

Passions About

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If you ever wanted proof that anything to do with Jesus Christ would be controversial in a culture that seems hell-bent on rejecting Christianity, *The Passion of the Christ* by Mel Gibson provides it. From the earliest stories about the movie's language (Aramaic or Latin with no subtitles) to the brouhaha from some Jewish organizations (that the film repeats age-old anti-Semitic stereotypes), director and producer Gibson has been at the center of a continuous firestorm.

Hollywood and liberals among the culture's gatekeepers at first mocked the idea of the movie and then predicted it would be a financial flop. Who would distribute it? Who would pay to see an R-rated religious movie? How could Gibson possibly recoup the \$25 million of his own money that he spent making it?

Let's start with the financial issue. By the end of the first four weeks *The Passion of the Christ* had approached \$300 million in sales and was on its way to becoming the most financially successful R-rated movie of all time. And it hadn't yet opened in a single overseas movie theater.

Gibson obviously did find a distributor, and moviegoers—large numbers of them churchgoers who bought tickets through their churches—flocked to see the movie. Overwhelmingly, the response from believing Christians was positive.

Billy Graham said: "After watching The Passion of the Christ, I feel as if I have actually been there. I was moved to tears. I doubt if there has ever been a more graphic and moving presentation of Jesus' death and resurrection."

As for the pope, he is reported to have said, "It is as it was"—obviously an expression of approval—but the Vatican backpedaled on this point when opponents of the movie complained about even these modest words. The pope, it was explained, never made "official" comments on works of art.

Well, maybe "It is as it was" was mumbled rather than expressed as a papal encyclical, but if the pope indeed said something like this, he was surely expressing a view held by a majority of all Roman Catholics in the United States who have seen the movie. Indeed, one beneficial fruit of The Passion has been the striking degree to which evangelicals and Roman Catholics have found themselves sharing common ground in their response to the movie.

And what about assertions of anti-Semitism? It should be acknowledged that Jews have a legitimate reason to associate anti-Semitic outbreaks in European history with performances of theatrical works about the Passion. As I have often said, Christians have a profound responsibility to be sensitive to this part of the Jewish experience among Christians.

But worries about Gibson's movie have been completely unfounded. A poll conducted by San Francisco's Institute for Jewish and Community Research found after polling viewers of the movie that 83 percent of them said the movie had no effect at all on whether they thought the Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Of the remainder, the number of those who said they now felt less inclined to blame the Jews

than previously was four times greater than the miniscule 2 percent who felt more inclined to do so. Not a single person I have spoken with thinks the movie is even the remotest bit anti-Semitic.

Still, the antagonism toward the movie has been truly shrill in some quarters. In The Boston Globe, left-wing columnist, anti-war activist and Catholic priest James Carroll described the movie as a “a blasphemous insult to the memory of Jesus Christ ... an icon of religious violence.”

On CBS's 60 Minutes, usually entertaining curmudgeon Andy Rooney denounced Gibson (and inexplicably, Pat Robertson) as “wackos” who are “crazy as bedbugs.” Deservedly, 60 Minutes received more complaining letters and e-mails for that Rooney comment than for any episode in its history.

What is apparent here is that any time the Christian message strikes the culture powerfully, as The Passion of the Christ does, it stirs up a hornet's nest. The reason is quite simple: Many people live out a way of life that is profoundly threatened by the possibility, however remote, that Christianity might be true.

Gibson's movie, a work of artistic brilliance, powerfully suggests that possibility.