



The Passion of Christ - now on DVD

On Ash Wednesday, February 25 of 2004, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ exploded on to the popular culture scene with the release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Moviegoers flocked to theatres across the nation to witness Gibson's cinematic portrayal of Christ's suffering and death. American evangelicals were quick to recognize the evangelistic potential of the popular film. One organization boldly labeled the film "*the best outreach opportunity in 2,000 years.*" Many churches cancelled services for the Sunday following the film's release and purchased seats in local theatres for a Sunday morning showing, so that congregants might invite unsaved friends and family to view *The Passion* for free. Pamphlets and tracts were written to supplement the film, and church members were offered instructional classes on how to maximize the evangelistic potential of the film.

Now that *The Passion of the Christ* is coming out on DVD, the evangelistic fervor surrounding the movie has once more left many Reformed believers in an uncomfortable position. Reformed churches have traditionally prohibited images of Christ as a violation of the second commandment. The Westminster Larger Catechism forbids "*making any representation of God ... or of any of the three persons*" (Q. 109). Raising questions about the propriety of representing Christ visually in film, in the midst of such excitement about *The Passion's* potential to reach the lost, may appear tantamount to a lack of concern for evangelism. And besides, haven't some within the Reformed tradition suggested that images of Christ are not a violation of the second commandment? As one Puritan theologian reasoned, "*Christ was a man like one of us, so He may be pictured as a man.*" Christ's true humanity, according to this line of argument, implies that visual representations of Him in His humanity are not inappropriate. In any case, should not interest in the church's evangelistic task override any qualms one might have over visual depictions of Christ? With the Evangelical world once again enthusiastically embracing *The Passion* as an "outreach opportunity," Reformed Christians may be tempted to imitate their Evangelical brothers and sisters without seriously considering whether the film is an appropriate means for evangelism.

In this essay I argue that the Church should not use *The Passion of the Christ* as a tool to fulfill her evangelistic task. I argue, first, that Gibson's portrayal of Christ's suffering and death is not in fact the gospel that the Church is called to preach. I argue, second, that God has appointed a specific means (namely, the ministry of the Word) to advance the gospel of His kingdom, and that the Church undermines God's own appointed method for evangelism to the extent that she embraces alternative means. My consideration of *The Passion of the Christ* focuses narrowly on the question of whether the Church should use the film as an instrument for evangelism. I am not directly addressing the question of whether Christians are morally prohibited from viewing this film altogether. My consideration of *The Passion of the Christ*, however, has broader implications for the question of whether any cinematic or dramatic presentation of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is an appropriate means of evangelism. I believe that the arguments I advance against using this film as an evangelistic tool could be applied to other films depicting Christ, or even dramatic representations of Christ in a Church context.

A transition in culture

We live in a culture that is increasingly dependent upon images for communication. Neil Postman, a critic of culture, describes "*the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television.*" Americans today view television and films far more frequently than they read any

printed works. The numerical statistics indicating the amount of time average Americans devote to viewing television and films are staggering. As a result, *“we are now a culture whose information, ideas and epistemology are given form by television, not by the printed word.”* America has become a culture enslaved to images.

Postman suggests the negative effect the triumph of the image over the word has upon culture:

“Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice.”

Others are less pessimistic about culture's increasing dependence upon images for communication. Roman Catholic author Anthony Schillaci also recognizes the transition *“from a verbal, literary culture to a visual one.”* Schillaci, however, suggests that living in *“the age of the image”* creates positive venues for educating people by the use of images. Schillaci is especially interested in how the Church might employ images to reach a *“visually oriented generation”* with its message.

Schillaci boldly suggests

that the message of Scripture “can no longer be entrusted exclusively to the printed page, but must incarnate itself in the moving image if it is to speak to a generation whose patterns of perception have been conditioned by film and television.”

Furthermore, *“the Word will have no effect today unless it is communicated by means of the central medium of the day, the moving image. The historical situation has demanded the wedding of the Image and the Word, and it is only those who lack the dynamism of a historical sense who will oppose the efforts to bring these two into fruitful combination.”*

Perhaps Schillaci's basic presupposition explains the zeal with which evangelicals have embraced *The Passion of the Christ* as *“the best outreach opportunity in 2,000 years.”* Many believers are likely to agree with Schillaci that *“the historical situation”* demands *“the wedding of the Image and the Word.”* If the *“central medium of the day”* has become the *“moving image,”* then certainly the Church must accommodate itself to the culture by communicating the gospel by means of moving images. There is a danger here, however, of never pausing to question whether the *“central medium of the day”* is even capable of communicating the gospel. In other words, the message communicated by *The Passion of the Christ* may in fact not be the gospel at all.

The Passion of the Christ is narrowly focused upon Christ's suffering and death. The film covers the short period from Christ's arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane to His death on the cross. The film's graphic nature in depicting what Jesus went through in His suffering and death has left audiences literally speechless. The film has undoubtedly been a powerful and emotional experience for viewers. But does the film communicate the gospel message?

J. Gresham Machen, in *Christianity and Liberalism*, notes that *“the full meaning”* of Christ's death *“could be made clear only after the event had taken place.”* The meaning of Christ's death upon the cross is not readily apparent from the event itself. It became the task of the apostles to explain how Christ's death reconciled sinners to God. The apostolic writings are largely devoted to explaining the full implications of Christ's death. This suggests, then, that a cinematic presentation narrowly focused upon Christ's death does not constitute the gospel message. The “good news” that the apostles proclaimed to sinners is not merely that Jesus died, or even that Jesus was crucified, buried, and rose from the dead. The “good news” is that forgiveness of sins and everlasting life are freely offered to sinners on the basis of Christ's substitutionary death as an atonement for sins. *The Passion of the Christ* lacks the necessary prophetic and apostolic interpretation of the event it depicts to be considered the gospel. In short, *The Passion of the Christ* is not the gospel.

Some have suggested that the film does not communicate the gospel because of Gibson's self-consciously limited focus. But perhaps there is a more substantial reason why the gospel message is not communicated by Gibson's film. Postman has argued that certain media are inherently incapable of communicating some messages. He suggests "*the primitive technology of smoke signals*" as an illustration. Smoke signals, he observes, are not capable of conveying sophisticated philosophical arguments:

"Puffs of smoke are insufficiently complex to express ideas on the nature of existence, and even if they were not, a Cherokee philosopher would run short of either wood or blanket long before he reached his second axiom."

Certain media of information, in other words, are inherently ill suited to convey complex messages. Postman identifies television (and by implication, film) as one such medium that is insufficient for communicating sophisticated ideas.

The failure of *The Passion of the Christ* to communicate the gospel message is not merely the result of Gibson's self-consciously limited focus. The medium employed is itself insufficient for conveying the gospel message. A cinematic presentation of Christ's life, death, or resurrection is inherently incapable of communicating the richness of the prophetic and apostolic interpretation of the Christ event. The spoken or written word is a means more suited for explaining what Christ's death means than the image.

This truth becomes evident even in considering the narrowly focused content of *The Passion*. Gibson captures the physical anguish that Christ underwent in His suffering, making the film a powerful, emotionally wrenching experience for viewers. But does the film capture the reality of the spiritual anguish that Christ experienced in taking upon Himself the wrath of His Father against sin in the place of His people? No, because the medium is intrinsically incapable of communicating that content.

Those who desire to use *The Passion* as an evangelistic tool need to recognize that the film is not the gospel. The mere event of Christ's death, as depicted in the film, is not in and of itself the "good news" the apostles proclaimed to sinners estranged from God. Some interpretation of the meaning of Christ's death is necessary to constitute the gospel message. Furthermore, the "central medium of the day, the moving image," is a means intrinsically unable to convey the complexity of the gospel message. The Church, for this reason, should not seek to use *The Passion of the Christ* as an evangelistic tool.

Bringing dry bones to life by images: An inappropriate medium

In response to the question of where faith originates, the Heidelberg Catechism explains that

*"the Holy Ghost works faith in our hearts by the **preaching** of the Holy Gospel"* (Q. 65, emphasis mine).

This answer emphasizes not only the agent (the Spirit) in creating faith and the message (the gospel) by which faith is created, but also the method (preaching) by which God engages sinners with the gospel message. The Westminster Confession of Faith emphasizes the same methodology when it states that saving faith "*is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word*" (14.1). The Reformed Standards are unanimous in recognizing that God has appointed a specific means for evangelism, the preaching of the Word. The Standards reflect Scripture's own testimony to the efficacy of the preached word as the means for converting sinners.

The word's power to convert sinners is vividly portrayed in the prophecy of Ezekiel 37.1-10. God brings the prophet Ezekiel to a valley scattered with dry and lifeless bones, and instructs him to prophesy to the bones. As Ezekiel proclaims the word of God to the dry bones, the Spirit of God brings life to them:

“And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them.”

The prophet continues to preach, and the dry bones ultimately *“lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.”*

It is the Spirit that brings life to the dry bones. The means by which the Spirit works, however, is particularly noteworthy. The Spirit brings life to the dry bones by having the prophet preach to them. The prophetic vision of Ezekiel 37 finds its fulfillment in the New Testament era.

Following Christ’s resurrection and ascension, the apostles, commissioned by Christ, became ministers of the word. On the day of Pentecost, Peter received the promised Spirit and preached to the multitudes. Through his preaching the people were *“cut to the heart,”* ultimately repenting and putting their faith in Christ as a result (Acts 2:14-37). At Pentecost, then, we see the word, empowered by the Spirit and administered by the apostle Peter, bringing life to the dead (converting sinners) in fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision. Many of the Jews present at Pentecost may have actually witnessed Christ’s brutal death. The sight of His death, however, was not the means by which they were converted, but rather the preached word.

Subsequently throughout the New Testament, we find preaching identified as the means used by God to create faith in those whom he effectually calls.

Paul notes that *“God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe”* (1 Corinthians 1:21).

The apostle also insists that *“faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”*

And *“how,”* Paul asks, *“are they to hear without someone preaching?”* (Romans 10:14-17).

Paul even suggests that through his own preaching ministry, Christ Himself came and *“preached peace”* to sinners estranged from God (Ephesians 2:17).

And by his preaching, Paul reminds Galatian believers, Christ was *“visibly portrayed as crucified”* before their very eyes (Galatians 3:1).

According to John Calvin, Paul understood that *“the actual sight of Christ’s death could not have affected [his hearers] more powerfully than his own preaching.”*

God has clearly appointed preaching as the method by which sinners are converted.

God has designated a particular means by which He transforms sinners from darkness into the kingdom of his Son. Is *The Passion of the Christ* consistent with the means God has appointed for effecting this transformation? *The Passion* depicts the suffering of Christ visually. But God has appointed the preached word, not the visual image, as the effective method for evangelism. While Paul insists that *“faith comes through hearing,”* Anthony Schillaci would have us believe that in our unique *“historical situation”* faith more likely comes through seeing.

In the Evangelical embrace of *The Passion* as an evangelistic tool, we see a rejection of God’s own appointed means for evangelism in favor of a means perceived to be more effective in our unique *“historical situation.”* The Church cannot substitute alternative means for communicating the gospel, no matter how effective she might perceive them to be, for the means God has appointed. In contrast to Schillaci’s assertion that *“the Word will have no effect today unless it is communicated by means of the central medium of the day,”* the Church should insist that the preached word remains powerful and effective precisely because God has appointed it as the means for advancing his kingdom.

Conclusion

We live in a culture where correct motives tend to justify any methodology. If a person earnestly desires to advance Christ's kingdom, we feel hesitant to criticize his message or his method. The apostle Paul, however, appears far more concerned with the message and method than with the motivation of the person who proclaims that message. In fact, he seems relatively unconcerned that some "*preach Christ from envy and rivalry*" (Philippians 1:15). He is less tolerant of those who tamper with the gospel message or the gospel method. He condemns even himself if he should proclaim "*a gospel contrary*" to that which he had already preached (Galatians 1:8,9). And he insists upon the "*foolishness*" of preaching as the method of the gospel, in distinction from the "*wisdom of the world*" (1 Corinthians 1:20).

The Passion of the Christ, if used as an evangelistic tool, undermines both the message and method of the gospel. It undermines the message because it is not the gospel. The film depicts the event of Christ's physical suffering without any interpretive context in which to understand that suffering. The particular medium of film, I have argued, is inherently incapable of communicating the gospel message. Using *The Passion* for evangelism also undermines the method of the gospel. *The Passion* represents a means for evangelism contrary to that means which God has appointed for evangelism. God has appointed a specific medium for communicating the gospel to a dying world. To the extent that the church seeks alternative media for communicating the gospel message, she undermines the specific medium that God has established. To capitulate to the needs of a "*visually oriented generation*" is to embrace the "*wisdom of this world*," contrary to God's design.

The Church must jealously guard both the message and method of the gospel. Believers, then, should not seek to use *The Passion of the Christ* as an evangelistic tool. Certainly the film's popularity may engender opportunities for individual believers to proclaim the gospel to lost friends and family. I am not suggesting that Reformed believers form picket lines to prevent people from seeing the film. Nor do I believe that believers must plug their ears and run from the room the moment unbelieving friends mention the film. But Reformed believers cannot follow the example of the Evangelical world in embracing *The Passion* as "*the best outreach opportunity in 2,000 years.*"

A cinematic or dramatic presentation of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection should never replace the normal ministry of the Word by ordained ministers each Sabbath day. Neither should believers put their confidence in God working through extraordinary means to save sinners, although He is free to do so. God may work through extraordinary means to convert sinners, but He has promised to work through the ordinary means of gospel preaching to convert sinners.

Believers must resist the temptation to believe that "*the central medium of the day*" will prove more effective for reaching the lost than the means that God has chosen. God will continue to frustrate "*the wisdom of this world*" by converting sinners through the seemingly "*foolish*" means of preaching. Believers should promote and rely upon those means, trusting that God will remain faithful to the method for evangelism that He Himself has established.

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