

Passion Film Becomes Ministry Tool

Church leaders say The Passion of the Christ has created a historic evangelism opportunity

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* sparked a new commitment to evangelism as ministries mobilized to take advantage of what many were calling one of the best opportunities to reach the lost in recent years.

"I believe *The Passion of the Christ* may well be one of the most powerful evangelistic tools of the last 100 years because you have never seen the story of Jesus portrayed this vividly before," said Greg Laurie, pastor of Harvest Church in Riverside, Calif.

Ministries were staging theatrical plays, launching online campaigns, airing TV commercials, and taking the gospel to the streets with the help of customized tracts. The American Tract Society distributed more than 3 million *Passion* tracts in 10 different languages. Outreach, a Christian company, offered various *Passion*-related evangelism materials, from door hangers and posters to booklets and banners.

And Faith Highway created TV commercials produced to help ministries reach out to the unchurched. The first 20 seconds are approved footage from the movie trailer. The last 10 seconds contain customized church information. Company officials said 400 churches had invested about \$1 million to air 500,000 commercials.

Ricky Rush, pastor of Inspiring Body of Christ Church in

Dallas, said four new families visited the church almost immediately after he began airing the commercials. "We've had people come up to the building late at night as we are closing up," said Rush, who also saw church growth as a result of the effort. "They had just seen the movie and wanted to come inside and pray. So we let them."

One of the most popular outreach strategies was buying out movie theaters and letting the movie do the talking.

Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Lake Forest, Calif., and author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, booked 47 theater screens so church members could take their lost friends to see the movie. Warren also planned a two-part sermon series on the movie to bookend both sides of its release and invited more than 1,000 community leaders to a VIP premier showing.

The strategy bore much fruit. Saddleback reported that nearly 900 friends of members accepted Christ, and the average church attendance increased by 3,000 in the first couple of weeks after the film debuted.

New Song Community Church in Oceanside, Calif., rented one theater and followed up the efforts with a four-part apologetic series called "The Passion: True or False?" The ministry mailed out 25,000 Passion-related postcards inviting people to the series. Senior pastor Hal Seed said at least 57 people have come to Christ through the effort.

"This is a one-time event in our generation's history," Seed told *Charisma*. "This movie has the potential to spark revival. I see churches that weren't interested in evangelism getting

interested and others fine-tuning their focus more on outreaches.”

The Rev. David Hale, senior pastor of Christ Life Church in Madison, Miss., made tickets available to first-time visitors and has seen several families accept Christ. But he’s not stopping there.

“When the movie comes out on video and DVD we plan to make it available so our members can offer viewings in their homes,” Hale said. “We know there are still a great number of people who have not seen the movie.”

The Passion sparked conversation and controversy about who Christ was, what Christ claimed, how Christ suffered, and even who is responsible for Christ’s death. The debate continues to rage on with some unexpected reactions.

“Claims that the film is anti-Semitic are ludicrous, and we need to recognize them as such,” said Jeffrey Mann, assistant professor of religion at Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pa., and a Lutheran. “Even the argument that it could inflame anti-Semitism is rather weak. Could one see the film and conclude that the Jews are Christ-killers? Of course. However, I suspect even more people will see the film and conclude that the Savior of the world is a Jew.”

Yechiel Eckstein, an Orthodox rabbi who founded and heads the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, cautions Jews against overreacting to the film. “The near-hysteria that has marked much of the Jewish communities’ reaction to the movie threatens to obscure the absolutely critical need for both Christians and Jews to focus on the true enemy of contemporary

western civilization and of Jews in particular—radical Islamists,” he said.

“Because Gibson’s film comes at a time when anti-Semitism is at its highest since World War II, it is that much more important to speak out against any material that raises the specter of Jews as ‘Christ-killers.’”

Messianic Jewish minister Michael Brown, president of the FIRE School of Ministry in Harrisburg, N.C., urged Christians to be sensitive to Jewish concerns about anti-Semitism. “It’s very important that Christian leaders ... reach out and say evangelical Christians are the best friends Israel has in the world, and Christians that see this movie don’t blame anyone for Jesus’ death,” Brown said. “They thank God for Jesus’ death and see it as a result of their own sin. As true followers of Jesus we renounce all anti-Semitism.”

Before the movie released, Brown debated Oxford-educated Rabbi Shmuley Boteach about who is responsible for Jesus’ death. Though Brown said the film did not create any formal dialogue between Messianic and traditional Jews, he said, “People are talking about the film and understanding why Jesus died,” adding that some Jews accepted Christ after seeing the film.

Muslim reaction is perhaps the most unexpected. The Passion was released in late March in Qatar. Muslims flocked to theaters to see the film because of the anti-Semitism claims against Gibson. The film was so popular in Kuwait that theaters cancelled other films to show The Passion on all its screens.

“In two short hours, more Qataris heard the gospel than I have

been able to reach in nearly five years of living here,” one church leader told Frank Dietz, minister at large with Operation Mobilization International. “The Muslims sitting around us were being moved—gasping, crying and reacting with disgust to the brutality that Jesus faced.”

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