

## WHY *THE PASSION* IS AROUSING PASSIONS

By Steven M. Ortiz

The movie was not out yet and already it had caused a major debate. Why would a movie depicting a story so commonplace within Western culture cause such division? Hundreds of movies about Jesus are rerun every Easter. Why would this new one bring out the critics?

The reason is the Jesus depicted in the movie “The Passion of The Christ” is not the Jesus of the 21st century.

Deconstruction and revisionism are the philosophy of our times. These deconstructionist trends are evident in media hoopla of the 1990s concerning the Jesus Seminar. This group of scholars, in their search for the “historical Jesus,” deconstructed most of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the New Testament down to less than 20 percent. This watered-down Jesus is more palatable to Western man and the fads of contemporary biblical scholarship.

The Passion is a visual depiction of the Jesus of the New Testament. This Jesus is not acceptable these days. I saw the movie the other night. Now I understand why the critics have labeled it as controversial. They do not want a suffering Jesus; they want a Hollywood Jesus. Mel Gibson is taking heat in the Hollywood community because he produced a movie about the wrong Jesus, a Jesus who willingly chose to undergo suffering and to go to the cross.

What must the critics do with the Jesus depicted in the Passion movie? Deconstruct!

If the content of the movie is so powerful, then deconstruct Gibson. Critics have focused on Mel Gibson’s father and Gibson’s Catholic faith; one critic compared Gibson’s production of *Braveheart* with *The Passion* on the themes of violence and gore.

Yes, Gibson has frequently portrayed characters in action movies from Mad Max to rogue cops. Do the movie critics actually think *The Passion* is a Mad Max movie set to the times of first-century Palestine? Is *The Passion*’s depiction of the crucifixion of Jesus just another version of *Braveheart*? Or was Roman crucifixion a gory and violent event?

I think it is a fascinating story of how someone in Hollywood has an authentic faith and is willing to invest millions of his own money to portray the passion accurately. But I expect movie reviews to be about the content of the movie, not the lifestyle of the producer. Does the movie accurately portray the events recorded in the Gospel accounts? Does the movie portray Mel Gibson’s version? What is the movie about? Simply stated, the movie is about the cross.

Our society wants to deconstruct the image of the cross. The cross becomes a hip piece of jewelry for Madonna wannabes. It becomes a symbol of group identification. Contemporary theologians have deconstructed the cross as a symbol of political correctness. The cross is a symbol for love and tolerance for all views. It is a symbol of liberation from capitalism. *The Passion* confronts these reinterpretations of the cross and places the crucifixion as a horrendous event experienced by Jesus.

Today’s church also is in danger of deconstructing Jesus in its own image.

We have developed a myriad of evangelism programs so that the Gospel message sometimes seems to be a sales pitch, and Christianity is seen by a lost world as one of many ways of living as Christians try to sell the Gospel as a product or a lifestyle. Jesus becomes, for example, the centerpiece of various types of weight loss programs and lifestyle changes. It doesn't matter which program, just find one that works for you. We have become guilty of watering down the Gospel and placing Jesus in the midst of our Western fast-food, feel-good, self-centered culture.

"There is no greater love than for a man to lay down his life..." the Bible says. But this is not the Jesus who will help you move up the corporate ladder.

"Take up our cross and follow Him." Is this the attitude that people will find if they walk into our church?

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." John 3:16 has become a placard to hold up in the end zone of football games. I admit that I also have deconstructed the cross into something casual in my relationship with God. *The Passion of the Christ* has placed the flesh and blood back into this verse that had become only a slogan to me.

"For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). A good sign of whether *The Passion* accurately depicts what Jesus did is how controversial the film becomes. *The Passion* forces us to remove our layers of meaning of the message back to the cross as a symbol of shame, sacrifice, atonement and redemption.

The question is not what our society should do with Mel Gibson's movie, but what impact the Gospel is going to have on our society. Which Jesus is the church going to present? The postmodern Jesus of pop culture or the Jesus who was preached by the early disciples?

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