

**ENDTIME ISSUES NEWSLETTER No. 113:  
PASSIONATE ABOUT THE PASSION:  
A RESPONSE TO CRITICISM**

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Why such a prolonged silence? No, I am not sick. The Lord is blessing me every day with the health and strength that I need to fulfill my ministry. The delay is caused by two major reasons. First, the extensive travelling. Second, the considerable time I spent in preparing this newsletter.

During the past few weeks I have shared my ministry in England, Los Angeles, Honolulu, and Orlando. In fact, I started working on this newsletter a month ago in England and I am finishing it now in Orlando, Florida. Travelling to meet speaking engagements consumes much of my time. I am seriously considering accepting fewer invitations, so that I can devote myself more fully to research and writing.

With the new DVD/VIDEO recording of my SABBATH/ADVENT seminars, which were professionally taped last January 16-17-18, 2004, I can now share all my Sabbath and Advent messages, simply by mailing the DVD or VIDEO albums with the 10 one-hour presentations. In fact, I use myself the DVD recordings to deliver some of my lectures (energy saver) on weekend. They enable me to deliver additional lectures, without exhausting myself. You can preview clippings of the recording at my website: [www.biblicalperspectives.com](http://www.biblicalperspectives.com) The response from those who have already viewed these messages is very encouraging. If you have not received your album, call us at (269) 471-2915, and we will be sure to mail you one immediately. We want to make it possible for many people to benefit from these timely message.

The second reason for the delay is that I have spent considerable time reading scholarly reviews of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. I have in front of me over 700 pages of reviews of the movie as well as studies on the meaning of Christ's suffering and death. There is no question that Gibson has thrust at the center of Christian consciousness the powerful question "Why did Jesus have to die?" During the next few months I plan to write a book investigating the meaning of Christ's suffering and death. This

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study is designed to help people appreciate the message of the Cross, which is grossly distorted in Gibson's movie.

### **Is *The Passion* the Touchstone of Orthodoxy?**

It is hard to believe that Mel Gibson's movie about *THE PASSION* is stirring up such conflicting and deep passions. Truly it can be said that many Americans have become *passionate about THE PASSION*. It almost seems that the movie has become the touchstone of orthodoxy. Some evangelical reviewers firmly believe that this movie separates the "sheep" from the "goats," that is, believers from unbelievers, conservative from liberals, and converted from unconverted people. My impression is that the movie separates the emotional from the rational responses.

Critics of the brutality of Gibson's movie are accused of being unwilling to face the facts that the crucifixion was bloody and violent. But the issue is not the brutality of the crucifixion. This is a well-known fact. Rather, the real issue is mystics' sadistic view of God who demands full satisfaction for all the sins of mankind through the brutal and inhuman torture of His Son.

To defend the mystic "satisfaction" view of Christ's suffering, Gibson portrays the violence of the crucifixion in slow-motion with close up repetitions of the violence. In real life it did not happen in slow-motion. Archeologists tell us that the scourging was done with a reed or a rod, not with cat-o'-nine-tail whips that flayed the flesh out of the victim (See, "Two Archeologists Comment on The Passion of the Christ," [www.archaeological.org/webinfo.php?page=10243](http://www.archaeological.org/webinfo.php?page=10243)). Moreover, the permissible number of lashes were 39, not 150-plus as in the movie. The inflation is Hollywood way to stimulate the emotions of the viewers. Unfortunately, those gory images will stay in people's minds for a long time, conditioning their devotional life and leading many to worship Christ according to Gibson's distorted images, rather than in Spirit and truth.

Never before in my life I have been assailed by fellow believers who question my commitment to Christ, because I have dared to expose the inaccuracies and the Catholic beliefs deceptively embedded in the movie. It is evident that *THE PASSION* is inflaming passions, causing some people to react emotionally, rather than rationally.

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## A Positive Outcome

A positive outcome of the controversy over THE PASSION, is the stimulus the movie provides to reexamine what the Bible really teaches regarding Christ's suffering and death. Mel Gibson's movie has thrust at the center of Christian consciousness the powerful question "Why did Jesus have to die?" The question is addressed afresh not only by theologians, but even by religion editors. An indication is the cover story of TIME (April 12, 2004) which carries the caption: "Why Did Jesus Have to Die?" The article provides a helpful historical survey of the debate over the reasons for Christ's suffering and death.

On my part, during the past few weeks I have spent considerable time rereading several times the Gospels' accounts of Christ's trial and death, the relevant chapters of *The Desires of Ages*, and significant studies on the atoning sacrifice of Christ. This reading has made me forcefully aware of the need to reexamine the fundamental question that has divided theologians and clergy for centuries, namely, Why did Christ die? I intend to investigate this question during the next three months and publish this research in a 150-200 pages book.

In his movie Gibson promotes the so-called "satisfaction" view of Christ's death, first developed by Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in his book *Why God Became Man* (published in 1098). Anselm maintains that Christ had to suffer exceedingly severe torture in order to satisfy the rigorous demands of God's justice for all of mankind's sins. This belief that only Christ's endless suffering could satisfy the demands of the Father's justice, was largely influenced by the feudal view of God as a despotic Lord furious at his disobedient subjects.

The traditional "satisfaction" view, later modified by Catholic and Protestant theologians, has been retained by Catholic mystic like Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824). Her book, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*, is the major source used by Gibson to portray the relentless brutality of the torture inflicted on Christ's body in order to satisfy the rigorous demands of divine justice. This teaching, as we shall see, is foreign to the Scripture. We are saved not by the enormity of Christ's sufferings, but by His perfect life and sacrifice for our sins.

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**Adventist Confusion on Atonement**

Adventists are not exempted from the controversy over the reason for Christ's death. As mentioned in the April 2004 issue of REFLECTIONS—the monthly newsletter published by the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference for church leaders and scholars—“the idea of a substitutionary sacrifice of Christ is rejected by some Adventists and replaced by the so-called moral influence theory.” An example of the latter is the book *Can God Be Trusted?* by Graham Maxwell.

The confusion over the meaning of Christ's suffering and death—confusion which has been heightened by Gibson's movie—has convinced me of the urgent need to prepare a fresh study on this timely subject. My plan is to research and write during the next three months a 150-200 pages book, tentatively entitled: *THE PASSION: A Biblical Analysis of Mel Gibson's Movie and of the Meaning of Christ's Suffering and Death*. The purpose of the book is not only to expose the inaccuracies and subtle Catholic deceptions of Gibson's movie, but also to set forth a biblical view of the atonement.

Since posting my last newsletter No. 112 on “Mel Gibson's Slaughter of Christ,” I have collected over 700 pages of reviews of THE PASSION, some written by competent Catholic and Protestant scholars. This has been a learning experience for me which has helped me understand the problems that the movie poses for both Catholic and Protestant teachings. In fact, some of the most perceptive analysis of THE PASSION come from respected Catholic scholars like Prof. Philip A. Cunningham and Prof. Lawrence E. Frizzell. These scholars expose the flaws of the movie in a frank and compelling way.

Even the Office for Film and Broadcasting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has prepared a full review of THE PASSION, deploring among other things, the savagery of Christ's torture, which ultimately, may prove to be “self-defeating in trying to capture the imagination of the everyday moviegoer” ([www.usccb.org/movies/p/thepassionofthechrist.htm](http://www.usccb.org/movies/p/thepassionofthechrist.htm)).

**Proposed Corrections Rejected**

It came as a surprise to learn that a group of seven scholars—four Catholics, two Jews, and one Protestant—were asked by Icon, the producer

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of *THE PASSION*, to review the script and suggest whatever corrections were deemed necessary. The committee worked under the supervision of Bishop Eugene Fisher, Associate Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. They submitted an 18 pages critique, pinpointing the historical errors and the deviations from magisterial Catholic teachings.

Gibson and Jesuit William Fulco, S. J., the translator of the script into Latin and Aramaic, were not prepared to make the corrections proposed, because they called for radical corrections. Instead, they tried to silence the constructive criticism provided by these competent scholars by means of legal threats. Such an unfortunate incident discredits Gibson's claim to have striven for historical and biblical accuracy. In the forthcoming book I will mention the unbiblical scenes and historical errors openly discussed by Catholic scholars. I do mention specifically Catholic scholars to disprove the allegation that I am anti-Catholic in my writings. The fact is that I am deeply indebted to Catholic scholarship.

### **Porn Stars Perform in *THE PASSION***

It came as a surprise for me to learn that three of the actresses who play key roles in *THE PASSION*, are not only internationally renowned actresses, but also hardcore porno stars. Monica Bellucci, who plays Mary Magdalene in Gibson's movie, is no ordinary porn star. She performed in the film *Irreversible*, where her rape lasts a horrifying 10 minutes. At the Cannes Film Festival, the film proved to be so shocking that 250 walked out, some needing medical attention.

The same is true of Rosalinda Celentano, who plays the androgynous character of Satan, and Claudia Gerini, who play the role of Pilate's wife. Both of them are porn stars. You can see them featured in numerous pornographic websites. These disturbing facts raise important questions: Why did born-again Mel Gibson cast hardcore porno stars in a movie about Christ? Why "Christian" reviewers of *THE PASSION* do not disclose these appalling facts? Is it because they do not want to scandalize Christians who turn out in record numbers to support a movie starring Italian porn stars? Issues such as these will be addressed in the forthcoming book.

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In this newsletter I will limit myself to respond to four major allegations from reviews of my previous newsletter on “Mel Gibson’s Slaughter of Christ.” This newsletter generated over 2000 responses, including about 1000 new subscriptions. Over 95 per cent of the responses were very positive. But I did receive a dozen critical reviews that need attention, because they are written by professional and respected Adventists who raise pertinent questions. For the sake of brevity I will respond to only four major allegations, after reporting briefly on my recent lecture tour in England.

### **Permission to Distribute this Review**

Several editors, newscasters, and church leaders contacted me to ask permission to use my reviews of THE PASSION. To avoid unnecessary calls or email messages, I wish to grant full permission to anyone wanting to use this review in any form needed. Be sure to inform your friends that they also can receive this newsletter free of charge, simply by emailing me a message at sbacchiocchi@biblicalperspectives.com, saying: SUBSCRIBE ME.

### **ENGLAND LECTURE TOUR**

From March 26 to April 4, 2004, I spoke at six churches located in Birmingham and London, England. On Sabbath March 27, we had a marvelous rally at the Camp Hill SDA Church in Birmingham with about 600 members in attendance. The partition walls were opened to accommodate the overflow. The same was true on the following Sabbath, April 3, at the Maranatha SDA church in London. About 500 members, mostly from Eastern African countries, attended the four sessions.

The reception and the response was heartwarming. I found our believers in England most eager to deepen their understanding and experience of biblical truths. As a result of their witnessing endeavors their congregations are experiencing considerable growth. The same is true in the Brazilian, Filipino, Spanish, and Ghananian congregations in London. They are all growing in numbers and in their love for the Lord. The Ghananians, led by Dr. Emmanuel Osei, have now over 600 members in London. I look forward to share my ministry with them in a couple of months, after speaking at the South England Campmeeting from June 7 to 12.

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Our Adventist Church in the United Kingdom faces the challenge of reaching the white Anglo segment of the population. About 97% of the approximately 25,000 Adventist members of the British Union, come from foreign countries, especially the Caribbeans. In an effort to reach the indigenous population, a TV program was recently recorded, called “EVIDENCE.” Pastor Dwight Nelson, the featured speaker, discusses some fundamental questions of interest to secularly-minded people. The program will be aired every Friday evening through the Adventist satellite stations. Let us pray that the Lord will bless this new outreach endeavor.

Surprisingly, few people in England have heard about THE PASSION. I asked 22 persons, including two Catholic nuns I met in the subway, if they had heard about or seen the movie. Not one of them had heard about it. Part of the reason is that England is largely a secular society, with a marginal interest for religion. Evangelicals are a distinct minority in England and do not impact society as they do in the USA.

In our Adventist churches our members have heard about THE PASSION, because they have been encouraged to distribute a special “Passion” flier outside cinemas that show the movie. The flier has an invitation to enroll in a Bible correspondence course. Our pastors explained to me that the vast majority of our members have not seen the movie, simply because they do not go to cinemas. Eventually, some of them may view the movie when it will be released in video or DVD.

**PASSIONATE ABOUT THE PASSION:  
A RESPONSE TO SOME CRITICISM:**

Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.,

Retired Professor of Theology and Church History  
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The last newsletter on “Mel Gibson’s Slaughter of Christ,” generated over 2000 messages. To my recollection none of my previous newsletters generated such a large number of responses. With a few exceptions, the responses expressed appreciation for the review. The comments received, whether positive or negative, mean a lot to me. They inspire and challenge me to attempt greater things for the Lord. It is a sign of Christian maturity to learn to disagree without becoming disagreeable to one another.



In planning this newsletter, I intended to respond to seven major allegations presented by critics of my review of Gibson's movie. But after writing over 35 pages in response to the first four allegations, I decided to address the rest in the forthcoming book. Some may feel that my responses are too long. That may be true, but my Jesuits professors taught me that it is wiser to overkill than to leave half-dead. Short answers seldom satisfy. They only generate new questions. Thus, in this newsletter, I will respond more fully to only four allegations:

**1. A LONELY VOICE:** My criticism of THE PASSION is discredited by the large number of Adventist pastors and church leaders who are promoting the movie.

**2. ANTI-CATHOLIC BIAS:** My criticism of THE PASSION is motivated by my anti-Catholic bias.

**3. E. G. WHITE'S WRITINGS SUPPORT THE BRUTALITY OF THE PASSION:** My criticism of the brutality of THE PASSION is discredited by statements of Ellen White which support Gibson's movie.

**4. EVANGELISTIC OPPORTUNITY:** My critical review of THE PASSION ignores the unprecedented evangelistic opportunity the movie provides to reach the unchurched people.

### **A LONELY VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS**

A few readers question the credibility of my critique of THE PASSION, on the ground that the majority of Adventist church pastors and leaders are promoting the movie by urging our members to go to see it. A brother argues that if the General Conference purchased 250 tickets for the employees to see the movie, then it is obvious that our leaders see nothing wrong with the movie. Another Adventist made the same point by mailing me an insert from the Loma Linda University SDA Church bulletin. The insert lists the three shows of *The Passion of the Christ*, sponsored by the church at the Krikorian Premier Theaters in Redlands.

Some critics wrote that the pastors of some of our largest Adventist churches are promoting Gibson's movie in their sermons, because they find its script to be strikingly similar to the details found in *The Desire of Ages*. Shortly I will comment on a sermon recently preached at Pioneer Memorial Church on the campus of Andrews University. The reasoning is that if the



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flagship churches of our denomination sponsors the film, it must be theologically sound.

My response to this criticism is twofold: First, truth is not decided by majority vote, but by its biblical accuracy. Second, a significant number of Adventist church leaders and scholars have expressed the same concerns about the movie that I have. Let me expand on these two points.

### **Riding the Cultural Wave**

The criterion to evaluate a teaching promoted by a book or a movie, is not the popular opinion, but its biblical accuracy. The history of the Christian church, which happens to be my specialty, teaches us that church leaders have often adopted unbiblical beliefs and practices which have led the people into apostasy. This was true in ancient Israel and it has been true in the history of Christianity.

Church leaders in the past have often followed Rick Warren's strategy to "ride the cultural wave" in order to bring the masses into the church. The result has been that pagans brought into the church their pagan idols and superstitions, thus paganizing Christianity. This trend ushered in what is known as the "Dark Ages" of the church, when popular piety was inspired, not by the reading of the Bible—which was unknown to the laity—, but by visual aid like icons, statues, bleeding crucifixes, and passion plays.

The Reformers attempted to clean the church of its idolatrous practices, by removing the visual representations of Christ, Mary, and the saints, replacing them with the proclamation of the Word of God. Gradually, however, evangelical churches have lost sight of their roots and are now embracing Catholic forms of worship. In a perceptive article entitled "Will Mel Evangelize Evangelicals?" Catholic editor Steven D. Greydanus explains how Evangelical Christians are embracing fundamental aspects of the Catholic worship promoted by THE PASSION. We shall return at the end to Greydanus' comments.

Our Adventist church is not immune from the pressure to follow the cultural wave promoted by the church growth movement. The problem with this strategy is that it makes the METHODS more important than the MESSAGE. The result is that new converts often fail to find in the Adventist message the reason for living, loving, and serving the Lord. Our challenge is

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not only to improve our methods of evangelism but also to think of new ways to make our endtime MESSAGE more relevant and captivating to our generation.

Adventism is at a crossroad today. The controversy over THE PASSION is a symptom of greater issues that are dividing our church today. Traditionalists want to preserve the status quo. They vehemently oppose any attempt to bring into the church Pentecostal forms of worship with beat music, shouting, drama, dancing, passion plays, and emotional outbursts. Liberals, on the other hand, are prepared to try any method that brings people into the church. The result is bitter feelings, divisions, and a loss of identity, which often results in less giving. Hundreds of pastors have been laid off in the USA during 2003. This crisis calls for spiritual minded and enlightened leaders, dedicated to heal the wounds by helping our people to capture the larger vision of our calling to proclaim the endtime message to our generation.

### **Reviews of THE PASSION by Adventist Leaders.**

Some critics allege that I am not a lonely voice crying in the wilderness by exposing the problems of THE PASSION, because there is near unanimous endorsement in the Adventist church for Gibson's movie. This allegation is untrue, because several Adventist leaders have expressed similar concerns about the movie. Let me mention a few of them.

#### **In the Spotlight *ADVENTIST REVIEW***

**William G. Johnsson, Editor**

William Johnsson, the editor of *ADVENTIST REVIEW*, offers two thoughtful reasons for his decision not to see the movie: "I have not seen the movie. I don't criticize anyone who has, but I don't intend to see it. Here is why. From all accounts the movie is jarringly graphic. Mel Gibson has starred in violent movies: now he has made the ultimate violent movie. The *Newsweek* article calls the violence in the R-rated movie 'at first shocking, then numbing.' I abhor violence and cannot stand to watch scenes of violence. I don't need to see this movie.

"Second, the movie offers Mel Gibson's interpretation of the Passion. The *Newsweek* cover story pointed out several places where the movie

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deviates from the Gospel accounts. For example, Gibson has Mary Magdalene trying to get help from Roman soldiers when Jesus is taken away to be tried by the priests. You will not find this in the Bible. Beyond such discrepancies, the question of the meaning of the event inevitably rests with Gibson.

“I prefer to let Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John interpret Jesus' sufferings and death for me. Their accounts are starkly specific, listing the grim details and leaving it to the Holy Spirit to speak to the reader's imagination, filling in the blanks.

“But I also want to express my hope and prayer for this movie—that it may lead many to a new, or renewed, appreciation for the sufferings of Jesus. Jesus died a violent death. He was executed! His sufferings were excruciating, more excruciating than any movie-maker could portray, because He bore not only extreme physical abuse but a terrible weight of spiritual desolation.”

Johnsson's reference to the mental anguish and “spiritual desolation” deserves consideration. No movie can portray the mental anguish Christ experienced as He sensed the separation from the Father in order to bear the sins of fallen humanity. Most likely Christ died of a broken heart rather than of physical wounds.

### **Review of “The Passion of the Christ”**

**James Standish, Associate Director**

**General Conference Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department**

James Standish is a GC observer of significant developments affecting our Advent church today. He publishes regularly a newsletter that you can access at <http://ola.adventist.org> You will find his newsletters very informative. His last newsletter includes this brief review of THE PASSION.

### ***The Passion of the Christ Controversy***

The *New York Times* last Sunday asked the provocative question “Why are evangelical Protestants embracing Mel Gibson's ultra-Catholic version of the Savior?” Why has a film that *The Wall Street Journal* a week ago noted is steeped in “Mariology” become a rallying cry to Protestants?” One puzzle of the reception of the film thus far is “why born-again Christians have given such a big thumbs up to what is so unapologetically a Catholic

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movie,” noted the *New York Times*. These are good questions to ponder, and this is a good time to do the pondering.

I saw the film last week. I was not impressed for two reasons. First, the film is by far the most violent film I have ever seen. It is one thing to show that tremendous evil was perpetrated against Jesus, it is quite another to wallow in two hours of gratuitous, desensitizing violence of the worst Hollywood order. Mel Gibson has added extra-Biblical tortures apparently to heighten the emotive effect, and incorporated techniques taken directly from the horror film genre (e.g., an extra-Biblical scene where a bloodied, gasping Christ is thrown over a bridge only to land inches from the face of a terrified Judas is reminiscent of slasher films in which distorted bodies suddenly appear to shock the audience; the extra-Biblical grotesque scenes of the devil with, among other things, a maggot crawling into his nose, all call to mind the horror movie genre).

The second objections is that in addition to the start to finish graphic violence, the film adds in a number of extra-Biblical scenes to promote Mariology. This includes Peter falling in a worship style at Mary's feet and calling her “Mother.” This shouldn't be surprising, as this is Mel Gibson's beliefs and the film is based not only on the Bible but on the visions of two Catholic Nuns.

Obviously good can come out of almost anything, and maybe this film will bring about an authentic religious awakening within some people, bringing them to a knowledge of our Savior. That said, we have been warned by prophecy against a false revival based on ecumenism. *The New York Times* thinks it is a “puzzle” that Protestants are championing this Roman Catholic version of the life of Christ. Maybe as Seventh-day Adventist Christians we are a little less puzzled than most.

### **Adventists Reconsider the Role of Mary**

Standish may be surprised to learn that not all Adventists understand how the movie is contributing to the bridging of the gulf between Catholics and Protestants. After viewing the movie some Adventists feel that the time has come for our Adventist church to reconsider the prominent role of Mary in our salvation. A brother wrote that for too long our Adventist church has treated Mary just as an ordinary women. He feel that the time has come to

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give Mary due credit for her contribution to our salvation. A sister wrote that it is unfortunate that the Gospels ignore the contribution of Mary in sustaining Jesus during the agonizing hours of His suffering and death. She was glad that the movie filled the gaps and set the record straight.

Comments such as these have made me forcefully aware of the deceptive impact of the movie in the mind of fellow believers who judge the Bible by the movie, rather than viceversa. There is no question that Mary was an extraordinary mother who did a great job in bringing up Jesus in a dysfunctional family. But the fact remains that she was the mother of the human Christ, and not the “Mother of God,” as stated in the daily Catholic prayer: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners” (I am translating the prayer from Italian). In the forthcoming book I will discuss in considerable details how the movie promotes in a subtle way the redemptive role of Mary.

### **Review of “The Passion of the Christ” by Three Seminary Professors**

Three professors from the Andrews University Theological Seminary, were officially asked to go to see the movie in order to share their impressions with Debra Haight, a correspondent of the local paper *Herald Palladium*.

The three professors are: Roy Gane, Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Eastern Languages and Associate Editor of the *Andrews University Seminary Studies* journal. Robert Johnston, Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins. Jon Paulien, Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Chairman of the New Testament Department.

All three professors were impressed by the use of Aramaic in the movie. “For the actors to be able to learn their lines in an ancient language was an amazing thing. They tried to reproduce the accents of the first century as much as they were able. The Italianate Latin was not as accurate.” In fact, they rightly point out that Greek, not Latin, was the language spoken by Pilate, the Roman soldiers, and the Jewish priest during the trial. Numerous scholars have made the same observation. The medieval Latin and dress of Mary and other women, only serves to promote Catholic traditional liturgy.

Although many consider *The Passion of the Christ* a powerful movie, the three professors feel people lose something when they get information from a movie rather than from reading a text for itself. The point is expanded by Jon Paulien, who said: “The tragedy is that most people now get information from the visual and not reading the text. The question is whether this movie will interfere with how they see and understand the text. Once you have seen this movie, it will have an influence on how you read the text.”

All three professors agree that there is too much flogging in the movie. Gane and Paulien said that “when scourging is mentioned in the Bible, the most stripes inflicted were 39 because people normally would pass out or die after that number. The ‘150 or so’ stripes the movie shows being inflicted on Jesus was not realistic.”

It should be added that the stripes were inflicted first with a reed in the first round and then with a cat-o’-nine-tail whip in the successive rounds. The intent was to draw as much flesh and blood from Jesus’ body to ensure that His suffering satisfied the rigorous demands of divine justice. Most scholars recognize that such a brutal torture would have killed Christ long before he was asked to carry the Cross.

An important observation made by Paulien is that “the word ‘blood’ only occurs twice in the Gospel narratives, once in Luke in the Garden of Gethsemane and once in John when Jesus is speared in the side after his death. This word is never used in relationship at all to suffering. The emphasis on the blood is a theological construction [sacrificial death]. Blood is not such a major part in the passion narrative as it is portrayed in the movie. The Gospels speak of Jesus’ emotional anguish, but that’s harder to portray than the physical.”

In the forthcoming book I will expand on the difference between the biblical view and Gibson’s view of blood. In the Bible the blood is the symbol of life sacrificed for the remission of our sins. In Gibson’s mystical theology, the gallons of shed blood and pounds of flayed flesh are needed to represent the exceeding suffering experienced by Christ to satisfy the demands of divine justice for mankind’s sins. From a biblical perspective Christ could have been killed by a lethal injection and still be our perfect sacrifice for our sins.

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In closing Paulien said: “I don't want to sound critical of the movie. It is a magnificent statement of faith. If I were to do it, I would have reduced the violence to more believable levels and have more flashbacks of Christ's life and ministry. As portrayed in the movie, Jesus' character was not developed as much.”

I will add that by focusing exclusively on the last 12 hours of Jesus' life, the whole meaning of Christ's suffering and death is muted. This is a point made in numerous Catholic and Protestant reviews of the movie.

At this point I could share other perceptive reviews received from Adventist psychologists and physicians who evaluate the movie from the perspective of their profession. For the sake of brevity I will include only one more review sent to me by Elder Donald McFarlane, who serves as the President of the South England Conference, in Great Britain. The review was prepared for the conference newsletter that goes out to about 18,000 members.

### **Review of “The Passion of the Christ”**

**Elder Donald McFarlane**

**President of the South England Conference**

**Great Britain**

Several of my colleagues and I were among a group of approximately 800 church leaders who were invited on March 9, 2004, to view Mel Gibson's much talked about movie, “The Passion of the Christ.” The dimming of the lights signalled that the show was about to commence and a deafening silence replaced the chatter of eager clergymen and clergy women as they waited momentarily for the first scene.

I was not totally prepared for what followed during the next two hours. At the end I was somewhat dazed as I sought to come to grips with my emotions after viewing two hours of relentless violence. The reviews I had read prior to watching the film referred to its violent nature but I had not anticipated the level of gratuitous violence that I saw.

The film opened with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. The grime and dirt that covered the face of Jesus as He prayed in the Garden bore no resemblance to the gospel account but I was willing nonetheless to accommodate that as poetic licence. What I was not willing to accept was the



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intensity of the violence that followed. As soon as Jesus was arrested the violence began and was unrelenting until he declared, "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." Of course, the gospel writers all wrote of the violence that Jesus experienced at the hand of his enemies but their account pales into insignificance when compared to the sado-masochistic version in the film. No human being can endure the brutal torture inflicted on Christ on the movie without dying several times.

It is clear from the level of violence in the movie that Gibson sees Christ's suffering as more important than His death. For him our salvation has been secured not merely by Christ's death but primarily through His suffering. Anyone with even a limited knowledge of Catholic theology could easily detect its influence on the film. The medieval chants and related music which form the aural backdrop to the brutal scenes are another clear influence of the Catholic Church. There was also a short scene which the observant viewer would recognize as the origin of the Turin Shroud.

Was there anything positive about the film? The answer is yes. The crucifixion scene was realistic and conveyed in powerful imagery Jesus' agony on the cross. Though bone-chilling to see, the effect of the massive spikes being driven into His hands and feet was not lost on me. That scene was fairly true to the biblical account. The flashbacks to Jesus' life and teachings were also very effective, especially for one who has studied the Gospels. This was in my opinion was one of the redeeming features of the film. Another redeeming feature was the use of the language of Jesus' time. The Aramaic was enunciated eloquently and though subtitled the linguistic beauty of the film can only elicit admiration.

My biggest disappointment with the film, apart from the brutality and violence, was the down playing of the resurrection. The sense of triumph and hope that the resurrection engenders was sadly missing. In fact, I will go further to say that unless one is familiar with the biblical account of the Passion of Jesus, the viewer could easily miss the resurrection in the film.

"Would you encourage your members to watch the film," was a question asked me after I'd viewed it. I replied by saying that I would not want my wife and children to see it and would not encourage church members to watch it, though I realize that many would want to see it. . . .

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I concur with Paul's words in Philippians 1:15 –19: "Some indeed preach Christ even out of envy and strife; and some also of goodwill: The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, but the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel. What then? Notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and I will rejoice."

### ***The Passion Fuels Arabs' hate for the Jews***

My reaction to the movie is somewhat different. On the one hand, I rejoice with Elder MacFarlane for the unprecedented way THE PASSION has thrust at the center of Christian consciousness the importance of Christ's suffering and death. Undoubtedly the movie will challenge many to appreciate, perhaps for the first time, the price that Christ has paid for our redemption..

But, on the other hand, I am saddened by the divisions, controversies, and fears the movie is generating among Christians, Jews, Moslems, and people of other ideologies. It is reported that Yasser Arafat liked the movie and viewed it with great satisfaction. The obvious reason is that the movie presents Jewish leaders as bloodthirsty criminals who did to Jesus what today the Israelis are doing to the Palestinians. For them the message is clear: *The Jews have not changed. They are still the same bloodthirsty criminals.* This explains why several Moslem countries have already approved the distribution of the movie, though it violates the Koran's explicit prohibition of any pictorial representation of prophets like Christ.

The Koran views Christ as a prophet, but it denies His crucifixion. No pictures of Allah or of any prophet have ever been allowed in Mosques or in private Moslem homes. Such pictures are considered as sacrilegious idols which Moslem have ruthlessly destroyed during the centuries of conquest of many Christian nations. It is a known fact that Mohammed derived such teaching from the OT prohibition of pictorial representations of God.

Surprisingly several Moslem countries are willing to violate the teachings of the Koran by approving the showing of THE PASSION. This is a calculated risk based on the assumption that the movie will fuel far more hate for the Jews, than love for Jesus Christ. After all the focus of the movie is on the sadistic and bloodthirsty nature of the Jews who were determined to have Christ tortured unto death. The powerful images of the wicked Jews

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can only strengthen the Moslem resolve to fight against the Jews and the nations supporting them.

### **“Passion Fund” Appeal**

To reduce the tensions and heal the wounds caused by the movie, two church leaders in Washington, D. C., Rev. Jim Dickerson and Rabbi Jerry Levine have appealed to Gibson to create a “Passion Fund” to be financed by the film's \$300-million profits. The funds will be used to heal the wounds caused by the movie and “to support efforts to combat religious intolerance and hatred and to promote interfaith community building, peace, justice, non-violence, reconciliation, social action, and community service. . . . Making money from the death of Jesus is another kind of crucifixion that distorts the true meaning of Jesus’ suffering and death.”

In a three pages appeal sent to major news organizations, Dickerson and Levine appeal to Gibson “to invest these funds [from the movie] strategically on programs that embody what Jesus stood for, what he worked for, what he died for, and what he commanded others to do. We are asking that he undertake an immediate and intensive program of active giving in these interfaith and social action areas. The good that these funds could do is immense and is sorely needed—now more than ever.”

If Gibson heeds the appeal to use the “Passion Profits” to sponsor initiatives designed to quench the flames of hatred, bigotry, and terror that have engulfed the world from the USA to Spain, Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, and Palestine, then the world will see that in spite of all its problems, Gibson’s PASSION is used by God in a providential way to heal some of the wounds inflicted by the movie and by the religious intolerance of our times. Let us hope and pray that Gibson will heed the appeal.

### **ANTI-CATHOLIC BIAS**

Some critics of my review of THE PASSION strongly feel that my negative comments are conditioned by my anti-Catholic bias that is supposed to be pervasive in all my publications. Arnold Gamboa, a professional Adventist from the Philippines, has posted in his home page ([arnoldgamboa.com](http://arnoldgamboa.com)) a three pages critique of my essay. His first allegation is that my review reflects “a biased mind” because I published a preliminary negative review of the movie “without watching it first.”

Does reviewing a movie without first watching it reveal “a biased mind”? If that were true, then Dr. William Johnsson, the editor of the *Adventist Review*, has a biased mind because he reviewed the film without first watching it. The fact is that Johnsson, like myself, read detailed reviews, like the one that appeared in the cover story of *Newsweek*. Reviews by competent critics offer more insight into a movie than viewing the film itself. This is proven by the fact that the average viewer sees no biblical or historical problems with the movie, while competent Catholic and Protestant scholars highlight a host of biblical and historical errors. This means that reading good reviews may be more enlightening than seeing the movie itself. Moreover, do we need to experiment with drugs, alcohol, or homosexuality before writing a credible analysis of their harmful effects!

Gamboa continues saying: “Here is a word to describe his review: anti-Catholic. But that is predictable. He is known for being anti-Catholic in his books and symposiums. He discredits the movie by Mel Gibson’s being a Catholic, its Catholic sources, the prominent role of Mary in the film and some scenes that are not in the Bible but are part of Catholic tradition.”

On a similar vein, Bruce N. Cameron, J. D., a lawyer, wrote a 9 pages critique which has circulated far and wide. I received dozens of copies of this critique from different sources. Like Gamboa, Cameron attempts to discredit the credibility of my review, by arguing that I have an anti-Catholic bias. He wrote: “*Can Any Good Thing Come Out of Nazareth?* Sam repeatedly attacks *The Passion* based on the fact that Gibson is Catholic and the Catholic Church supports the film. Almost every criticism that Sam has of this film he manages to turn it into an attack on Catholic theology. Is it fair to say that Mel Gibson is a Catholic and therefore he cannot create an accurate depiction of the last few hours of Jesus life on earth?”

My reply is that the issue is not Gibson’s religious affiliation, but his determination to make the movie a personal statement of his traditional Catholic faith, hoping to win many people, especially evangelicals, back into the Roman Catholic Apostolic church. The results are very encouraging for Gibson personally and for the Catholic Church in general. In an interview with *Christianity Today*, Gibson expresses his delight at how evangelical are embracing some of his Catholic beliefs: “I have been actually amazed at the way I would say the evangelical audience has responded to this film more than any other Christian group. For me the amazing thing is that the *film is*

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*so Marian*. But I think the way the film displays her has been kind of an eye opener for evangelicals” (*Christianity Today* February 23, 2004, emphasis supplied).

Indeed, in a subtle way the movie is opening the eyes of many Christians, including some Adventists, by leading them to accept the Catholic understanding of the prominent role of Mary in our salvation. In an email message an Adventist sister laments the fact that the Gospels do not give adequate recognition to Mary’s contribution to our salvation. She expresses her gratitude to God for the way Gibson’s movie sets the record straight. It is evident that for some the movie is the new touchstone of orthodoxy to test even the biblical record. This is a serious error.

The allegation that my review is conditioned by my anti-Catholic bias, is discredited by two major facts:

- 1) My admiration for certain Catholic beliefs and practices.
- 2) The reviews by Catholic scholars who point out the same biblical, historical, and theological errors mentioned in my review. Let me expand on both of these facts.

### **My Admiration for Certain Catholic Beliefs and Practices**

Several years ago Elder George Vandeman produced a TV series entitled: *What I like About...*, which was published in a book by the same title. He interviewed leaders of different churches to show the Adventist appreciation for the contributions of various denominations to Christian life and thought. When he came to the TV transmission about the Catholic Church, he interviewed me, because he felt that in my research I speak favorably about certain Catholic beliefs and practices. Evidently Vandeman did not think that I am biased against the Catholic Church.

The fact is that in my writings I have always shown respect for Catholic beliefs and piety, even when I do not agree with them. If I were biased against the Catholics, then Pope Paul VI could hardly have awarded me a gold medal for my research on the change of the Sabbath! Over the years dozens of Catholic church leaders, including the late Cardinal Joseph Bernadin of Chicago, wrote favorable reviews of my books. It is evident that Catholic scholars do not feel that I am biased against their church.

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Respected biblical scholars are not denominational apologists, because they are committed to objective investigation, even if it means questioning some of their denominational positions. An example is the book *The Biblical Meaning of Man* by Dom Wulstan Mork. He is a Dominican scholar who rejects the traditional Catholic dualistic view of human nature, with the mortal body and immortal soul. Instead, he accepts the biblical (Adventist) wholistic view of human nature, where the soul is the animating principle of the body. Surprisingly his book was published with the official Catholic approval (*imprimatur*).

### **Outstanding Scholarship**

Among the many things that I like about the Catholics, three of them stand out in my mind. First, there is the outstanding scholarship of many Catholic scholars. It was refreshing for me to seat in classes taught by outstanding scholars during the five years I spent at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Their scholarship is evident even in some of the reviews of THE PASSION that I will briefly mention shortly and more fully in my forthcoming book. They do not hesitate to point out the historical, biblical, and theological errors of the movie, because they are genuine scholars, not apologists.

### **Inspiring Spirituality**

Second, I like the spirituality of devout Catholics. It was inspiring for me to watch my Jesuit professors doing their early morning devotions. When I managed to arrive early to the Gregorian University in order to find a parking place, I saw some of my professors meditating while walking up and down the terrace of the contiguous building. They were reading their breviary, and then would stop from time to time to meditate, and pray.

Catholic spirituality is reflected in the respect they show for the place of worship. No talking is allowed in the church and proper attire is required for admission. Adventists are shocked when they are refused admission to Catholic churches like St. Peter because they wear shorts or sleeveless dresses. There is a lot we can learn from the Catholics about reverence in the place of worship.

### **Sanctity of Life and Sacredness of Marriage**

Third, I approve the Catholic view of the sanctity of life and sacredness of marriage. It may come as a surprise to some readers to learn that no abortions are performed in Catholic hospitals, unless the life of the mother is in danger. Our Adventist hospitals are more permissive in this area.

Marriage also is held in high esteem by the Catholic church. It is viewed as a sacrament, that is, a sacred union that no one can dissolve. To prevent divorces, a six months premarital counseling is generally required for couples intending to get married. In my book *THE MARRIAGE COVENANT* you will find a survey indicating that the rate of divorce in the Catholic church is three times lower than in our Adventist church.

There is much more that I could say about what I like about the Catholics. The above observations should suffice to discredit the allegation that I am biased against the Catholics. The truth is that I greatly appreciate the positive aspects of Catholic beliefs and piety, but this does not prevent me from exposing those Catholic teachings that are negated by Scripture. Some of these teachings like the veneration of Mary, redemption through the intensity of Christ's suffering, the reenactment of Christ's sacrifice at the Mass, and the imitation of His suffering as a way of earning salvation, are subtly embedded in *THE PASSION*. It would be irresponsible on my part not to warn our fellow believers against the unbiblical teachings of the movie which are not easily recognized by the average viewer.

### **Reviews by Catholic Scholars**

The most compelling refutation of my alleged anti-Catholic bias is provided by the reviews of the movie done by competent Catholic scholars. Some of them mention the same inaccuracies listed in my review, adding additional ones that escaped my analysis. For example, in his review "Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ: A Challenge to Catholic Teaching*," Catholic Professor Phillip Cunningham submits a partial list of 17 unbiblical scenes contained in the movie, in addition to historical and theological errors ([www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/reviews/gibson\\_cunningham.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/reviews/gibson_cunningham.htm)).

Cunningham introduces the list of "unbiblical scenes" saying: "The film is filled with non-biblical elements. In principle there is nothing wrong for a screenwriter to augment the rather meager Gospel narratives. Indeed, choices such as staging, lighting, costuming, etc. make the supplementing of



the biblical texts inevitable. These unbiblical features are so interwoven with scenes from one Gospel or another that the unwary viewer, already experiencing sensory overload because of the film's vivid brutality, is unlikely to detect them or ponder their significance."

Regarding Gibson's brutal torture of Christ in order to satisfy the demands of divine justice, Cunningham expresses the same concern that I have presented in my review. He writes: "The film's graphic, persistent, and intimate violence raises theological questions from a Catholic perspective. It closely resonates with an understanding of salvation that holds that God had to be satisfied or appeased for the countless sins of humanity by subjecting His son to unspeakable torments. This sadistic picture of God is hardly compatible with the God proclaimed by Jesus as the one who seeks for the lost sheep, who welcomes back the prodigal son before he can even express remorse, or who causes the rain to fall on the just and unjust alike. One wonders why it is necessary to communicate God's love by scenes of unremitting torture. None of the Gospel writers felt obliged to go into the gory details and yet they have communicated God's love for two millennia."

What a perceptive observation! The Gospel writers have communicated God's love for two millennia without focusing on the gory details of Christ's torture. If only Gibson had asked himself these questions: Why do the Gospels tell us so little about the flogging and crucifixion of Jesus? Do I have the right to have Jesus flogged four times, inflicting on Him over 150 stripes with metal tipped whips which were never used at that time, when 39 stripes was the maximum permissible? If Gibson had asked himself these question, he would have produced a more balanced film, portraying a loving God, not a sadistic Being.

It is refreshing to read Catholic scholars who reject the sadistic picture of God portrayed in THE PASSION. In his review "*The Passion of the Christ: A Catholic Response*," Father Lawrence E. Frizzell from Seton Hall University, expresses the same criticism "The theology of the suffering of Jesus seems to be very inadequate. Is God being propitiated by brutality? Rather, the fidelity of Jesus to the Father's will, his resolution to persevere and his patience under duress might have been stressed by additional flashbacks to his teachings. While suffering vicariously, he is providing the example of those virtues, especially *agape* (charity), which are to become the pattern for his disciples in their lives of service" ([www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/reviews/gibson\\_frizzell.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/reviews/gibson_frizzell.htm)).

The two Catholic scholars just cited recognize that Gibson's mystical understanding of Christ's brutal suffering to satisfy the demands of divine justice, ultimately turns God into a sadistic, cruel Being, to be feared rather than to be loved. Such comments coming from Catholic scholars, who express my criticism in a more eloquent way, clearly show that there is nothing anti-Catholic in what I wrote.

### **Catholic Scholars Acknowledge Problems Posed by THE PASSION**

Some Adventists ignore that there are brilliant Catholic scholars who are willing and able to acknowledge the problems posed by THE PASSION, much more readily than some Evangelical leaders. A major reason is that the formers examine the movie rationally, while the latter respond to the movie emotionally. Catholic Professor Cunningham closes his review with this perceptive statement: "*The Passion of the Christ* is a powerful cinematic experience that will no doubt emotionally move many viewers. Whether this emotion is the result of the trauma of seeing someone graphically tortured to death or a genuine spiritual encounter or some combination of the two is difficult to assess. Grief and shock are not automatic promoters of Christian faith" ([www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/reviews/gibson\\_frizzell.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/reviews/gibson_frizzell.htm)).

The last comment is especially true when the victim, Christ, is tortured unto death without an adequate explanation. It is hard to understand how unbelievers unfamiliar with the teaching of the NT regarding Christ's incarnation, perfect life, atoning death, resurrection, and heavenly ministry, can see in the brutal sufferings of Christ a revelation of God's love. After all, the only reason shown in the movie for Christ's brutal torture and death, is the hate of the Jewish leaders, who were determined to see Him dead at any cost for claiming to be the Son of God. Is this a revelation of God's love, especially when the Lord send a crow to pluck out an eye of the impenitent thief on the Cross?

Cunningham continues saying: "The movie's problematic aspects outweigh some positive features. For example, many Catholics will appreciate the prominence given to the mother of Jesus, even though in the New Testament she appears only briefly at the foot of the cross in just one Gospel. Likewise, the visual Eucharistic allusions are praiseworthy, although they

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depict the Mass only in sacrificial terms and minimize its fellowship meal dimensions.”

Note that Cunningham acknowledges that the prominent role of Mary and the allusions to the Eucharist (Mass), are problematic aspects of the movie, because of their inadequate biblical support. Surprisingly, some Adventists wrote to me saying that they do not feel that the movie promotes the prominent role of Mary or the importance of the Mass. The failure of some people to recognize these important Catholic teachings, does not change the fact that such teaching are there. I am reminded of the failure of some students to understand important points I explained several times in my lectures.

The above sampling of statements from respected Catholic scholars who acknowledge some of the problem of *THE PASSION* that I highlighted in my review, should suffice to put to rest the allegation that my criticism was inspired by anti-Catholic bias. The fact is that Catholic scholars themselves acknowledge the same problems that I point out. The issue is not bias, but an adequate biblical and historical knowledge that enables a person to understand the subtle deceptions promoted by the movie.

In the forthcoming book I will quote other Catholic authors, including the “Full Review” of *THE PASSION*, prepared by the Office for Film and Broadcasting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishop. Surprisingly, some Catholic scholars recognize the problems of *THE PASSION* more readily than some Evangelical leaders. A reason is that some Evangelical leaders seem to be more interested to capitalize on the popularity of the movie for their church growth program, than to consider the long term effects of the Catholic beliefs promoted by the movie, on the spiritual life of their congregations.

### **E. G. WHITE’S WRITINGS SUPPORT THE BRUTALITY OF GIBSON’S *PASSION***

Some influential Adventist pastors and a few critics of my review, are appealing to some statements of Ellen White to support the details of Gibson’s movie, especially its graphic brutality. On Saturday April 17, Pastor Dwight Nelson preached a most inspiring sermon entitled “Hast Thou No Scar?” at the Pioneer Memorial Church of Andrews University. I was not

privileged to hear the sermon in the church, since I was speaking at a rally in Honolulu, Hawaii. I heard the recording of the sermon which can be easily purchased on line ([www.pmchurch.org](http://www.pmchurch.org)) or at the Berrien Springs, ABC. What I like about the sermon is the reflections on the meaning of carrying the cross. Nelson presents perceptive thoughts from John Stott's classic book on *The Cross of Christ*. He explains that bearing the Cross is not simply a matter of accepting unfavorable circumstances, but of being willing to make wilful choices to follow Christ's teachings—choices that can be costly.

What distresses me about the sermon, is Pastor Nelson's attempt to promote Mel Gibson's movie as one of the three trustworthy sources of the details of Christ's suffering and death. He mentions the three major sources in the following order: "We have the three synoptics, plus Mel Gibson, plus *Desire of Ages*."

### Is Gibson's Movie Equal to the Bible?

Surprisingly Gibson's movie is mentioned after the Bible and before the *Desire of Ages*, as a major source of information about the details of Christ's Passion. Few sentences later, he reverses the order, mentioning *The Desires of Ages* before Gibson's movie. It is hard to believe that even some Adventist preachers have already elevated THE PASSION to a canonical status comparable to the Bible. I predicted this development in my previous newsletter, because movies impact the thinking and living of most Americans much more than the Bible.

Pastor Nelson finds it ironic that those who are "so vehement in their opposition to Mel Gibson's portrayal [of the Passion] and so vocal in their advocacy of *The Desire of Ages* portrayal," ignore "how close the two tracks parallel each other, exposing [sic] to us details that you cannot find in any of the Gospels. You just find them in *Desire of Ages* and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*." To support his contention Nelson refers to a compilation prepared by R. Wresch, M.D., an Adventist physician serving in Guam—a compilation which lists "all the unique details found in Mel Gibson and *The Desire of Ages*, but not in the Gospel records."

Wresch's compilation is similar to the longer one prepared by Bruce N. Cameron, J. D., a lawyer. The intended purpose of these two compilations is to discredit my review by showing that numerous details of THE PASSION which are not found in the Gospels, are fully supported by statements found in *The Desire of Ages*. The problem with this methodology is

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the superficial nature of the comparison, largely based on brief statements of Ellen White. No serious attempt is made to compare the full text of Gibson's script and *The Desire of Ages*. Such a comparison reveals, as we shall soon see, radical and irreconcilable differences between the two sources.

To compare Gibson's script and the *Desire of Ages* is relatively easy because his script is largely derived from Anne Emmerich's book on *The Dolorous Passion of the Lord Jesus Christ*. This book, as John Dominic Crossan, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at DePaul University, in Chicago, points out is "the hidden script" that inspired Gibson to "create a film that is two hours of unrelenting brutality."

A reading of *The Dolorous Passion* helps us understand why Gibson has produced such a brutal representation of THE PASSION which is radically different from *The Desire of Ages*. As Crossman explains *The Dolorous Passion* describes "the satisfaction which [Jesus] would have to offer to Divine Justice, and how it would consist of a degree of suffering in his soul and body which would comprehend all the sufferings due to the concupiscence of all mankind, since the debt of the whole human race had to be paid by that humanity which alone was sinless—the humanity of the Son of God." ("Hymn to a Savage God," [www.beliefnet.com/story/140/story\\_14099\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/140/story_14099_1.html)).

We noted earlier that Gibson's view of God being propitiated for all of mankind's sins by the exceeding brutality of Christ's suffering, ultimately turns God into a sadistic, cruel Being, to be feared rather than to be loved. This frightening view of God portrayed in Gibson's movie, is foreign to the Bible and to Ellen White. Its source, as we shall see is Anne Emmerich's meditation on *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*.

### **Problems with the Use of Ellen White's Writings**

Before comparing *The Desire of Ages* to *The Dolorous Passion*, we need to note two problems posed by the use of Ellen White's statements to support Gibson's movie. First, her statements are like a two edge sword that can be used for or against her. Some critics of Ellen White emailed me a similar compilation of her statements to argue that she is a false prophet because she invents things that are not in the Bible. I reject this allegation, because in my view the additional information Ellen White provides, does not contradict but supports the biblical narrative.

Second, we need to be aware of the fact that there are statements in *The Desire of Ages* that are difficult to reconcile the Bible. For example, in commenting on Matthew 27:25, where the Jewish people told Pilate: “Let his blood be upon us and our children,” Ellen White wrote: “That awful cry ascended to the throne of God. The sentence, pronounced upon themselves, was written in heaven. That prayer was heard. The blood of the Son of God was upon their children and their children’s children, *a perpetual curse*.”

“Terribly was it realized in the destruction of Jerusalem. Terribly has it been manifested in the condition of the Jewish nation for eighteen hundred years—a branch severed from the vine, a dead, fruitless branch, to be gathered up and burned. From land to land throughout the world, from century to century, dead, dead in trespasses in sins! Terribly will that prayer be fulfilled in the great judgment day” (*Desire of Ages* 739, emphasis supplied).

This is a troubling statement because it suggests that Ellen White believed the same traditional Catholic teaching (prior to Vatican II) that the Jewish people are under “a perpetual curse” for their responsibility in Christ’s death. On account of this curse, the Jews have been oppressed during the past centuries “from land to land throughout the world,” because they are “a dead, fruitless branch, to be gathered up and burned” in the great judgment day. It is difficult to reconcile what Ellen White wrote a century ago, with the 1945 establishment of the State of Israel and the success the Jews are enjoying today in the scientific and financial world. Today the Jews are a driving force of the American economy. The stock market hangs on the words of a Jew, Alan Greenspan.

Personally I have difficulty to believe that Ellen White viewed the Jews as a cursed people, condemned to suffer throughout human history until judgment day. I asked Prof. Jacques Douhkan, Seminary Professor and Director of the Jewish Outreach, to help me interpret this passage in the light of what Ellen White wrote elsewhere about the Jews. He graciously shared with me a paper he wrote on this question. His conclusion is that for Ellen White the perpetual curse on the Jews, “concerns the Jewish leaders, the priests and the rulers,” and not the Jewish people as a whole. This explanation makes sense, but it is difficult to apply it to the statement under consideration, because Ellen White speaks of the oppressed condition of the Jews during the past centuries “from land to land throughout the world.” It is evident that this includes, not only the Jewish leaders, but the Jewish people

in general. The best solution would be to edit this statement in harmony with what she wrote elsewhere.

As it stands Ellen White's statement is contradicted by Paul's prediction regarding the salvation of the Jews: "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins'" (Rom 11:25-27). I mentioned this problematic statement simply to make the point that it is wiser for Adventists to give priority to Scripture in evaluating any teachings, including THE PASSION. Other problematic statements will be mentioned shortly.

### **The Mocking of Jesus Before Caiaphas**

The argument that *The Desire of Ages* supports many of the details of THE PASSION, is contradicted by the primary source of Gibson's script, namely, Anne Emmerich's book *The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Gibson openly admits: "She supplied me with the stuff I never would have thought of" (*The New Yorker*, September 13, 2003). This is evident, as we shall see, in the many details of the movie which are foreign to the Gospels and to *The Desire of Ages*, but present in *The Dolorous Passion*.

Since the major issue is the exaggerated brutality of Gibson's movie, we will briefly compare what *The Desire of Ages* and *The Dolorous Passion* have to say regarding two episodes:

1. The mocking of Jesus before the High Priest
2. The scourging of Jesus before Pilate

These two episodes are a most brutal and shocking part of the movie that never seems to end. We shall see that their treatment in *The Desires of Ages* is radically different from that of *The Dolorous Passion*. The same radical difference can be seen many other episodes, such as the role of Mary, the Stations of the Cross, the appearances of Satan, the story of Veronica wiping the face of Jesus, the carrying of the Cross by both Jesus and Simon of Cyrene, the smashing of Jesus' body under the weight of the Cross, the final earthquake and the splitting of the Temple. These glaring difference will be examined in the forthcoming book. The results of the comparison



will be self evident. Contrary to the claim that “the two tracks parallel each other,” the truth is that two sources have very little in common.

### Ellen White on the Mocking of Jesus before the High Priest

Ellen White’s account of the mocking of Jesus before the Sanhedrin and His flogging before Pilate, differs substantially from the brutality portrayed in the movie—a brutality which is inspired by *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. A comparison between the two accounts should put to rest the allegation of my critics that Ellen White supports Gibson’s movie.

Regarding the mocking of Christ before the Sanhedrin Ellen White wrote: “Then came the third scene of abuse and mockery, worse even than that received from the ignorant rabble. In the very presence of the priests and rulers, and with their sanction, this took place. Every feeling of sympathy or humanity had gone out of their hearts. When the condemnation of Jesus was pronounced by the judges [Sanhedrin], a satanic fury took possession of the people. The roar of voices was like that of wild beasts. The crowd made a rush toward Jesus, crying, He is guilty, put Him to death! Had it not been for the Roman soldiers, Jesus would not have lived to be nailed to the cross of Calvary. He would have been torn in pieces before His judges, had not Roman authority interfered, and by force of arms restrained the violence of the mob” (*Desire of Ages* 714-715). Note that Ellen White speaks of the verbal abuse and fury of the crowd which was restrained by Roman soldiers. But there is no mention physical violence being carried out by the crowd against Christ.

The Gospels’ account of the abusive treatment Christ received before the Sanhedrin is very brief: “They all condemned him as worthy of death. Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, and struck him with their fists, and said, ‘Prophesy!’ And the guard took him and beat him” (Mark 14:64-65; cf. Matt 26:67). There is a discrepancy between *The Desire of Ages* and the Gospels. While Ellen White says that the Roman soldiers protected Christ, Mark affirms that “the guards took him and beat him” (Mark 14:65).

The same discrepancy appears again in the account of the scourging of Jesus in the judgment hall of Pilate (Praetorium). The Gospels tells us that the Roman soldiers were responsible for mocking and abusing Jesus (Mark

15:16-20; Matt 27:27-31) but Ellen White says that “the Roman soldiers that surrounded Christ were not all hardened; some were looking into His face for one evidence that He was not a criminal or dangerous character. . . . They looked at the divine sufferer with feelings of deep pity” (*Desire of Ages* 735).

Our concern at this point is not to reconcile the apparent discrepancies between the Gospels and Ellen White on the Roman soldiers’ attitude toward Christ. Instead, we simply wish to point out that Ellen White’s picture of humane Roman soldiers who looked with pity on Jesus, is totally missing in *THE PASSION* where the soldiers act like drunken sadists, competing with one another on who could inflict the greatest damage to Jesus body with their whips and cat-o’-nine-tails with metal barbs. This is one of the many indications showing that Ellen White does not support Gibson’s inflated brutality which is inspired *Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*. The two tracks of the narratives are noticeably different, not similar.

### **Anne Emmerich on the Mocking of Jesus before the High Priest**

Emmerich devotes a whole chapter to the physical abuse that Jesus received in the Court of Caiaphas. She mentions a host of gruesome methods used to torture Christ—methods shown in the movie, but absent in the Gospels and in *The Desire of Ages*. “No sooner did Caiaphas, with the other members of the Council, leave the tribunal than a crowd of miscreants—the very scum of the people—surrounded Jesus like a swarm of infuriated wasps, and began to heap every imaginable insult upon him. Even during the trial, whilst the witnesses were speaking, the archers [soldiers] and some others could not restrain their cruel inclinations, but pulled out handfuls of his hair and beard, spat upon him, struck him with their fists, wounded him with sharp-pointed sticks, and even ran needles into his body; but when Caiaphas left the hall they set no bounds to their barbarity. They first placed a crown, made of straw and the bark of trees, upon his head, and then took it off, saluting him at the same time with insulting expressions, like the following: ‘Behold the Son of David wearing the crown of his father.’”

“Next they put a crown of reeds upon his head, took off his robe and scapular, and then threw an old torn mantle, which scarcely reached his knees, over his shoulders; around his neck they hung a long iron chain, with an iron ring at each end, studded with sharp points, which bruised and tore his knees

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as be walked. They again pinioned his arms, put a reed into his hand, and covered his Divine countenance with spittle. They had already thrown all sorts of filth over his hair, as well as over his chest, and upon the old mantle. They bound his eyes with a dirty rag, and struck him, crying out at the same time in loud tones, ‘Prophesy unto us, O Christ, who is he that struck thee?’ He answered not one word, but sighed, and prayed inwardly for them.

“After many insults, they seized the chain which was hanging on his neck, dragged him towards the room into which the Council had withdrawn, and with their sticks forced him in, vociferating at the same time, ‘March forward, thou King of Straw! Show thyself to the Council with the insignia of the regal honor; we have rendered unto thee.’ . . . They fetched a basin of dirty water, which they poured over his face and shoulders, whilst they bent their knees before him, and exclaimed, ‘Behold thy precious unction, behold the spikenard worth three hundred pence; thou hast been baptized in the pool of Bethsaida.’”

This description of the shameful and relentless physical abuse that Christ suffered before the Sanhedrin, can be seen in *THE PASSION*, but is absent in the Gospels and *The Desire of Ages*. Nowhere does Ellen White or the Gospels speak of the crowd pulling Christ’s hair and beard, wounding him with sharp pointed sticks, piercing Him with needles, dragging Him around with a chain hanging around his neck, bruising and tearing His knees with a studded chain with sharp points, and pouring dirty water over His head to mock His regal unction. The exaggeration of Christ’s physical abuse before the Sanhedrin, serves to support the mystical view of redemption through the excessive suffering of Jesus, but it obscures the real meaning of Christ’s sacrifice for our salvation as presented in the Gospels and *The Desire of Ages*.

### **Ellen White on the Scouring of Jesus in Pilate Judgment Hall**

The contrast between Gibson’s movie and *The Desire of Ages* is most evident in the account of the scourging of Jesus in Pilate’s judgment hall. Ellen White follows closely the Gospel of Mark, adding only very few words. “Jesus was taken, faint with weariness and covered with wounds, and scourged in the sight of the multitude. ‘And the soldiers led him away into the hall, called Praetorium; and they called together the whole band. And they clothed Him with purple, and platted a crown of thorns, and put it about his head, and began to salute Him, Hail, King of the Jews! And they . . . did spit upon

Him, and bowing their knees worshipped Him' [Mark 15:16-19]. Occasionally some wicked hand snatched the reed that had been placed in His hand, and struck the crown upon His brow, forcing the thorns in His temples, and sending the blood trickling down His face and beard" (*Desire of Ages* 734).

The account of the scourging of Jesus is brief and sober. Contrary to THE PASSION, Ellen White does not explain how the scourging was done and how long it lasted. Instead, she mentions the mocking of Jesus and the occasionally striking with a reed upon the crown of thorns which sent "the blood trickling down His face and beard." Ellen White speaks of the trickling of the blood down Christ's face and beard, while Gibson portrays blood flowing by the gallons as the hooks dug deep and tore out the flesh of Jesus' body reduced into a pulp. Throughout the ordeal Mary is identified with her Son, gathering His flesh and blood after the scourging and taking Him down from the Cross with the help of John. Shortly we shall read these details of the script and we shall see that there is no resemblance between Gibson's movie and *The Desires of Ages*.

The difference between the two scripts is evident also in the description of the Roman soldiers. Gibson portrays them all as sadistic and sarcastic, bribed by the Jews to dig deeper into Christ's flesh with their metal-tipped whips. By contrast, Ellen White says that "The Roman soldiers that surrounded Christ were not all hardened; some were looking into His face for one evidence that He was a criminal or dangerous character. . . . They looked at the divine sufferer with feelings of deep pity. The silent submission of Christ stamped upon their minds the scene, never to be effaced . . ." (*Desire of Ages* 735-736). There are no picture in Gibson's movie of Roman soldiers looking at Jesus with feelings of pity and compassion. Such pictures would have obscured Gibson's focus on the relentless, brutal torture of Jesus to satisfy the demands of divine justice.

### **Anne Emmerich on the Scouring of Jesus in Pilate Judgment Hall**

Contrary to the brief and sober account of the scourging of Jesus we have just read in *The Desire of Ages* and the Gospel of Mark, both Gibson's movie and its source, *The Dolorous Passion*, portray the Roman soldiers as drunk, sadistic brutes who take turns in scourging Jesus with their arsenal of instruments until He collapses in a bloody heap of shredded flesh.

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*The Dolorous Passion* devotes a whole chapter to the scourging of Jesus, describing in minute details the four scourging of Jesus carried out on an alternating basis by six Roman soldiers, who escalated the torture with their arsenal of instruments. It is hard to believe that Gibson did not realize that the 150-plus stripes with metal tips, would have killed three times over any SUPER MAN. For the sake of brevity we quote only few paragraphs which Gibson portrays with unsurpassed oscar-winning brutality.

“Pilate was determined to adhere to his resolution of not condemning our Lord to death, and ordered him to be scourged according to the manner of the Romans. The guards were therefore ordered to conduct him through the midst of the furious multitude to the forum, which they did with the utmost brutality, at the same time loading him with abuse, and striking him with their staffs. The pillar where criminals were scourged stood to the north of Pilate’s palace, near the guard-house, and the executioners soon arrived, carrying whips, rods, and ropes, which they tossed down at its base. They were six in number, dark, swarthy men, somewhat shorter than Jesus; their chests were covered with a piece of leather, or with some dirty stuff; their loins were girded, and their hairy, sinewy arms bare. . . .

“These cruel men had many times scourged poor criminals to death at this pillar. They resembled wild beasts or demons, and appeared to be half drunk. They struck our Lord with their fists, and dragged him by the cords with which he was pinioned, although he followed them without offering the least resistance, and, finally, they barbarously knocked him down against the pillar. . . .

“Jesus trembled and shuddered as he stood before the pillar, and took off his garments as quickly as he could, but his hands were bloody and swollen. The only return he made when his brutal executioners struck and abused him was to pray for them in the most touching manner: he turned his face once towards his Mother, who was standing overcome with grief; this look quite unnerved her: she fainted, and would have fallen, had not the holy women who were there supported her. . . .

“The Holy of holies [was] violently stretched, without a particle of clothing, on a pillar used for the punishment of the greatest criminals; and then did two furious ruffians who were thirsting for his blood begin in the most barbarous manner to scourge his sacred body from head to foot. The whips or scourges which they first made use of appeared to me to be made of

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a species of flexible white wood, but perhaps they were composed of the sinews of the ox, or of strips of leather. . . .

“Our loving Lord, the Son of God, true God and true Man, writhed as a worm under the blows of these barbarians; his mild but deep groans might be heard from afar; they resounded through the air, fording a kind of touching accompaniment to the hissing of the instruments of torture. These groans resembled rather a touching cry of prayer and supplication, than moans of anguish. . . .

“Several of the servants of the High Priests went up to the brutal executioners and gave them money; as also a large jug filled with a strong bright red liquid, which quite inebriated them, and increased their cruelty tenfold towards their innocent Victim. The two ruffians continued to strike our Lord with unremitting violence for a quarter of an hour, and were then succeeded by two others. His body was entirely covered with black, blue, and red marks; the blood was trickling down on the ground, and yet the furious cries which issued from among the assembled Jews showed that their cruelty was far from being satiated. . . .

“Then two fresh executioners commenced scourging Jesus with the greatest possible fury; they made use of a different kind of rod,—a species of thorny stick, covered with knots and splinters. The blows from these sticks tore his flesh to pieces; his blood spouted out so as to stain their arms, and he groaned, prayed, and shuddered.

“[Then] two fresh executioners took the places of the last mentioned, who were beginning to flag; their scourges were composed of small chains, or straps covered with iron hooks, which penetrated to the bone, and tore off large pieces of flesh at every blow. What word, alas! could describe this terrible—this heartrending scene!

“The cruelty of these barbarians was nevertheless not yet satiated; they untied Jesus, and again fastened him up with his back turned towards the pillar. As he was totally unable to support himself in an upright position, they passed cords round his waist, under his arms, and above his knees, and having bound his hands tightly into the rings which were placed at the upper part of the pillar, they recommenced scourging him with even greater fury than before; and one among them struck him constantly on the face with a new rod. The body of our Lord was perfectly torn to shreds,—it was but one

wound. He looked at his torturers with his eyes filled with blood, as if entreating mercy; but their brutality appeared to increase, and his moans each moment became more feeble.”

## Conclusion

The preceding lengthy quotes from *The Dolorous Passion*, clearly show that the bloody and gory description of Christ’s scourging, which is the centerpiece of Gibson’s movie, is absent in *The Desire of Ages* and the Gospels. Contrary to Gibson, Ellen White is not obsessed with capturing every holy drop of Christ’s blood and every sacred goblet of His flesh flayed during the flogging. Her account of the scourging is brief and sober, with no explanation of how it was done and how long it lasted

The inflicting of suffering on Christ is the central action of Gibson’s movie, but it is secondary to *The Desire of Ages*. The reason is that Ellen White teaches salvation through Christ’s perfect sacrifice, not through the intensity of His suffering.

In *THE PASSION* the beating, whipping, and ripping of Christ’s flesh is relentless until He is skinned alive and taken apart. When the viewer thinks that the flaying of Jesus’ flesh can get no crueller, it does. In those endless moments when the soldiers escalate their torture with new instruments, Gibson proves his oscar-winning abilities in portraying violence. Somebody said that the violence of *Braveheart* becomes *Bloodheart* in *THE PASSION*. Gibson seems determined to show only *one color* from the full Christian spectrum: *blood red*.

Why is Gibson dishing out to Christ the kind of punishment that would kill any *SUPER MAN* three times over? We noted earlier that the answer is found in *The Dolorous Passion*. The book explains that to satisfy divine justice and pay the debt of all of mankind’s sins, Christ had to suffer in his body and mind the equivalent of the punishment for all the sins of mankind.

Gibson’s unrelenting and brutal vision of *THE PASSION*, reminds us of the great revivalist Jonathan Edwards who during the first great awak-



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ening tried to trigger mass conversion by preaching hellfire. His favorite sermon was: “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” In *THE PASSION*, Gibson attempts to convert million to his Catholic understanding of redemption by portraying “God in the Hands of Angry Sinners.” Behind both visions, stands a bloodthirsty Father, more eager to damn and punish than to save. Such visions may convert some people through fear, but may also cause many to hate God for His sadistic and angry character.

Dr. Charles Krauthammer, a *Washington Post* columnist, finds “Gibson’s personal interpretation [of the scourging of Jesus] spectacularly vicious. Three of the Gospels have but a one-line reference to Jesus’s scourging. The fourth has no reference at all. In Gibson’s movie this becomes 10 minutes of the most unremitting sadism in the history of film. Why 10? Why not five? Why not two? Why not zero, as in Luke? Gibson chose 10 (*The Washington Post*, March 5, 2004, Page A23).

A reason for Gibson’s choice is to be found in his sadistic view of God who demands full satisfaction for all the sins of mankind through the brutal and inhuman torture of His Son. Such sadistic view of God is foreign to the Gospels and to *The Desires of Ages*. Thus, the claim that “the two tracks parallel each other, exposing [sic] to us details that you cannot find in any of the Gospels,” is discredited by the preceding comparative analysis of the two narratives. We have seen that the two sources differ radically both in the details of the scourging and in the meaning of Christ’s suffering. The same radical differences are evident in many other episodes that will be examined in the forthcoming book.

## **UNPRECEDENTED EVANGELISTIC OPPORTUNITY**

Some critics argue that my critical comments about Gibson’s movie ignore the unprecedented opportunity *THE PASSION* provides to complete the Gospel commission. We live in a highly visual and anti-literate society where many people would rather watch a movie than listen to a sermon or read a book. *THE PASSION* provides a powerful modern-day technique to confront people with the message of the Cross—the message of the divine Son of God who was willing to enter into the limitation, suffering, and death of human flesh to pay the price of our redemption and reconciliation with God.

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There is no question in my mind that the Lord is using Gibson's movie to lead many to a new or renewed appreciation of Christ's sufferings for our redemption. The reason is that God is able to use to a good end even a movie that is so Catholic in its teachings and so sadistic in its portrayal of God's character. An indication of the latter is the crow sent by an unforgiving God to pluck one eye of the thief on the cross.

### **A Personal Experience**

I am reminded of an experience that I have never shared before. It happened in Rome, Italy, when I was 9 years. Bruno Cornacchiola, a local elder of our Seventh-day Adventist church, on Saturday, April 12, 1947, took his three children (Isola, Carlo, and Gianfranco) for a picnic to Tre Fontane (Three Fountains)—an area outside of Rome, close to the basilica of St. Paul, where according to tradition Paul was beheaded.

When he went into a cave with one of his children to retrieve their lost ball, the Virgin Mary appeared to him and his children, saying: "I am she who is related to the Divine Trinity. I am the Virgin of Revelation. You have persecuted me, now is the time to stop! Come and be part of the Holy Fold which is the Celestial Court on earth" ([www.theotokos.org.uk/pages/approved/appariti/trefonta.html](http://www.theotokos.org.uk/pages/approved/appariti/trefonta.html)). Cornacchiola responded by returning with his family into the Catholic Church. He claimed that the apparition of Mary led him and his family to a true conversion experience.

Few months later on October 5, 1947, a special statue representing the Mary appeared to Cornacchiola, was blessed by Pope Pius XII and taken in procession among large crowds from St. Peter to the grotto of Tre Fontane. The statue was eventually placed in the grotto which has become a popular pilgrimage shrine. I vividly recall when the statue reached the place where I was standing with the families of our condominium. The people started jeering at me for belonging to a Protestant heretical church condemned by the Virgin Mary herself. They urged me to return to the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church or I would burn in hell for ever. I shall never forget the verbal abuse I experienced on that day.

### **Does God Use Bad Things to a Good End?**

Could it be that God used a deceptive apparition of Mary to lead Bruno Cornacchiola and his family to a conversion experience? Could it be that God is using Jim Caviezel, who plays Christ in *THE PASSION*, to lead

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many to understand and accept the sufferings and sacrifice of Christ for our redemption, though he gives credit to the Croatian Madonna of Medjugorje for sustaining him throughout the filming? Caviezel said: “This film is something that I believe was made by Mary for her Son. Mary has always pointed me toward the truth. I really believe that she was setting me up, getting me ready to play her Son. She architected this whole thing” (*National Catholic Register* January 30-2004).

Could it be that God is using THE PASSION to help people appreciate the Cross, though the film is a Catholic movie with a distinct Catholic message, exalting the redemptive role of Mary, the satisfaction view of the atonement, and the sacrificial nature of the Mass? The answer is “Yes,” because God is able to use even bad things to a good end. “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom 8:28).

### **Is Mel Gibson Evangelizing Evangelicals?**

To acknowledge that THE PASSION is used by God to lead some people to a new or renewed understanding of the suffering and death of Jesus for our salvation, does not mean that we must ignore the unbiblical Catholic teachings promoted by the movie. Could it be that Mel Gibson is evangelizing the Evangelicals in a very subtle and deceptive way?

The very fact that many Evangelicals are uncritically endorsing a movie that promotes such Catholic beliefs as Mary’s role in our salvation, the sacrificial view of the Mass, the satisfaction view of the atonement, and salvation through the imitation of Christ’s suffering, speaks volumes about how far Evangelicals have slipped away from the teaching of their Founding Fathers.

In a perceptive article entitled “Will Mel Evangelize Evangelicals?”, Steven Greydanus, Catholic Editor and Chief critic of Decentfilms.com, notes how THE PASSION is making Evangelicals receptive, not only to the popular traditional Catholic devotion of the 14 Stations of the Cross and the five sorrowful mysteries of the rosary, but also to the fundamental Catholic teachings of the Mass and of the unique role of Mary.

Regarding Mary, Greydanus writes: “For many non-Catholics, Mary is such a contentious subject that the very mention of her name elicits knee-

jerk defensiveness: ‘Mary was just an ordinary sinful woman like anyone else; God used her in a special way, but she's no different from you or me.’

“*The Passion of the Christ* reaches beyond this defensiveness, inviting the viewer to a positive, sympathetic contemplation of Mary’s unique relationship with Jesus and with his disciples. When a scene of Mary’s anguish at her son staggering under the cross gives way to a flashback of Jesus falling as a toddler and Mary rushing to his side, many will grasp on an emotional level something they might resist putting into words: While Jesus alone made atonement for our sins, of all his followers Mary was in a unique way united with him in his sufferings, as her mother's heart was pierced by a sword.”

Greydanus continues explaining that “Gibson’s film also plays with the Marian interpretation of the verse: ‘And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed’ [Gen 3:15]. In traditional Catholic exegesis, ‘the woman’ is ultimately Mary, and her ‘seed’ is Christ himself. The ‘enmity’ between Satan and ‘the woman’ signifies nothing less than a total opposition of wills untainted by the slightest fault or sin on Mary’s part, and thus points to her Immaculate Conception. . . . Add to this the way Peter early on refers to Mary as ‘Mother,’ and it is clear *The Passion of the Christ* holds up Mary as a mother figure to all of Jesus' disciples.”

Greydanus concludes suggesting that “perhaps Catholics should make it a point of going [to see the movie] with their Protestant friends—and then pointing out what their friends are not hearing about the film in their own churches” ([www.ncregister.com/current/0229lead3.htm](http://www.ncregister.com/current/0229lead3.htm)). Do Evangelical leaders really need the help of Catholics to understand the unique Catholic teachings promoted by THE PASSION? Perhaps some do, because of their limited biblical and historical preparation. However, most leaders are educated enough to recognize the distinctive Catholic beliefs and piety promoted by the movie.

### Seeking for Shortcuts to Complete the Gospel Commission

Why then are so many Evangelical leaders promoting THE PASSION as THE BEST OUTREACH OPPORTUNITY IN 2000 YEARS? A plausible answer is suggested by Pastor Brian McLaren in his article entitled “Why *The Passion* ‘Outreach’ was all Hype, and I Did not Fall for It,” pub-

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lished in *Christianity Today*. McLaren explains that the reason for all the hype about THE PASSION is because we are “seeking single source shortcuts to complete our mission, which we hope to finish as soon as possible, I guess so we can all get to heaven so the world and its trouble are left behind” (*Christianity Today*, March 9, 2004).

McLaren notes that “optimistic American Evangelicals bounce and bound like golden retrievers from one silver-bullet ‘outreach opportunity’ to the next.” Several one silver-bullet ‘outreach opportunities’ have been promoted in recent years: Radio/TV/Satellite evangelism (Net 98, 99, 2000, etc), contemporary praise music, mass rallies, Christian Rock Music, seeker services, new models of doing church, internet evangelism, PowerPoint preaching, or a new film, THE PASSION.

There is no question that our visual oriented society responds more readily to dramatic, multi-sensory, special effects presentations. But, ultimately, the greatest outreach opportunity today is not a *movie*, but people *moved* to live, love, and serve as Christ did. What made the early Christians an irresistible force that eventually turned to Roman world upside down, was not dramatic Gospel shows in the Roman amphitheaters scattered throughout the empire, but the manifestation of Christian love, able to pray for and forgive even enemies. Tertullian tells us that the Romans were jealous of the Christians, because they loved their enemies, more than the Romans loved their blood relatives.

Instead of seeking a one silver-bullet shortcut to proclaim the Three Angels Message to our generation, we need to utilize the countless outreach opportunities given to every Christian. My heart resonates with the following appeal by Pastor McLaren: “There are uncountable great outreach opportunities. For example, there are millions of people, precious to God, dying of AIDs. And their orphans too. Do you want the emerging culture to sit up and take notice? Don't show them another movie, however great it is. Show them Christians around the world (starting with those who have been given the most: us) who care and give and love and move to serve.

“There are millions of poor Muslims who see the West as decadent, strident, arrogant, selfish, careless, and pugilistic, and of course, they are right. Can you see how offering them a fine movie could just make things worse? Instead, why don't we show them some Christians who are honest, upright, peacemakers, compassionate, humble, and generous?

“Our world is torn by ethnic, class, and religious hatred. Don't show the emerging culture a movie about Jesus: show them a movement of people living like Jesus—people who like him love the different, even the enemy, whose doors are open and tables are set with welcome (*Christianity Today*, March 9, 2004).