply because images are not accurate and will invariably fall short of the truth, but rather it is because images are so powerful. They are so powerful that once they are viewed they are then always at hand to inform our reading of Scripture. Unlike a traditional commentary, the image, particularly the video image, intrudes and overpowers thinking and reading.

In order to illustrate, let's examine two examples from pop culture. The first example is from a classic film. How many people are forever resigned to read the book of *Exodus* in light of the movie, The Ten Commandments? Cecil B. DeMille's depiction of Moses and his times forever informs our understanding of the Biblical text. In that film, elaborations to the Scriptures abound. Dialogue is added. Personalities are embellished. Charlton Heston has been defined by this role and in many ways so has Moses. For many people, Moses will no longer be a Hebrew. He is now a very tall, very handsome white guy from America. Not to mention that the Egyptian, Ramses, is a white guy named Yul Brynner. Do not deceive yourself into thinking that you can overcome these influences. They are inescapable and dangerous.

The second example is from the last film that transformed movie making, the movie Star Wars. I cannot even look at Harrison Ford without seeing Han Solo. Any time I see Mark Hamill, I see Luke Skywalker. I am pretty certain that many of you have had the same experience.

Neither of these examples provides a foolproof argument regarding the danger that is inherent to the power of images. I do not expect either example to fully persuade anyone. However, I do expect that these examples will set your mind to thinking. Can movies transform our thoughts? Yes! And if so, then we must think carefully about the lasting image we will carry away from a viewing of Gibson's movie.

A possible objection to my line of thinking might be that books also have the power to transform our thoughts. Yes, books transform our thinking also, but they do it in a different way. The difference is the difference between words and images. In order for you to see my point, consider a common human experience.

Have you ever read a book that was made into a movie? I have. Some of those books were The Outsiders, most of the Grisham books, The Chronicles of Narnia, Holes, and recently The Lord of the Rings. In every one of these instances something profound happened to me. In the reading of the novels my imagination was shaped by the words on the page. I saw pictures in my head and lived in the worlds created by the author. Then, upon seeing the movie those images were not simply superseded; they were obliterated. In this analogy I see a parallel and consequent danger in reading the Bible and then seeing the Scriptures portrayed in film or on stage.

In the reading of novels, having our encounters with the text obliterated by a movie is not a huge loss. But, when we have the same experience with the Scriptures, we are no longer talking about fiction; we are now talking about the very Word of God. And, when our understanding of the Bible is shaped by visual media rather than our own reading of the text, something very dangerous has happened to us. If in viewing the film you are overwhelmed to the point that you give more homage to the image in the film than you do to Christ Himself, then you will be in danger of idolatry. How can you be in danger of idolatry? You can be in danger of idolatry by over-identifying the image on the screen with the person of Christ. This happens when that image defines your understanding of who Jesus is.

This does not mean that we cannot ponder the appearance of Jesus. Surely Jesus looked like many other first century Jewish men. Surely He bore the marks of a laborer, such as calluses. All of these details help me contemplate things I know from Scripture. But, when these ponderings are committed to canvas or stage or film, they obtain a power they did not previously have. They obtain a power to dominate and inform, and they will dominate and inform generations and entire cultures regarding their core beliefs about who Jesus is. This is why

the leaders of the Reformation, particularly the Puritan branch of the Reformation, worked so hard to get rid of the icons in the church. To them the icons held the gospel captive, and they sought to set the gospel free.

My thoughts regarding The Passion of the Christ began as an application for an exposition of John 4:21. In this exposition my primary purpose was to answer the question, "What does it mean to worship in spirit and truth?" If it means nothing else, this phrase means that worshiping God must occur in a spiritual manner and in a truthful manner. In light of the spiritual and truthful nature of Biblical worship, it is helpful to observe that the Bible was written in words rather than pictures. This fact demonstrates God's preferred method for communicating with His people. He has ordained the method of holy conversation. He speaks to us, and we speak to Him in words. He speaks, and we speak back to Him in words of poetry and prose. We commune heart to heart and mind to mind. With the aid of a full-orbed revelation we experience God through His Word in our minds, in our emotions, and in our wills. We think, we feel, and we act in light of His speaking, a speaking that occurs in words of prayer, words of song, words of history, words of image (the book of Revelation), and ultimately the word of a person who is Jesus Christ (John 1:1-5; Hebrews 1:1-3).

Words and images are very different. It is important to realize that historically Evangelicals have valued words over images. Evangelicals, coming out of the Reformation and the Puritan tradition, have valued the Bible above all forms of communication. Contrary to this, the Catholic faith and the Eastern Orthodox faith have valued images. It may be argued that they have even valued the images more than they have valued the text. Since Mel Gibson, the director and producer of the movie, is Catholic, it may be safe to assume he has been influenced by the traditions of the Catholic Church. Now, I do not condone Catholic bashing, but there is a difference between Catholics and Evangelicals. We do not need to be afraid to state those differences or to warn people about potential influences on their thinking.

It is the differences between Evangelicals and Catholics that gives me pause about the movie's message. So, now I turn to consider my second caution concerning this movie, which has to do with the things that influence our theology.

Some will try to argue that my point here is not valid because this movie attempts to portray what happened rather than why it happened. However, several messages regarding why Christ died have already been debated and discussed during the pre-release interviews. More of these messages will continue to come through in the subtleties of the film. The question concerning why Jesus died is the most important question that will result from this film. It is also the question that raises my concerns. The need to answer this question led my church to participate in distributing John Piper's new book that puts forward fifty reasons from Scripture for why Jesus died.

Piper's book and articles like this one will be helpful to counteract all the promotional hype regarding the film's fidelity to the original text. Supposedly, Gibson was so concerned that the film be true to history that he produced the movie with subtitles so the characters could speak in Aramaic and Latin. As evangelicals, our commitment to the inerrancy of the original text has to do with the Greek manuscripts. I wonder why this language was not chosen? While it is certain that Jesus spoke Aramaic, He did not speak exclusively Aramaic, and I find no historical data to support any speaking in Latin. This certainly seems like undue influence of Catholic theology.

And so I ask, how much Catholic theology will come through in the elaborations? One of the film's elaborations on Scripture is a vision Mary has of Jesus as a young boy. She has this vision in the form of a remembrance while she is staring into His face on the Via Dolorosa. How many people will leave the cinema, having never read the gospels, believing that this is a part of the sacred text? And, what is the message of this scene?

While I am concerned about the movie's influence, I have a greater concern regarding the manner in which so many Evangelical leaders are handling this discussion. It seems that Evangelicals are giving unprecedented support to a work that we ought to be more skeptical of. Recently, a prominent pastor's conference in Orlando invited Gibson to speak about his upcoming movie. Not every pastor that attended that event supports the movie equally. However, the event itself gave the impression to the larger community that evangelical leaders had no cautions in regard to this film.

In addition to this, the local Christian radio station heralded Gibson's presence at the pastor's conference as a wonderful thing. Yet, the truth is that Gibson's faith is radically divergent from Protestantism as a whole. For example, as a practicing Catholic Mel Gibson testified to taking the Lord's Supper every day while filming this movie. Why did he do that? Did he take the Lord's Supper because of a grace-filled gratitude toward a God who paid Gibson's debt completely on the Cross? No, probably not. He probably did it because, as a good Catholic, Gibson believes that the supper supplies him with saving grace that protects him from hell. He is not trusting in the merits of Christ; he is trusting in the performance of his own works.

Now, I am not being critical of Mel Gibson as a person. He is certainly free to do as he pleases. And, if he desired to make this movie, I am not angry with him. Hopefully, I am not angry with anyone. However, what I am critical of is the lack of discernment that many very important evangelicals have shown in regard to the theological influences of this film and the dialogue that surrounds it.

I heard one evangelical comedian quip that since Mel Gibson was now a Christian, there would be a major increase in the number of conversions of women. I guess for some reason women might want to go to heaven more, now

that they think such a handsome movie star will be there. While I think that this comment does contain humor, I also think it is very shameful that evangelicals make no distinction between their own faith and the faith represented by the Catholic Church. I am beginning to wonder why there was ever a Reformation. Forgetting the Reformation is akin to forgetting the Holocaust. And, if you think I am overstating the case, just consider the number of men and women that lost their lives for the sake of the true faith from 1100-1700 A.D. Catholicism is not Christianity. When Catholicism fails to uphold that justification before God comes through faith alone in Christ alone, it ceases to be in the vein of Biblical Christianity. I am deeply disheartened that so many conservative, Bible-believing evangelicals fail to acknowledge this distinction.

Therefore, I caution you in regard to the theological influences of this film. It is not totally clear what they will be. However, in the years to come I am certain that we will see the influence of this film fleshed out in churches all across this nation. So, if you choose to see this film, please do it with your brain in gear. It is imperative that evangelicals be discerning. We have been passive in theological matters for far too long already.

Conclusion

I must admit that I get very afraid when I stand alone on an issue. At this point I have a strong notion that I am the only pastor calling for caution. This is probably not true, but I do feel this way. Therefore, I wish to be focused. I am offering a word of caution. Christianity has far bigger issues to deal with, and this movie has helped to bring some of them to light. I greatly appreciate Al Mohler of the Southern Baptist Theological seminary for publishing a reply to the recent *Newsweek* article. If you wish to see that, please log onto www.passion-book.com/passion/movie_reviews and click on the link [Al Mohler Responds to Newsweek Article on the *Passion* Film.](#)

I never want to be bitter towards people or events that I may not agree with. Nor do I want those who read this article to be bitter. But, neither do I want public opinion to keep us from thinking. Therefore, I do offer these two cautions. I offer them because they are cautions that I think evangelicals need to ponder. I know people will see this movie regardless of what I say. So, I want them to be prepared in the best possible way, for even when they are prepared, people still run the risk of succumbing to the great but subtle power inherent to visual media.

In respect to this movie, visual media is treading at the door of the second commandment by obliterating our previous understanding of a God-written text. The film obliterates that understanding by replacing it with a cinematic vision. It is this contrast between the God-written text and the cinematic vision that is in question, and all I am asking for is caution and thoughtfulness because images may be hazardous to your faith. If your affections ever overwhelm you to the point that you give more homage to the image than you do to Christ Himself, you

will be in danger of idolatry. In regard to this film in particular, we must all be aware of the danger of over-identifying the image on the screen with the person of Christ.

It's not that God would never use a film about Christ to reach people. He may very well do just that in the case of The Passion of the Christ. He has certainly done it the case of the Jesus Film. But, we must remember; the fruit of a particular instrument is never a wholesale validation of the veracity and purity of that instrument. Consider those who worked for Christ their entire lives but heard from Jesus on the last day, "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:21-23). Consider the preachers of Philippians 1 who preached the gospel out of selfish ambition. God uses sinful people all the time. This does not validate their sin. We can rejoice in the things our God does through sinful people without thinking that God has thrown a blind eye to sin; He has not done that. Even though He wins many souls through broken messengers, the messengers must still give an account for their lives. In regard to my own ministry, I am very thankful that God still uses sinful people.

I do not want to sound like an alarmist, but there is a lot at stake here. For those who choose to see the movie, there will be a price beyond the cost of admission. Yet, for every person God transforms for His glory, I believe we should rejoice. Whether I choose to see the movie or not, I must be prepared to deal with the difficult questions that will arise. There is hard spiritual work ahead of us even after this movie leaves the theatre. We must be prepared, for this movie will leave many people with many questions. Their questions will be so numerous and profound that they may spiritually look like fishing line all tangled up. As a pastor I find myself often untangling fishing line that I did not tangle up. Maybe a word of caution such as found in this article or the instruction found in Piper's book will be just the thing many will need to not be so tangled up. May we be cautious, may we be thoughtful, and may we be prepared to the glory of God.