

“THE MOVIE” IS ENDING—NOW WHAT?

By Don Whitney

Apparently, we are over the crest of the wave. It is a wave of interest unlike any I’ve seen. And unless the Lord is pleased to send another Great Awakening in this country, as He did on a handful of occasions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we may never see anything like this again.

We have recently lived through a time where the national conversation has included a great deal of interest, not just in God—for we have had much of that since September 11—but in Jesus Christ. And the conversation has not been about Jesus in general, but the interest has been focused on something at the very center of the life and ministry of Jesus—His sufferings and death on the cross.

It has been remarkable to turn on both network and cable television, both news and talk shows, and hear guests—many of whom make no pretense to be Christians—talking by the hour about the cross of Jesus. In restaurants and on airplanes, I have engaged strangers in conversation who would soon ask, “Have you seen ‘the movie’?” No explanation is necessary. We both know that “the movie” is Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* and the source of all the current interest in the cross.

The attention given to this film has opened countless and unprecedented doors for the gospel. More than a million copies of John Piper’s book, *The Passion of Jesus Christ*, were sold in six weeks. A brief article I wrote on “Ten Questions to Ask About *The Passion*” was reprinted by (of all things) a thoroughly secular, online glamour magazine that claims 1.5 million readers per month. “The movie” has generated so much buzz that even those who haven’t seen it have had serendipitous opportunities to talk about Jesus as never before.

But now, with the close of the Easter season and Gibson’s movie giving way to newer releases, it seems the wave of national interest in the cross has crested.

I hope our experience with *The Passion* has reminded us that the power of the crucifixion is not in a visual depiction, but in a verbal explanation. No *image* of the cross—past, present, or in the high-tech future—can sufficiently communicate the *meaning* of the cross. Future filmmakers may someday create a three-dimensional experience where moviegoers enter into a holographic portrayal of the crucifixion. Viewers may feel the wind on Golgotha, smell the stench of unwashed soldiers and the blood of dying men all around them, and look from ten feet away into the face of the actor

portraying Jesus as he cries, “It is finished!” But even then they will need the *words* of Scripture to explain *what* is finished and to reveal the significance of what they’ve seen.

Our prayers have rightly been that somehow “the movie” would result in many people trusting in Jesus to make them right with God. But as we pray and work toward this end, let’s remember how saving faith in Jesus is kindled. Faith does not come from seeing images of Christ. The Bible says, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). The gospel of Jesus Christ does not require something to be seen, but it does require something to be understood. Unless a person hears (or reads) the *reason* for the cross—that is, that Jesus died for the sins of others so that through faith in Him they could be right with God—then understands and believes it, he is still under the wrath of God. Without this simple understanding and faith, no one is accepted by God, even though he believes that the cross of Christ is a historical fact and he is moved by every remembrance of it.

No one questions the power of images to arrest the attention, impress the memory, and touch the emotions. Even unconverted people who’ve never read or heard a word of the Bible can be moved to tears by images of Jesus’ suffering. But words—words of explanation from the Bible—are necessary for people to comprehend and believe the reason why He suffered. What was true for the salvation of people in the Apostle Paul’s low-tech day is still true today: “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message *preached* to save those who believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21, emphasis added).

So as *The Passion of the Christ* recedes from the theatres and headlines, as the national conversation turns to other subjects, and as Christians anticipate the release of the movie on video, let’s remember that the most powerful means of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ always has been—and always will be—men and women of God, filled with the Spirit of God, *speaking* the Word of God.

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