

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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Since everyone else has done it I thought I would add my own thoughts about Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

I am surprised at the attention it has received. I don't buy the media hype that it is the "most controversial film" in the last decade. But it *is* controversial – at least if we understand that controversy is rooted in the conflict that emerges when two or more ideas try to occupy the same space at the same time.

What are those ideas?

First, those of Jewish descent are fearful that this could be the catalyst for a new wave of violent anti-Semitism. History justifies their concern. I don't need to rehearse the shameful timeline of violence and prejudice perpetrated by those who claimed to be Christians. Notable "Christian" leaders and thinkers are included in that number. While anti-Semitism is always around, it is not restricted to those who claim to be Christians and it is contrary to any theological teaching I ever received. To say it plainly, this kind of violence and hatefulness is inconsistent with Christianity. That is not to say that Christianity (or any other religion) is immune to being "hijacked" by those who want to (mis)interpret and apply it to their own evil purposes. For this reason, those who truly follow Jesus Christ must be vigilant and clear about who we are and what we are about.

We need to remember that Jesus and all his early followers were Jews. We need to remember that the relationship between Judaism and faith in Christ was an up-close-and-personal existential question for the first Disciples. We need to remember that for the writers of the Gospels and the Epistles, the mixed response of Jews to Jesus Christ was a tragedy to be lamented, not an offense to be avenged. Even the Apostle Paul (another Jew) could not give up on the hope that somehow non-Christian Jews retained a place in God's Kingdom through Jesus Christ.

Anti-Semitism is one expression of our urge to "place the blame" for something. (Obviously, part of "placing" blame entails "avoiding" it for ourselves!) As far as I am concerned, the New Testament is pretty clear about who is "to blame" about the Crucifixion – it is me! To assert anything else is self-righteous heresy.

Years ago I was privileged to be in a seminar led by Jewish scholar Amy-Jill Levine (a professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School). The seminar was about the Jewishness of Jesus. The issue of the Crucifixion was unavoidable. Dr. Levine said a few simple things, as I remember: (1) It is certain that Jesus was crucified, (2) It is unthinkable that crucifixion happened as other than a Roman-authorized execution, (3) It seems highly likely that key Jewish officials were involved in bringing Jesus before the Roman authorities, and (4) we really can't find justification for crucifixion from either a Roman or Jewish perspective, so (and this is my conclusion) we look for human reasons.

Some of those reasons are raw emotion: The Jews were just hateful mean people. Others are creative rationalizations: Jesus threatened the power-base of the Sadducees, or Jesus posed a political threat to the Romans. But none of these reasons satisfy. I think one of the reasons they do not satisfy is that the kind of dehumanizing brutalization that defines crucifixion is fundamentally irrational – it is beyond reason. Searching for a reason that will finally allow me to say – *Oh! Now it all makes sense* – is an exercise in futility.

While the human *reasons* for the Crucifixion are suspect, Christians have been more outspoken about the *consequences* of the Crucifixion/Resurrection. The unanimous consequence is that, somehow, things have been made right with God, those who were far away have been brought near, there is a new humanity. The “somehow” is explicated in a variety of atonement theories.

That “somehow” holds the second controversial idea. Despite the variety (even incompatibility) of atonement theories, the common thread is that human beings and God are alienated from one another. Despite the fact that we must “own” the alienation, God took the initiative to reconcile us. That reconciliation is first to God, but it quickly sweeps along with it reconciliation to others, Nature, and even ourselves.

This is controversial for at least two reasons. Some will find me suspect because I don't clearly advocate one or another of the atonement theories. But they won't find it in the film either! We must project our theory of atonement/reconciliation into the film. While crucifixion is brute fact, atonement is an interpretation of the Crucifixion – it is hermeneutic. Consequently, controversy may break out among Christians as to how we interpret the Crucifixion. That may be a good thing! It would be a nice change of pace to debate the Crucifixion rather than some of the other things that have occupied us.

But the “somehow” is also controversial because some – even professing Christians – are offended by the very idea of reconciliation with God. The Cross has been sanitized to a gleaming piece of jewelry, and Jesus has been framed as a gentle icon. These are “good” people. In fact, it is their attraction to goodness which is repulsed (as it should be) by the bloody brutality of crucifixion. They would rather see a movie about

shepherds in a manger, or the Sermon on the Mount, or the feeding of the 5000, or For them, the death of Jesus can become irrelevant and inconsequential. The movie will confront them with a mutilated corpse.

A third idea that drives the controversy is the exact opposite of this last point. Third World Christians and oppressed peoples who have experienced the lash both literally and figuratively have always found comfort in the Crucified Christ. There is a reason that the cover of **A Theology of Liberation** by Gustavo Gutierrez is a photo of an agonizing crucifix in wood and clay by Peruvian sculptor, Edilberto Merida. Such persons will share in the pain of this movie in a way that none of us privileged Christians can, because they experience the solidarity of God in their suffering. They may challenge the preoccupation with atonement theory or the distraction of doing good as faithful ways of understanding the Cross. The key will be to do so without glorifying suffering, or slipping into a morbid devotion focused on the violence of crucifixion which can never be satisfied, or justifying self-mortification.

A fourth idea that will contribute to the controversy will come from those who make no claim to follow Jesus. I really don't believe many of these will see the film. A small number will go out of curiosity, but I suspect most of those who go will do so only because they have been invited to attend with another. Whether driven by curiosity or comradeship, I think two responses will follow the viewing. The first response is a repulsion to the violence and the question of why we would want to watch such a thing. The second response is to question just who this is and what difference it makes.

Jesus was not the first person to be crucified. Practice had made the Romans very adept at this brutal form of execution. In fact, the dehumanizing brutality really seems to be the point, because there were more efficient ways to execute, even then. The historical record of crucifixions is staggering. What makes Jesus different from all the others? Even if we "bracket" the means of execution, victimization provides no easy answer. In just my lifetime, what about the millions killed in Stalinist Russia, or the killing fields of Cambodia, or the bloodbaths in Uganda, or the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, or the systematic "disappearance" of friends and family in Central America? Or look at the assassinations of leaders: Mahatma Ghandi, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr, Robert Kennedy, or Anwar Sadat. Is Jesus different from these? If so, how?

A fifth idea that will contribute to the controversy is the "lens" of the film itself. Moving from a verbal (whether spoken or written) to a video medium entails change of necessity. Some will find reason to challenge particular ways Gibson has made the transition. More serious (in my opinion) is the fact that this film limits itself to the last twelve hours of Jesus' life.

I understand (and have written in other places) how the Crucifixion/Resurrection is central to Christianity, but it is not the whole story. Jesus didn't just die, Jesus lived.

And I believe his *life* is important. Apparently the Gospel writers did as well. Even though they used an extended short story form, and it may not easily fit our modern understanding of biography, the Gospel of Jesus does not begin in the Garden of Gethsemane and end in the Garden of the Tomb. The Gospels begin with Jesus preaching, teaching, and healing. Jesus' last word to the Disciples was to do the same. The Crucifixion/Resurrection infused that preaching, teaching, and healing with new meaning, validity, and authority.

I have gone on way too long, and I apologize. I close by saying that I hope that the "controversy" (as I have identified it) will stimulate a conversation among those of us who claim to be Christians and a renewed theology of the Cross. But this will happen only if there are deliberate conversations around the film. I urge your church to plan discussion groups about *The Passion*. One resource I believe to be helpful is Philip Yancey's **The Jesus I Never Knew**. Not only is there a book, there is a video-based curriculum to go with it. I recommend Yancey for several reasons. First, he writes in an engaging way. Second, it is easily understandable and accessible to most persons in your church. Third, he launches his study with an examination of the way Jesus has been portrayed in movies; it seems to me that is a natural connection.

If you want to do some more serious reading, I recommend:

The Crucified God by Jürgen Moltmann

Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith by William Placher

The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth by Ben Witherington III

The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is by N.T. Wright

The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World by Douglas John Hall

**This film is not entertainment.
It is rated R for a reason; at least one reviewer has said that it should
be NC17 because of the graphic violence.**

