

Second Thoughts on 'The Passion'

Guest Viewpoint by James C. Goodloe IV and Robert W. Patterson

You shall not make for yourself a carved 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 on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.
— Exodus 20:4–6 (ESV)

As the Mel Gibson extravaganza opened in the nation's theaters this week, "The Passion of the Christ" has already become a blockbuster among Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants. *Christianity Today* devotes its March issue to explaining "why evangelicals are cheering a movie with profoundly Catholic sensibilities," while *First Things* proclaims, also in its March issue, that the Gibson effort sets a new standard in regard to movies about Jesus, worthy to be associated with such classics as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Allegri's *Miserere*.

But where does this leave Presbyterians, who do not share the public profile of either group, and especially observant Presbyterians who strive to maintain continuity with the Reformed confessional tradition that differs from both Catholic and evangelical ways of being the Christian community? What should be their take of what has become, according to the *Washington Post*, the most talked-about movie event in America?

We have no doubt that this movie was produced with the best intentions to depict faithfully the last 12 hours of the life of Christ as recorded in the Gospels. Nor do we lend any credence to the charge that the film is anti-Semitic any more than the Gospel writers are anti-Semitic. We are even delighted that Mel Gibson is a devout Christian who seeks to keep faith with his Catholic "confessional" tradition, a path we wish more Protestants would follow in their respective tradition. We have every reason to believe that "The Passion", as *Christianity Today* and *First Things* claim, is an exceptional work of art.

At the same time, the second of the Ten Commandments should caution Presbyterians about sharing in the hype and enthusiasm over this film. At the risk of playing the sectarian card, Protestants have historically interpreted this commandment differently than Catholics, which explains why the 16th century Reformers removed from sanctuaries — and even destroyed — paintings and statues. Catholic crucifixes, with their graphic depictions of the bloody body of the crucified Christ, were replaced in Protestant churches with empty crosses.

The Confessions on the Second Commandment

Some think that the Second Commandment does not explicitly prohibit the making of images of God, only the making of images that are used in worship. This would suggest that any movie that depicts Jesus is fine as long as it isn't brought into the church. Yet that is not the way the Westminster Larger Catechism sees it:

The sins forbidden in the Second Commandment are: all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and any wise approving any religious worship not instituted by God himself; 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 worshiping of it, or God in it or by it; the making of any representation of feigned deities, and all worship of them, or service belonging to them; all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other pretense whatsoever; simony, sacrilege; all neglect, contempt, hindering, and opposing the worship and ordinances which God hath appointed. (A. 109)

The Heidelberg Catechism expresses the same idea: "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" (A. 97). Moreover, in response to Q. 98, which asks if pictures might be tolerated in place of books for the unlearned, this catechism states: "No, for we must not try to be wiser than God who does not want his people to be taught by means of lifeless idols, but through the living preaching of his Word."

Images vs. The Word

These confessions come down hard on the making of images not only because God prohibits it, but also because images end up upstaging preaching, the principle means with express warrant in Scripture for communicating the faith and nurturing the people of God. As the Apostle Paul writes, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17 ESV). That is, saving faith comes through the reading, preaching and hearing of the Word of God. It does not come through statues, images, pictures or motion pictures. No wonder Karl Barth observed that "speaking about God is commanded hundreds of times in the Bible but setting up images is forbidden and barred *expressis verbis*" (*Church Dogmatics*, I/1:134).

Another problem with images is that they cannot do justice to the greatness and majesty of God, who transcends the physical senses. Perhaps this is why the movie "Ben Hur" exercised restraint in depicting Christ; it never showed his face — only his hands, his backside, his shadow. The movie's very form suggested that this One is no ordinary human being who can be perceived easily. For human beings tend to think that "seeing" is knowing, that if they can "see" Jesus, they can therefore "know" him. Yet the New Testament is counterintuitive on this point; it talks about faith as something that is always and everywhere in contrast to sight. As John Calvin writes, "The things pertaining to salvation are too high to be perceived by our senses, or seen by our eyes But we contemplate them only in his Word, of the truth of which we ought to be so persuaded that we should count whatever he speaks as directly done and fulfilled" (*Institutes*, 3.2.41).

As human creations, images often embellish or go beyond Scripture. If reports are correct that blood and gore are prominent in Gibson's creation, this would represent a flaw, as the Scriptures, which is God's creation, do the opposite and relate the facts of Christ's death with reserve and without sensationalism. The Gospel of Mark, for example, makes no mention of *blood* in its

entire passion narrative. The closest mention of *blood* is in the account of the Last Supper, where Jesus says of the wine, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24 ESV). After that, the story of the betrayal, arrest, condemnation and crucifixion is told without any recourse to blood and gore. Surely it was bloody, but Mark does not dwell on that.

Even if such embellishment helps the viewer sense the suffering of Christ, can the presentation adequately convey the meaning of Christ's passion to both believer and unbeliever? Can it offer the gospel, the good news, the saving word? Does it have authority to exercise the keys of the kingdom — to open and close the door to heaven — an activity that the Westminster Confession reserves to "lawfully ordained" ministers as they preach the Word?

Some might argue that the movie is not intended to promote or produce saving faith. Yet such protestations belie the fervent and genuine zeal of Gibson and the evangelicals who are strongly promoting the film, some who believe that the movie represents the most potent evangelistic opportunity in 2,000 years. Even Rabbi Daniel Lapin predicts "The Passion" might trigger a religious revival in America.

God's Ways Are Not Our Ways

The peculiarly Presbyterian question is whether any movie fits the definition of what the Westminster Shorter Catechism calls the "outward and ordinary means" that Christ appointed to communicate his grace, which the Catechism identifies as "especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer" (A. 88). The question is not whether God could theoretically use a movie to engender faith, but what means God has expressly endorsed and promised to bless. Surely, if God has commanded his people not to make images of himself, would he bless that which he prohibits?

The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:21 (ESV) that "it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." Just as the *message* of Christ crucified appears to be a foolish way to save the world, the *means* of communicating that gospel (preaching) also seem foolish. In fact, if the "outward and ordinary means" seemed foolish in Paul's time, how much more so in a mass-media society that values the dramatic, the visual, and the extraordinary. From a human perspective, preaching seems ineffective and old fashioned compared to the extraordinary means of a dramatic motion picture. Yet, just as salvation is the work of God in the human heart, the effectiveness of preaching depends upon the unseen work of Christ who appointed those means, not upon human ingenuity or creativity.

For these reasons, one motion picture — no matter how compelling — cannot add to or enrich the preaching of the Word that is carried out weekly in worshiping congregations. We therefore don't need images or representations of any kind, confident that the Scriptures contain, as the Confession (1.6) claims, "all things necessary ... for man's salvation, faith and life," or as the Shorter Catechism (A. 3) puts it, "what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man."