

**ENDTIME ISSUES NEWSLETTER No. 119:
“The Portrayal and Impersonation of Christ”
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We live today in a highly visual society. The motto is *seeing is believing*. Most people are no longer satisfied with *word-images*. They want to see *picture-images*. The result is that we are bombarded by images in the market place, in schools, in the workplace, at home, and more and more in churches.

Church growth experts tell us that preaching is old-fashioned and no longer appeals to Generation Y (born in the 80’s) or Generation X (born between 1964-1982). To reach these new generations, *Word-Worship* must be replaced with the more effective *Image-Worship* such as drama, plays, dancing, movies, and rock band.

Church history, however, teaches us that when the preaching of the Word was gradually replaced by a visual worship consisting of the staging of the Mass, Passion Plays, veneration of images, relics, processions, and pilgrimages to holy shrines, the apostasy of the church set in, ushering in what is known as the Dark Ages. For a thousand years people worshipped the Christ, Mary, and saints that they could see, touch, wear, and kiss. Instead of worshipping the invisible God in Spirit and Truth, they worshipped a variety of visible beings with ritualistic superstitions.

To revive the church, the sixteenth century Reformers overwhelmingly rejected the use of images, statues, relics, Passion Plays in the church, as a violation of the Second Commandment. Rather than using icons as aid to worship, they relied on the preaching of the Word to meet the spiritual needs of believers and to reach unbelievers with the Good News of salvation.

Today in the Evangelical world there is a movement from *Word-worship* to *Image-Worship*, consisting of drama, plays, movies, “sacred dancing,” and rock bands. Could this trend lead to a repetition of the past downfall of the church and of the ancient Israelites? I have addressed this

question in chapter 2 of the book I am currently writing on THE PASSION OF CHRIST IN SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY. In this newsletter I am posting a brief excerpt of this chapter dealing with “The Theology of the Passion Plays.”

What led me to consider the role of images in worship, is the fact that none of the Evangelical church leaders who are promoting Mel Gibson’s movie on *The Passion* as a biblical masterpiece, ever stop to consider how the impersonation of Christ by a movie actor relates to the Second Commandment. This question affects also our Adventist church, because it is becoming a common practice to impersonate Christ in Passion Plays staged in our school campuses and large churches.

The intent of this essay is not to condemn the use of images indiscriminately, but to seek to understand the biblical principles that should guide us in the use of images in worship. Some of you may not agree with my conclusions. That is not a problem as long as we can disagree without becoming disagreeable to one another. Remember that I come from Rome, but I do not claim infallibility. I submit to you my earnest attempt to understand what the Bible teaches on portraying and impersonating Christ.

The purpose of this essay is to stimulate reflection on an important current issue affecting today our worship experience. If this study causes you to think, I feel satisfied, whether or not you agree with me. My philosophy is that I would rather read a study or listen to a sermon that causes me to think, though I may not agree with everything written or said, than a study or a sermon that puts me to sleep because it repeats what I have already heard hundreds of times.

A THANK YOU NOTE

Words fail to express my appreciation for the many messages you have sent me, expressing your gratitude for the last newsletter no. 118 on “The Co-Redemptive Role of Mary in *The Passion*.” Several of you told me that the essay helped you to understand the subtle and deceptive way in which the Catholic belief in the co-redemptive role of Mary is embedded in Mel Gibson’s movie.

Several of you expressed your appreciation also for alerting you to two outstanding Adventist productions, namely, the new *Commentary on the Book of Revelation* published by Andrews University Press, and the interactive multimedia CD-ROM on the unfolding of the Great Controversy, produced by a team of gifted people under the direction of Gerard Damsteegt, Ph. D., Professor of Church History at our Andrews University Theological Seminary.

Surprisingly, even pastors were surprised to learn about the best new SDA *Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, authored by Ranko Stefanovic, Ph. D., Professor of New Testament at Andrews University. You can read more about these two outstanding Adventist productions below in the announcement section.

In the light of the encouragement I have received, I will endeavor in the future to inform you from time to time about some outstanding Adventist publication or recording that can deepen your understand and experience of Biblical truths. Rest assured that I will only recommend what I consider an outstanding biblical research or recording.

Thank you also for sharing my newsletters with your friends. As a result of your efforts, I receive an average of 200 new subscriptions every week. Let your friends know that this is a FREE service. To subscribe they only need to email a message to <sbacchiocchi@biblicalperspectives.com>, saying SUBSCRIBE ME.

A CLARIFICATION ABOUT 3ABN

In the last newsletter I gave the faulty impression that 3ABN has a limited outreach and no internal auditing. I was basing my comments on what I have seen and heard in my travels around the world. I have learned that the facts are different.

Danny Shelton, the Director of 3ABN, graciously took time to explain to me both the auditing system and the outreach of 3ABN. The latter includes not only the reception of the programs through dishes but also the airing through an increasing number of cable stations. I asked Danny Shelton to prepare a descriptive statement of the outreach of 3ABN,

which I received just in time for this newsletter. Here is the official statement.

STRETCHING THE REACH OF THE GOSPEL

By Danny Shelton

Three Angels Broadcasting Network (3ABN) is helping to stretch the reach of the gospel to the far corners of the earth, and now their potential viewing audience has doubled in size! 3ABN has recently been added to the cable systems of 45 of the largest cities in India, with a conservatively estimated potential viewing audience of 250 million people!

In addition, 3ABN has just received confirmation that a satellite programming provider will be adding 3ABN to cable systems across the country, including Washington, D.C. by November. This will add another 2.5 million potential viewers to the network.

The Lord has been opening many doors of opportunity to reach hundreds of thousands of precious souls in Nashville, Tennessee through the Comcast cable company, which plans to add 3ABN to their Knoxville, Tennessee and Atlanta, Georgia markets as well. Other major cities scheduled to get 3ABN include Memphis (Tennessee) and Seattle (Washington). Credit for these new cable links, largely goes to supporters of 3ABN who work tirelessly by calling their local cable companies or writing them letters, requesting 3ABN's Christ-centered programming be added. Your calls and letters really make a difference!

3ABN has invited Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi to be a guest on a live two-hour program in December on "The Passion of Christ," on their flagship program 3ABN Today. Plans are also in progress to produce future programs with him as well.

I wish to thank 3ABN for inviting me to participate in some of their live programs and for airing some of my popular messages. The aim is to broaden the outreach of 3ABN by attracting viewers who look for a more substantive presentation of biblical truths. I will be sure to inform you about the time of the airing of my messages.

NEW ANNOUNCEMENTS POLICY

At the suggestion of several subscribers, I have decided to eliminate the lengthy announcements of my weekend seminars and the special

offer of my publications/recordings. These announcements take several pages that clutter the newsletters. Instead, from now I will post in the newsletters **ONLY A LIST** of the announcements and of the special offers. The details will be posted at my website that you will be able to access simply by clicking on the URL address given.

In other words, each announcement is linked directly to my website, where you will find the rest of the information. This means that you can access immediately the details of the announcement at my website simply by clicking on the address provided. Those who cannot surf the web, are welcomed to contact me and I will email them the details of each announcement.

LIST OF ANNOUNCEMENTS AND SPECIAL OFFERS

UPCOMING WEEKEND SEMINARS

As a service to our subscribers, I am listing at my website the date and the location of the upcoming seminars for the month September and October 2004. Every Sabbath it is a great pleasure for me to meet subscribers who travel considerable distances to attend the seminars. For a listing of the time and places of my seminars, visit my website at <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/seminars.html>

HITACHI PROJECTORS AT A BARGAIN PRICE

If your church or school are looking for a outstanding LCD projector, especially the forthcoming NET 2004, you will be pleased to learn about the substantially discounted HITACHI is offering to our Adventist churches and schools on their line of projectors. Over 400 Adventist churches and schools have already enjoying these outstanding projectors.

I especially recommend the newly released 2700 LUMENS HITACHI CP-S420, which is designed for churches or auditoriums with large amount of light. I am using this new projector every weekend with great satisfaction. Its special price is only \$2195.00, instead of the factory suggested retail price of \$7,495.00 given at the HITACHI website.

HITACHI has just come out with two new projectors with lens shift. This makes it possible to place the projector on a side wall or even on the ceiling behind the beams because the lens can be moved

Read the rest of the story about the special offer on HITACHI projectors at my website: <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/projector.html>. If you have a problem accessing my website, just email us your enquiry or call us at (269) 978-6878 or (269) 471-2915. We will be glad to give you all the information about the special HITACHI offer.

SPECIAL ONETIME OFFER ON CD-ROMS AND DVD/VIDEO RECORDINGS

We are extending until September 30, 2004, the **SPECIAL ONE TIME OFFER** on the **TWO CD-ROM** and the **FIVE DVD DISKS**. The **TWO CD-ROM** contain all my research (over 7000 pages) and all my PowerPoint Lectures. The **FIVE DVD DISKS** the live recordings of my SABBATH/ADVENT seminars, that were taped by a TV crew last January.

The special offer is ONLY \$100.00, postage paid, instead of the regular price of \$350.00. Read the details at my website: <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/Promotions/SPECIALPACKAGEOFFER.htm>. If you have a problem ordering the package through my website, just email us your order or call us at (269) 978-6878 or (269) 471-2915. We will be glad to take your order by phone and mail you the package immediately.

THE BEST SDA COMMENTARY ON REVELATION

Much of the prophetic message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church derives from the Book of Revelation. Yet until now, most of the Adventist commentaries on Revelation were produced by authors who had a limited understanding of the linguistic, historical, political, and social settings of the book. Finally, our Adventist Church has published a *Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, that provides a wealth of information needed to unlock the meaning of problematic passages.

The author is Ranko Stefanovic, Ph. D, currently serving as Professor of New Testament at Andrews University. The publisher is Andrews University Press. Prof. Stefanovic spent two years producing this popular version of his doctoral dissertation presented with distinction at the Andrews University Theological Seminary.

You can read the full story at my website: <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/Promotions/RevelationofJesusChrist.htm>. If you have a problem ordering the book through my website, just email us your order or call us at (269) 978-6878 or (269) 471-2915. We will be glad to take your order and mail you the book immediately.

AN INTERACTIVE MULTIMEDIA CD-ROM OF THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

Have you ever wished that you could see the unfolding of the Great Controversy during the history of Christianity? This has been the dream of Gerard Damsteegt, Ph. D., Professor of Church History at our Andrews University Theological Seminary. With the help of competent people who worked with him during the past 8 years and the generous contribution of supporters who believed in this project, Damsteegt has produced a CD-ROM that will thrill your soul and enrich your mind.

The simplest way for me to describe this interactive multimedia CD-ROM is for you to imagine having 100 documentaries compressed in one disk. You are guided through a virtual tour of the early church and constantly given the opportunity to click and watch what you want to see or read. You are in for months of pleasurable learning.

Read the rest of the story at my website: <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/Promotions/TheGreatControversyExp.htm>. If you have a problem ordering this marvellous CD-ROM through my website, just email us your order or call us at (269) 978-6878 or (269) 471-2915. We will be glad to take your order and AIRMAIL you immediately this fantastic multimedia interactive CD-ROM.

“The Portrayal and Impersonation of Christ”**Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.,****Retired Professor of Theology and Church History,****Andrews University**

Thousands of pastors and theologians were invited to an exclusive screening of Gibson’s movie *The Passion* prior to its release. Their reactions were mostly very positive. James Dobson calls *The Passion* “a film that must be seen.”¹ Greg Laurie of *Harvest Crusades* said: “I believe *The Passion of the Christ* may well be one of the most powerful evangelistic tools of the last 100 years.”² Rick Warren, pastor of the Saddleback Community Church, stated: “The film is brilliant, biblical, a masterpiece.”³ Billy Graham himself is on record for saying: “Every time I preach or speak about the Cross, the things I saw on the screen will be on my heart and mind.”⁴

The Passion and the Second Commandment

What struck me in reading the comments of leading pastors, is the fact that none of them mentions how the impersonation of Christ by a movie actor relates to the Second Commandment which states: “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Ex 20:4-6).

The question of the biblical legitimacy of dramatizing in a movie the final hours of Christ’s agony and death, is never addressed in the reviews that I have read. The comments of movie critics and church leaders focus primarily on the artistic qualities and biblical, historical accuracy of the film. The problem is that a film about Christ’s agony and death, may be artistically brilliant, but biblically flawed, because, as we shall see, any attempt to impersonate the Divine Son of God, reducing Him to a mere mortal human being, violates the intent of the Second Commandment, as understood in Scripture and history.

Historically, Protestants have interpreted the Second Commandment as a prohibition against making images or representations of the three Persons of the Trinity for the purpose of worship. For example, in response to the question, “Are images then not at all to be made?” the *Heidelberg Catechism* responds: “God cannot and should not be pictured in any way. As for creatures, although they may indeed be portrayed, God forbids making or having any likeness of them in order to worship them or to use them to serve him.”⁵

The Reformers took a firm stand against visual representations of members of the Godhead and removed from churches paintings and statues. Crucifixes with the contorted bloody body of the crucified Christ, were replaced in Protestant churches with empty crosses. The focus of worship shifted from the *Images-oriented worship* to *Word-oriented worship*, that is, from veneration of images and relics, to the proclamation of the Word.

In recent times changes have taken place in the use of images for worship. A growing number of Evangelical churches are adopting the Catholic tradition of placing images of Christ and crucifixes with His contorted body in their churches. The reasoning is that the Second Commandment prohibits only the making of images to be used in the church for worship. But, pictures or even religious movies like *The Passion*, shown in churches to educate the laity, are supposed to be permitted by the Second Commandment, because they are not used as aids to worship

The Meaning of the Second Commandment

The distinction between the liturgical and educational use of pictures of God in the church, is artificial and can hardly be supported by the Second Commandment. There is a progression between the First and Second Commandments. The First Commandment calls us to reject all other gods and to worship Yahweh as the only true God: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:2). The Second Commandment builds upon the First by warning against wrong and incorrect ways to worship God by means of visual or material objectification of God.

The meaning of the Second Commandment is clearer in its expanded version found in Deuteronomy 4:15-19, where Moses reminds the Israelites of the veiled appearance of God at Sinai: “You saw *no form* of any kind the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the water below. And when you look to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars—all the heavenly array—do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshipping things the Lord your God has appointed to all nations under heaven” (Deut 4:15-19; emphasis supplied).

The fundamental reason given for warning the Israelites against making images of the Lord in the semblance of people, animals, or celestial lights, is precisely because they saw “*no form*” of the Lord when He spoke to them. It is important to note that in the Old Testament God manifested His glory, not His face. On Mount Sinai God’s face was hidden by a cloud. In the sanctuary His presence was manifested as the *shekinah* glory between the cherubins, but there was no visual portrayal of God. Respect for the holiness of God precluded any attempt to represent the divine Beings of the Godhead. Even sacred objects like the ark of the covenant located in the Most Holy Place (symbol of God’s throne), could not be touched or looked inside by ordinary people.

We read in 1 Samuel 6:19 that God slew 70 men of Beth-shemesh because they dared to look into the ark of the Lord: “And he slew some of the men of Beth-shemesh, because they looked into the ark of the Lord; he slew seventy men of them. . . . Then the men of Beth-shemesh said: ‘Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?’” (1 Sam 6:19-20). Later on when the ark was carried on a new cart to Jerusalem “Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there because he put forth his hand to the ark; and he died there besides the ark of God” (2 Sam 6:6-7).

No Visual Representation of the Deity in Bible Times

These tragic episodes teach us an important lesson. No human being can afford to treat lightly what is associated with God. The ark was

the place where God manifested His presence (*Shekinah*). Thus, to treat it casually was sacrilegious. God's people understood this important truth. An indication is the fact there were no pictures of God in the Temple, Synagogue, or Early Christian Churches.

In the catacombs Christ is represented not by pictures, but by symbols like the fish, the anchor, the Jonah's cycle, or the Good Shepherd. The reason is that early Christians understood that pictorial and visible representations of the three Persons of the Trinity, violates the prohibition of the Second Commandment against the use of images to worship God.

In our visual society is difficult to accept the biblical principle that objectifying God by means of pictures, statues, drama, Passion Plays, or religious movies, violates the intent of the Second Commandment. Christian today find it hard to accept that God is not a consumer product for our society to reproduce, use, and market. Paul explained to the Athenians who were surrounded by countless artistic representations of gods in stone and images, that "we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, *a representation by the art and imagination of man*" (Acts 17:29; Emphasis supplied). The reason given by the Apostle is that "God who made the world and everything in it, being the Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands" (Acts 17:24-25).

God has chosen to reveal to us, not His outward appearance, but His character. Yet, in spite of God's precautions not to reveal His "*form*," the history of the Israelites is replete with attempts to objectify God and worship Him through idols that could be seen and touched. The downfall and rejection of the Jews as God's people is causally related in the Bible with the abandonment of the worship of the invisible God and the adoption of the worship of visible gods, often called *balim*.

Is it Biblically Correct to Portray or Impersonate Christ?

Is the Biblical prohibition against making visual representations of God the Father applicable to the Son as well? The answer of some Christian leaders is "NO!" They reason that the Second Commandment cannot be applied to Christ, because, contrary to the Father who did not reveal His "*form*," Christ took upon Himself a *human form* and lived like

a man upon this earth. Consequently, there is nothing wrong in portraying the human side of Christ through pictures or drama.

Bian Godawa argues that “*The Passion of the Christ* is a narrative depiction of Christ’s humanity, not of His divinity. “6 Consequently *The Passion’s* dramatization of the last 12 hours of Christ’s suffering and death, does not violate the Second Commandment, because what is portrayed is the human side of Christ’s person.

There are several problems with this reasoning. First, the human side of Christ cannot be artistically portrayed in isolation from His divine nature, because Jesus was not simply a man nor simply a God, but the God-man. The divine and human natures were not split, but mysteriously blended together in Christ. As stated in the classic definition of the Chalcedonian Creed, the two natures in Christ were united “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence.”

The New Testament tells us that Christ is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), “He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature” (Heb 1:3). Jesus Himself said that “he who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). The fact that in Christ the divine and human natures were mysteriously united, makes it impossible for any artist or actor to capture the totality of Christ’s personality. How can any artist portray such divine traits of Christ’s nature as His creative and restorative power, His wisdom, His immortal nature, and His power to lay down His life and to take it up again (John 10:17)?

Can Images of the Deity Be Used as Aids to Worship?

Any portrayal of the human Christ must be regarded as an artistic creation, based on the pure imagination of an artist, who creates his own Christ. Since no artist has seen the real Christ and no artist can grasp the mysterious union of the divine and human natures in Him, any portrayal of the Lord in canvas, stone, or drama, must be seen as a distortion of the real Christ. Perhaps this explains why the movie *Ben Hur*, exercised restraints in depicting Christ, showing only His hands, backside, and

shadow, but never His face. Apparently the producer understood that Christ was no ordinary human being. The mystery of His divine and human natures could not and should not be legitimately portrayed.

These comments should not be taken as an outright condemnation of any visual representation of Christ. Some plain pictures of Christ's healings or teachings, can be used for illustrating important truths about Jesus, but they should never be seen as factual representations of the real Christ. More important still, pictures of Christ should never be used as icon for worship, designed to help believers to form mental images of the Divine Christ whom they wish to worship. We cannot expect God to bless the use of images of Himself in worship, when He enjoins us not to make them in the first place.

In Catholic worship, the pictures or statues of Jesus or of Mary, are mass-produced as icons for worship purpose. They are aid to worship in the sense that the believer kneels and prays before them in order to form a mental image of the real Christ or Mary they are worshipping. The Scripture condemns as idolatry the use of visual images to conceptualize God in prayer or preaching. Paul explains that idolatry involves exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images of mortal beings: "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man" (Rom 1:22-23).

The historic Protestant confessions recognize that the idolatry condemned by the Second Commandment includes the use of images as aids in forming a mental image of God in worship. For example, the *Westminster Larger Catechism* states: "The sins forbidden in the Second Commandment are: . . . the making any representation of God, of all, or of any of the three Persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever; all worshipping of it, or God in it or by it."⁷

The biblical prohibition of the use of visual representation of the three Persons of Trinity to form mental images to worship them, raises questions about the endorsement of *The Passion* by "name-brand" preachers like Billy Graham. In an interview Dr. Graham stated: "Every time I preach or speak about the Cross, the things I saw on the screen [of *The Passion*] will be on my heart and mind"⁸ If a preacher like Billy Graham

will be permanently influenced by Gibson's "animated crucifix,"—as *The Passion* is rightly called—will not millions of average Christians unfamiliar with the Gospels' narrative "exchange the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man" (Rom 1:23)?

Dr. Graham could have easily said: "Every time I preach or speak about the Cross, the things the Word of God and the Spirit have taught me, will be in my heart and mind." The fact that now his preaching of the Cross will be permanently influenced by the crucified Christ of Gibson's movie, shows that people today, like the Israelites of old, are not satisfied to worship God in "Spirit and Truth" (John 4:24) according to the all-sufficient Word, but long and yearn for a tangible God whom they can see and feel.

Nobody Knows What Christ Looked Like

This leads us to consider a second reason why visual representation or dramatic impersonation of Christ cannot be biblically justified. This reason is the simple fact that any representation of Christ is a misrepresentation, because nobody knows what the Savior looked like. In His wisdom Christ chose to leave no physical imprint of Himself. The popular church pictures and movie's portrayal of Christ, as a robust, handsome, tall man with blue eyes, long flowing hair and a light complexion, are inspired by the pious imagination of gifted artists, conditioned by popular conceptions, rather than by biblical and historical sources.

For example, Jim Caviezel, who plays Christ in *The Passion*, hardly looks like a first century Jew. A typical Jew was of medium height, with semitic nose, pointed beard, with black, cropped hair. The archeological wall painting showing the arrival of a group of Palestinian in Egypt gives us an idea of what the Jews looked like.⁹ It is a known fact that ordinary Jewish men did not wear long hair like Caviezel. The only exception was when a Jew took a voluntary and temporary Nazarite vow to dedicate himself to the Lord by abstaining from grape products (Num 6:3-4), avoiding ritual defilement (Num 6:6), and leaving his hair uncut until the close of the specified period (Num 6:5, 13-21).

But Jesus was not a Nazarite. He wore short hair like the Jewish men of His time. Paul explains that the length of the hair distinguished a man

from a woman. In the Jewish culture of the time women wore long hair and men short hair. The reason given by Paul is that “for a man to wear long hair is degrading to him” (1 Cor 11:14). This means that Caviezel with his long hair looks more like today’s hippies than the New Testament Jewish Christ.

Furthermore, most likely Jesus was not as attractive as movie star Caviezel. None of the Evangelists comment on the beauty of Christ’s physical appearance, presumably because what attracted people to the Savior was His character, rather than His appearance. Isaiah says: “He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Is 53:2). If the real picture of Christ were available today for people to see, most likely many Christians would be disappointed by His unappealing appearance.

People were attracted to Christ not because He was a handsome and strong Super Man who could carry a heavy cross of about 400 pounds like in *The Passion*, after being whipped for 10 minutes with a cat-o’-nine-tails that teared out His flesh and drained His blood. Instead, what attracted people to Christ was the nobility of His character and His penetrating teachings that reach the depth of their souls. Even His opponents admitted, “No man ever spoke like this man” (John 7:46).

The biblical Christ is not the invincible Survivor of *The Passion*, but the Divine Son of God, who took upon Himself our human limitations and was “made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17).

Images of Christ Go Beyond Scripture

The problem with artistic representations of Christ in images or in drama, is that often they go beyond Scripture. Few are willing or capable to recognize this fact. For example, we noted earlier that respected Evangelical leaders claim that Gibson’s brutal reenactment of the Passion is *true to the Gospels*. Gibson himself stated in an interview with the *New Yorker* magazine: “I wanted to be true to the Gospels. That has never been done before. I didn’t want to see Jesus looking really pretty. I wanted to mess-up one of his eyes, destroy it.”¹⁰

Is this what being true to the Gospels means to Gibson and to Evangelical leaders? Do any of the Gospels portray Christ with a “destroyed eye” and with his body skinned alive as shown in *The Passion*? It is noteworthy that the Gospel of Mark makes no mention of *blood* in the entire passion narrative. The Gospels’ accounts of Jesus’ flogging and crucifixion are as minimal as they could be. They all tell us essentially the same thing: “Having scourged Jesus, [Pilate] delivered him to be crucified,” . . . “And when they came to a place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him” (see Matt 27:26, 33; Mark 15:20, 22; Luke 23:25, 33). A few verses later, Jesus is dead. This is the whole brief, sober, and cryptic account of Jesus’ sufferings and death.

The Gospel writers do not linger over the details of Christ’s brutal suffering to stir emotions and to promote the Catholic view of suffering as a way of salvation. The reason is that the Evangelists were not mentally unbalanced Catholic mystics obsessed with intensifying Christ’s suffering to satisfy what they believed to be the exacting demands of a punitive God. Instead, the Gospel writers were balanced men who learned at the feet of Jesus how to follow their Master, not by inflicting physical suffering on their bodies (self-flagellation), but by living in accordance to His teachings.

There is a world of difference between the blood and gore of Gibson’s movie, and the brief Gospels’ story of the betrayal, arrest, condemnation and crucifixion which is told without recourse to blood and gore. Surely it was bloody, but the Evangelists chose not to dwell up that. Instead they focus on Christ’s perfect life, atoning death, and glorious resurrection. Gibson took 124 minutes to flagellate Jesus, throw Him off a bridge, bleed Him, slash Him, and nail Him on the Cross, but less than 2 minutes to show a fleeting resurrection. These reflect Catholic proportions which are tied to the ritual of the Mass as a perpetual reenactment of Christ’s sacrifice, but they are foreign to the Bible.

The point of these observations is that often popular representation or dramatic impersonation of Christ, turn out to be gross misrepresentations of the real meaning of Christ’s life, suffering, and death. Christians who depend upon such misrepresentations to conceptualize and worship the Lord, end up developing a superstitious faith based on the fear of a punitive God. A healthy faith is based on mental image inspired by the

Word and apprehended through the eyes of faith. Such images help us to conceptualize God, not as a harsh, punitive Being who brutalizes His Son to meet the rigorous demands of His justice, but as a merciful God who satisfied the demands of His justice by substituting Himself for us.

Images and Plays Upstage Preaching

The use of images, drama, plays, and religious movies during the worship service, ends up upstaging preaching, which is God's chosen means for communicating the faith and nurturing the spiritual life of His people. The Apostle Paul explains that "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ (Rom 10:17). This means that saving faith comes through the reading, preaching and hearing of the Word of God, and not through statues, images, plays or religious movies. It is not surprising that Karl Barth observes that "speaking about God is commanded hundreds of times in the Bible but setting up images is forbidden and barred *expressis verbis* [by explicit words]"¹¹

In theory God could use a *movie* to engender faith, but the reality is that He has chosen *preaching* instead to communicate the Gospel. As Paul puts it: "It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21). Preaching seemed foolish in Paul's time, when people responded more readily to dramatic plays staged in amphitheaters visible across the Roman world. Preaching may seem even more foolish today in our mass-media society that values dramatic movies or theatrical plays far more than preaching.

Church growth experts tell us that preaching is old-fashioned and no longer appeals to Generation Y (born in the 80's) or Generation X (born between 1964-1982). To reach these new generations, preaching must be replaced with the more effective means such as drama, plays, movies, and beat music.

Word-worship Versus Image-Worship

The problem with this reasoning is the failure to recognize that God has chosen to use what may appear to be old-fashioned and foolish methods to save the people. Just as the *message* of Christ crucified appears to be a foolish way to save people, so the *means* of communicating the

Gospel through preaching appears to be foolish. From a human perspective preaching may seem old-fashioned and ineffective compared to the extraordinary appeal of visual plays, drama, and movies. But we must not forget that salvation is the work of God in the human heart, accomplished through the proclamation of the Word, rather than the staging of dramatic visual representations.

Church history teaches us that when the preaching of the Word was gradually replaced by a visual worship consisting of the staging of the Mass, Passion Plays, veneration of images, relics, processions, and pilgrimages to holy shrines, the apostasy of the church set in, ushering in what is known as the Dark Ages. The movement today in the Evangelical world from *Word-worship* to *Image-Worship*, could well represent a repetition of the past downfall of the church and of the ancient Israelites.

Most people think that *seeing* is *believing*. If they can only see Christ, then they can believe in Him. But the New Testament teaches otherwise. It talks about faith as coming from hearing, not seeing. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). The temptation to worship a visible and objective Christ leads to idolatry. This can be seen in dominant Catholic countries, where the only Christ devout Catholics know and worship, is the One they touch, kiss, see, and often wear as jewelry. Statues, crucifixes and pictures of the bleeding Savior, abound in devout Catholic homes. Instead of worshipping the invisible Lord in Spirit and Truth, they worship idols that they can see, touch and feel.

God’s Precautions to Prevent the Objectification of Christ

We can hardly blame God for the human attempts to objectify the three members of the Godhead through movies, statues, painting, images, crucifixes, and religious jewelry. Christ took utmost precaution to prevent human beings from materializing and objectifying His spiritual nature. This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that when the second Person of the Godhead became a Human Being for about thirty-three years, He refrained from leaving a single material mark that can be authenticated as His own.

Christ did not build or own a house; He did not write books or own a library; He did not leave the exact date of His birth or of His death; He did not leave descendants. He left an empty tomb, but even this place is still disputed. He left no “thing” of Himself, but only the assurance of His spiritual presence: “Lo, I am with you ‘always, to the close of the age’” (Matt. 28 :20).

Why did Christ pass through this world in this mysterious fashion, leaving no physical footprints, visual images, or material traces of Himself? Why did the Godhead miss the golden opportunity provided by the incarnation to leave a permanent material evidence and reminder of the Savior’s look, life, suffering, and death on this planet? Why do the Gospel writers minimize the suffering of Christ’s final hours? Why is the “blood” factor, which is so prominent in Gibson’s movie, largely missing in the narrative of the Passion? Is this not clear evidence of God’s concern to protect mankind from the constant temptation of reducing a spiritual relationship into a “thing-worship”?

In surveying the history of the Passion Plays in chapter 1, we noted how the visual staging of Christ’s cruel sufferings and death, inspired many people to imitate the physical suffering of Christ by wounding their bodies and carrying crosses. By focusing on the physical suffering of the dying Christ, they failed to see with the eyes of faith the triumphant Lord in heaven at the right hand of God.

The Sabbath Discourages Visual-Oriented Worship

It was because of this concern that God chose the Sabbath—a day rather than an object— as the symbol of a divine-human covenant relationship (Ez 20:12; Ex 31:13). Being time, a mystery that defies human attempts to shape it into a physical idol, the Sabbath provides a constant protection against a physical, visual-oriented worship, and is a fitting reminder of the spiritual nature of the covenant relationship between God and His people.

If Gibson were to accept the message of the Sabbath regarding the spiritual nature of God and of our relationship with Him, he would soon realize that his reenactment of Christ’s Passion, though well-intentioned, tempts sincere Christians to worship a visible movie-Christ, rather than the mystery-Christ of divine revelation.

The only Christ that many people will come to know, is the Caviezel-Christ they have seen in the movie being tortured unto death to satisfy the rigorous demands of a punitive God. Such a gory and bloody mental image of Christ, distorts the Gospel story where the focus is not on the lacerated, bloody body of Jesus, but on His exemplary life, compassionate ministry, profound teachings, perfect sacrifice for sin, and glorious resurrection. Such mental images, inspired by the Gospels, provide the legitimate basis for worshipping our Savior in “Spirit and Truth.”

No Drama, Passion Plays, or Pictures in the Early Church

The early Christians respected the Second Commandment by shunning any visual representation of the Deity in their worship places. During the first four centuries, Christians did not use pictures of Jesus or Passion Plays for their worship or evangelistic outreach, despite the fact that they lived in a highly visual Greco-Roman culture. Pagan temples with statues of gods littered the countryside. Mystery religions like Mithraism, Cybele, and Isis had their own Passion Play. A popular play was known as the *taurobolium* (bloodbath). It consisted in the imitation of the death and resurrection of the god Attis by killing a bull and covering a new believer with his blood.

The primitive church did not adopt pagan religious visual practices for communicating the Gospel. In accordance with the Second Commandment, the early church did not allow pictorial representation of the three Persons of the Trinity to be used. Their worship was *Word-centered*, not *Image-centered*.

The situation gradually changed as Gentile Christians brought into the church their pagan beliefs and practices. Soon pictures, statues, and plays became common place. During the Middle Ages, Passion Plays were staged first in churches, then in church yards, and finally in special outdoor amphitheaters. They have become important tourist attractions in several countries. In the year 2000, the Oberammergau Passion Play in Upper Bavaria, Germany, drew over half a million pilgrims from many parts of the world. In America also there are popular Passion Plays in such places as Eureka Springs, Arkansas, Black Hills, South Dakota, and Lake Wales, Florida.

The Temptation to Worship a Visible Christ

In the sixteenth century the Reformers overwhelmingly rejected the use of images, statues, relics, Passion Plays in the church, as a violation of the Second Commandment. Rather than using icons, they relied on the preaching of the Word to save souls and the Gospel made significant advances.

This does not mean that we should follow the example of the Reformers by eliminating of all pictures of Christ. Plain pictures of Christ's life, teachings, and miracles can be used as illustrations without becoming an object of adoration. The problem arises when pictures are produced and used as icons for worship. In most cases they portray and foster unbiblical teachings. For examples, pictures of the Cross or crucifixes with Christ's contorted body hanging on the Cross and covered with blood, are still widely used today in Catholic countries to promote the devotion to Christ's Passion. Devout Catholics wear, kiss, hold, touch, and pray toward such images to express their devotion to the suffering Savior. In these instances pictures encourage an idolatrous form of worship.

The sad reality is that many Evangelicals have become so conditioned by the entertainment industry, that are drifting more and more toward the Catholic system of worship with images, drama, Passion Plays, and religious movies. The highly Catholic portrayal of Christ's suffering and crucifixion in *The Passion*, is contributing significantly to the Evangelical acceptance of a visible Lord that dominates in Catholic worship. By accepting the use of images that were once rejected as signs of papal authority, Evangelicals are running the risk today of returning to the Medieval false worship which the Reformers fought hard to reform.

ENDNOTES

1. The quotes are from Ron Gleason, “The 2nd Commandment and ‘The Passion of the Christ,’” http://www.christianity.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID23682%7CCHID125043%7CCIID1716514,00.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. The *Heidelberg Catechism*, (Question 97).
6. Bian Godawa, “The Passion of the Christ,” http://www.christianity.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID23682%7CCHID125043%7CCIID1712182,00.
7. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Answer 109.
8. “What Others Are Saying,” www.passionchrist.org.
9. *SDA Dictionary*, end sheet, explanation on p. xxiv.
10. *New Yorker* (September, 2003), p. 21.
11. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:134.