

Another Look at Gibson's Film "The Passion of the Christ"

Colleagues,

Crossings president Steve Kuhl offers another look at Gibson's film. Steve's a farm boy, like me, who got educated. In his case, first as an aeronautical engineer, which brought him to St. Louis 30 years ago to work for McDonnell Douglas. He was there when Semtex happened. Curious, he came over to see what it was all about. He stayed. He also got involved in Crossings and did a Ph.D. linking Christian faith to the "culture" of American agriculture at the time of the farm crunch in the 70s. After many years of pastoring in the ELCA he recently was asked by Roman Catholics in Milwaukee to join their seminary faculty as church history professor with emphasis on the Reformation. He's deeply involved in ecumenical work. You've seen some of that in earlier postings of ThTh. His essay below comes from such ecumenical work – in this case, with Jews as well as with Roman Catholics.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Finding Common Ground as God-fearers: Reflections on "The Passion of the Christ" ***By Steven Kuhl***

A Presentation given at Congregation Shalom, Fox Point, WI as part of a Jewish-Christian Dialogue panel discussion on the Gibson Movie, "The Passion of the Christ." Dear friends,

I'm inclined to call you "Theophilos," "God-lover," as St. Luke addressed the audience of his famous gospel, because that is precisely what I assume we gathered here are: God-Lovers. Whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, clergy or lay, young or old, black or white, we are all God-lovers—and nothing can take that away. But just because we love God doesn't mean we understand God – at least, not in the same way. Indeed, it's obvious we don't – and that, on first glance, would seem to be the problem. But while that is a problem, I suggest to you that that is not the biggest problem. (I remember a reference to a time, whether historical or imaginative, I'm not sure, when there was unanimous, world-wide human consensus about God, and God declared them wrong. The story of the Tower of Babel, remember?) The biggest problem that faces us, then, is not whether we all understand God the same way, but whether we understand God the way God wants to be understood. Do we love God for who God is or do we love God for who we want God to be? To ask the question that way unites us, I believe, but it unites us not as God-lovers but as God-fearers, indeed, as potential blasphemers: for nothing is more dangerous – and worthy of true fear – than to feign the love of God. But isn't that, namely, the "fear of God," precisely the beginning of wisdom, as both the Jewish and the Christian traditions tell us, in both the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures? Indeed, I propose that the only place for us to find common ground is in the "fear of God" lived out as repentance, because true wisdom and love is borne only out of repentance.

In light of that, what has been most puzzling to me about the public reaction to Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" is the lack of wisdom borne out of repentance. Rather, the reaction has been triumphalistic and defensive, especially on the part of many Christians, but not only Christians, though it is to my fellow Christians that I wish to speak. Why is that?

My own impression is that the film has become such a powerful symbol of the "culture wars" between (what I will call for lack of better terminology) "secular liberalism" and "Christian conservatism" that all sides read into the film what they want, see in it what they want, and ignore in it what they want. Defenders of the film do not see its success at the box office as simply another (though perhaps surprising) commercial success, but as a sign of a hunger for traditional "Christian" values in the culture. Defenders of the film don't just see Jesus getting beaten, but their values agenda for the nation being beaten; they don't just see Pilate capitulating to Jews but our government capitulating to liberalism; they don't just see Judaism plotting against Jesus, but liberalism plotting against them. By the same token, critics of the film also react with the same allegorical interpretation, as though the villains on the screen are really meant to represent them. Now maybe my mind has been clouded by watching too many of those cable TV news programs to really understand the phenomenon of the movie. (You know, the ones that pit Conservative Protestants and Catholics against Hollywood critics and Jewish and Catholic liberals.) Nevertheless, so it seems to me, there is much of the "culture wars" at work here and that, I think, interferes with approaching the film and its subject matter in the "fear of God" borne out as repentance.

What I'm going to ask you to try to do now is bracket out the "culture wars" symbolism that the film has taken on and look at it critically, objectively, as simply a film about the Passion. What might we see if we look at it from the perspective of the "fear of God" borne out as repentance? Since my assignment is to share something of the Lutheran perspective on the topic, to do this I'm going to draw on the documents which the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations has put out in recent years: not only the document called "Guidelines for

Lutheran-Jewish Relations,” but especially the document called “‘The Passion of Christ’: Concerns and Recommendations in Anticipation of the Forthcoming Film,” which was issued in January of this year while the movie was still in production. The document reads, and I here synthesize the text:

The portrayal of the Passion of Jesus is one of the most difficult subjects in the history of Jewish-Christian relations. Whenever and however it is told, the Passion sets the Jew Jesus, his Jewish disciples, other Jewish leaders, a large Jewish community of considerable diversity, a Roman governor, Roman soldiers, and God in a complex web of relationships. Tragically, portrayals of the Passion over many generations have led to the virulent condemnation of Jewish communities, with Christians lashing out to punish those they had learned to call “Christ-killers.” This doleful history demands a special vigilance from any who portray the Passion today. The Passion has the power of the gospel, God’s power to bring life from death. We must not allow the libels of former ages to compromise it in our time.

“[T]he New Testament must not be used as justification for hostility towards present-day Jews,” and “blame for the death of Jesus should not be attributed to Judaism or the Jewish people.”

Recognizing [Mel Gibson’s] stature and influence as a film producer and celebrity, we can expect that Mr. Gibson’s project will share and reshape understandings of this central Christian story for millions of viewers. It is imperative that such influence be exercised with due regard for the powerful heritage of the Passion as gospel truth for Christians and as human tragedy for many Jews.

We urge members of the [ELCA] to renew their familiarity with

the Passion story by reading and studying the gospel portrayals [and] to become informed about the issues that surround the challenging task of portraying the Passion in dramatic or cinematic form.

We urge Mr. Gibson to give due regard . . . to its historical accuracy and to its portrayal of Jewish characters [which] requires that he give credence to the critique of historical scholars and [which] neither stirs antisemitism nor lends itself to antisemitic exploitation.

How well does “The Passion of the Christ” do relative to these Passion Play guidelines for depicting Jews and bringing understanding to the complex web of relationships that formed first-century Palestine? In general, I’d say not well. In Gibson’s redaction of the story (where he draws on the canonical Gospels, his own imagination, as well as other extra-biblical and speculative material) the Jews and the Romans both are presented very one-dimensionally. His account reflects nothing of the complexity that is variously reflected in each of the four gospels, let alone the way modern scholarship has been able to illuminate the cultural context.

For example, Gibson uses his imagination to create an extra-biblical scene between Pilate and his wife (extrapolated and redacted from parts of Matthew and John, as well as Anne Catherine Emmerich) to give us a picture of a Pilate, not as the ruthless ruler known to scholarship, but as a man who languishes under the weight of imperial responsibility. How is he to rule in “truth” this manipulating Jewish populace? Indeed, the Roman authorities cannot even control their own soldiers, who beat Jesus beyond the symbolic scourging the rulers intended him to get. Why couldn’t Gibson have done something similar for Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders by

drawing, for example, on the fears of the Jewish leaders as expressed in John 11? There, in response to Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead, the leaders fear that Jesus' increased popularity will create the perception of insurrection and incite the Romans to destroy both the "holy place and our nation." In that light, Caiaphas proclaims a central element in the gospel, namely, that "it is better for one man to die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed," showing how richly ironic and inclusive the symphony of grace is. In addition, the massive, mindless, arbitrary, bloodthirsty tenor of the crowd looks all too much like the caricatures of the Jews as presented in the ancient passion plays that at times led to violent actions against Jews. [On this observation I am heavily indebted to Matthew Meyer Boulton, "The Problem with The Passion," *The Christian Century*, vol. 121, No. 6 (March 23, 2004), p. 19.] This is precisely the kind of depiction of the Jews that the Lutheran and Roman Catholic documents on Passion Plays are saying needs to be avoided. Even more, theologically, these one-dimensional depictions overlook the deep irony that permeates the Biblical accounts of the passion to the point of obscuring, if not obliterating, the reason why the Christ (as Jesus explains over and over again in his teachings) must be rejected, suffer, die and on the third day rise. Unless we can sympathize with the complex dilemma of all the people who are caught up in the events of that tragic, but good Friday (as Christians want to call it), the Jews as well as the Romans, then the account obscures the mind-boggling reason for Christ's passion: that Christ died for all, as Christians are wont to confess it. Anti-Jewish and anti-semitic portrayals obscure the gospel because they portray the event as a Medieval morality play, indeed, as a classical Manichean struggle of good guys and bad guys, we against them, and not as Christ's solemn plea and wrestling with God that God relent of his judgment and offer mercy (for no other reason than for Christ's sake) to the

whole, complex, sinful world.

Besides the concern about latent anti-Jewish features in the film, concern has also been raised about the level of violence portrayed. It is in this regard, especially, that Gibson claims for himself the prize for historical accuracy and cinematic realism. Whether or not the flaying that Jesus gets at the hands of the sadistic, out-of-control Roman soldiers is historically accurate (and I have my doubts), the greater question is this: Does that historical detail and plot-line emphasis add to or diminish the meaning of the Passion of Christ? That depends on what you think the canonical Scriptures are saying the meaning of the Passion is. I don't think so, but Gibson does, and here is why he does, or so it seems to me. It has to do with his theory of atonement, the rationality of why God forgives.

It must be remembered that Gibson is avowedly not a Vatican II Catholic but a Tridentine Catholic and, accordingly, his film, so it seems to me, serves as an apologetic, though subtly, for that conviction. (Not only did he invest \$25 million to make this film, but he also built a \$1 million church so the Latin, Tridentine Mass could be celebrated.) Accordingly, Gibson interprets the Passion as predominantly a cultic sacrifice, using a kind of Satisfaction or Penal Model of the atonement (which has roots reaching back to the High Middle Ages), a model that seeks to link systematically, if not mathematically, the measure of Christ's suffering with the measure of our forgiveness. Moreover, an important part of his agenda is to show an explicit connection between that concept of the atonement and the Tridentine concept of the Sacrifice of the Mass.

Gibson's view of the atonement (how Jesus pays the price for our sins) is a quantitative and retributive view: that is, the

greater the quantity of punishment Jesus receives, the greater the portion of sin's burden he carries. This idea is also very closely related to the substitutionary view of the atonement that is definitive of Fundamentalism. Therefore, it is important for Gibson that Jesus be portrayed as an extraordinary sufferer, a heroic sufferer. Jesus has to be able to shoulder more suffering than any ordinary man because his very purpose is to take onto himself the punishments that belong to the whole sinful world. Unless he is the heroic sufferer, he cannot succeed in carrying out the atonement, and Gibson makes Jesus' heroism in suffering so profound that even his sadistic torturers become exhausted in their efforts to overwhelm Jesus with suffering. However, for Gibson, as badly as Jesus has suffered in the ordeal of the Passion, the quantity of satisfaction for sin is not accomplished once and for all on Calvary, but is continued through the celebration of the Tridentine Sacrifice of the Mass. That celebration is understood as the ongoing unbloody sacrifice for sin that has been established by the bloody sacrifice of Christ.

Gibson explicitly connects this atonement theory to the notion of the Tridentine sacrifice of the mass (an idea that would repel Fundamentalists if they could see it in the film) through a series of flashbacks. The scenes that I remember as making this connection are these: 1) While Jesus is before Pilate, Gibson has a flashback to Jesus washing his hands at the last supper, then returns to Pilate washing his hands to justify the offering of this victim – all an allusion to the action of the priest washing his hands at the Mass. 2) When Jesus gets to Calvary we have a flashback, again, to Jesus at the supper, where he rips the cloth off the basket exposing the bread for the meal, then a return to the soldier ripping off Jesus' sackcloth robe – all an allusion to the priest preparing the victim for the sacrifice. 3) After Jesus is nailed to the cross

we have a flashback to Jesus at the supper lifting up the bread, only to return to see Jesus' cross lifted up –an allusion to the priest raising up the consecrated host, now the body of Christ, as the ongoing work of atonement through the unbloody sacrifice of the mass. My point here is not to disparage the Eucharist or the real presence, which I too see as central to the Christian's relation to Christ crucified and raised, but to show why Gibson focuses so graphically on the suffering, or more specifically the scourging, of Christ. He suffers the punishment we deserve, thus satisfying the demands of God's judgment on sin. It also explains why Gibson gives scant attention to the resurrection. It plays no direct role in this view of atonement, except to establish the ground for the ongoing offering of the sacrifice of the mass.

This, in my judgment, is clearly Gibson's theory of the atonement and his lens for interpreting in a simple straightforward manner the complex story of the Passion. While that concept of the atonement has roots in medieval theology, it is not, in my judgment, the dominant paradigm for understanding the suffering, death, and resurrection in the New Testament Gospels, nor is it the kind of view that figured prominently in the Patristic Age, which Gustaf Aulen called the Christus Victor Model. While I cannot go into depth here on the New Testament "meaning" of the Passion (maybe we can do that more in our discussion) I'd like to close by making two points about the meaning of the "sufferings of Christ" that, I think, dominate the New Testament perspective and that contradict the major thrust of Gibson's presentation.

First, in the New Testament, "Christ crucified" is not the Hero, not the strongest man, but the weakest man. He is not "Braveheart" but the "broken heart," he is not exemplary in the way he confronts suffering, but ordinary, displaying a radical solidarity with every sufferer. [Boulton, p. 20. In addition,

classical Christology saw in the suffering of Christ – including that he got hungry, thirsty, scared, ached, bled, died, etc. – the humanity of Jesus, not his divinity. Gibson wants to use Christ’s sufferings to show Christ’s distance, his divinity, how much he is not like ordinary human beings.]

Thousands of Jews were crucified by the Romans. Jesus was simply one among the many, from the perspective of the camera lens at least. What is surprising about the gospel (such that the New Testament writers cannot ignore it) is this: how can a man with such an unremarkable end to his life (dying as a common criminal) become the key to our relationship with God? That unremarkable ending, that mind-boggling mystery, “scandal” and “foolishness” of the cross, as Paul puts it, is central to the gospel. And here is essentially how the New Testament addressed it. Jesus as the Messiah of God, in his cross, identifies with those who are weak and lowly, obscure and forgettable – indeed, those defined as God-foresaken – so that in his resurrection he can gather them and present them to God as those who are most precious, that is, set apart for mercy. Most people I know came away from the movie awed at the level of suffering Jesus endured. It was superhuman, and the fact that people came away with that reaction reveals, I believe, one of the major theological problems with Gibson’s presentation. No one I know came away from the theater identifying with the sufferings of Christ, as the New Testament bids us to do. To the contrary, they were so awed at the level of heroic suffering that Gibson presented on the screen, that they were distanced from the Christ. For many, Gibson’s presentation of the sufferings of Christ simply put their small sufferings to shame. That is not what the cross of Christ is intended to do in the New Testament Gospels’ presentation – at least, not “simply” that, as I read those Gospels.

Second, Gibson presents the Passion as though the great nemesis

that Jesus had to deal with was the devil, that spooky androgynous figure who floats throughout the film. In this regard, Gibson frames the Passion in a classical Manichean framework of good versus evil with the "good" and the "evil" easily identified on the screen. Jesus and a few others in the film, especially Mary, are easily identified as the good, while the bulk of the people, especially the Jews (amongst whom the evil one floats) are easily identified as the evil. While it is true that the struggle between good and evil is a common subtheme in the New Testament (God's judgment and death sentence upon sin and evil is well attested) the dominant theme in the Passion (and the gospels generally, as they interpret the passion) is not a good -versus-evil struggle. Rather, it is God's mercy versus God's judgment, the redemption of sinners, the plea "Father, forgive them [for my sake] for they know not what they do." In the Passion, Jesus, the Son of God, takes the side of sinners before God the judge, pleading for mercy. One can easily see here the Abrahamic tradition being carried forward: just as Abraham pleads mercy, not judgment, for Sodom and Gomorrah, now Jesus pleads mercy, not judgment, for the whole world. Here is a voice calling for the end of, not the exacerbation of, the culture wars by inviting everyone to die to self through him: in a word, to repent. Of course, the paradox and intrigue of this confrontation is mind-boggling and there is no way to depict it with the lens of a camera. It needs commentary! Something that Gibson doesn't do much of. As pure historical event, so it seems to me, as Jesus breathes his last dying breath, we have no way of knowing what the outcome will be. Has God abandoned him along with his cause? Or will the Father receive his spirit? That is, will the spirit of Christ's mercy (marked by forgiveness and life) trump the spirit of judgment, of retribution (marked by judgment and death)? For the New Testament the answer to this question is the resurrection and the proclamation of forgiveness in the

name of Jesus. Moreover, the "truth" of Jesus' Passion, the way of mercy over judgment, can be presented to the world only as believers live humbly and repentantly in the world: not as crusaders of the culture wars, even though they find themselves in that war, but as cross-bearing servants, willing to be ordinary people, suffering quietly, obscurely, unimpressively, unheroically, for the sake of their neighbors and their world, regardless of who they are.