

R-Rated Faith

When I attended an advance screening of *The Passion of the Christ* in January, I pinched myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. There I was, sitting in a Pentecostal church in Orlando, Florida, with thousands of pastors, and we were watching an R-rated movie on a screen hanging above the pulpit. Earlier that day, actor Mel Gibson, a Catholic who prefers his liturgy in the most traditional Latin format, had told the evangelical Christian audience that he hopes his film will be an evangelism tool.

Gibson gambled almost \$25 million of his own money to get this project in theaters. He tells reporters that God put it in his heart to get the story of Christ's crucifixion on screen. Speaking to Christians in Colorado last summer, Gibson said: "The Holy Ghost was working through me on this film, and I was just directing traffic."

After seeing *Passion*, I wasn't sure which was more impressive—the movie itself or the muffled sobbing I heard coming from people who were overwhelmed by its pathos. I suddenly realized what could happen at the local cineplex when non-Christian folks who have never gone to church see Gibson's movie out of curiosity.

Do you realize how amazing this is? We have a Catholic talking to evangelicals about the Holy Ghost. And we have evangelical Christians endorsing a mainstream Hollywood film that accurately details the last hours of Christ's ministry on earth.

I call this a miracle. Let's hope we're smart enough to recognize God is at work.

Some stuck-in-the-mud Christians will object to *Passion* for silly reasons. Some will remind us that God does not go anywhere near movie theaters. Others will suggest that Satan is at work because Gibson is Catholic. A few will insist that if God had blessed this film project it would be rated G.

Sorry, but I am not waiting for the cartoon version of *The Passion of the Christ*. I want my teenage girls to know that when Jesus took the burden of the world's sins on His back, it led to whips, 12-inch iron spikes and a crown of thorns. It was rated R, but we should see at least a glimpse of the pain Jesus endured.

Thanks to the power of film—which has become the language of our culture—we can see His suffering like no other generation has. I hope as many people will watch Jesus ascend to Golgotha in *The Passion* as have seen Frodo Baggins carry his ring to Mount Doom in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

If we seize this amazing opportunity, countless Americans could embrace faith. Don't see it just for yourself. Take your neighbor. Invite everyone from your office, and then start a Bible study to discuss it. Urge every waitress and store clerk you meet to see it. Then use the film's message to engage them in a conversation about what Jesus died for.

And don't let the R rating stop you. There is no sex or bad language in the film, in case you are wondering. The movie is restricted because it shows how Jesus was tortured. You might have to close your eyes during some scenes, but you need to

hear His groans and see the sadness in His mother's eyes as she watches her son die.

In this movie's case, the R stands for real. My prayer is that The Passion of the Christ will help us get real about our faith—and serious about reaching those who haven't heard.