

THE BOX OFFICE BALLOT: THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST AND THE BUSH CAMPAIGN

BY ROBERT GEHL

FROM CONGREGATIONS WHICH MEET IN
ABANDONED ONE-SCREEN MOVIE
THEATERS IN SMALL MIDWESTERN DOWN-
TOWNS, TO MASSIVE, SUBURBAN “MEGA-
CHURCHES” WHICH BOAST MULTIPLE
SCREENS AND HAVE STATE-OF-THE-ART
MUSIC AND VIDEO STUDIOS,
CHURCHGOERS AND RECENT CONVERTS
WILL BE WITNESSING THE VIOLENT,
HORRIFIC DEATH OF JESUS

CHRIST -
AGAIN
AND
AGAIN.

On August 31, two months before Election Day, Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* will be released on DVD and VHS. While it is still in theaters worldwide and has garnered hundreds of millions of dollars, the home theater release will mark the film’s biggest success, especially in churches: the film will be presented along with targeted sermons that utilize marketing strategy, aimed to gain and retain parishioners. The same zealous outreach efforts that drove Evangelical churches to purchase large blocks of theater tickets to give to “unchurched” people in their communities will be used with this home version. These days, video and media presentations are major aspects of modern American churches, and Fox, who will be distributing the film, is offering quantity discounts to any churches that want multiple copies for distribution among their parishioners, as well as custom made slipcases that, according to ThePassionoftheChrist.com, allow “churches to add specific messages and insert congregation literature.”

In this closely contested election year, anything that raises church attendance, that brings potential voters into sphere of the religious right, is going to benefit the President this November. Given that President Bush’s main constituency is fundamentalist Christians, and that we are the midst of debating the merits of dual military efforts in Islamic countries, this cultural event has serious implications. In essence, *The Passion of the Christ* is, like any art, propaganda. Thus, the success of this film should not be measured in millions of box office



dollars and home video sales. The success of *The Passion* will be measured in votes for Bush this fall. It is the cultural centerpiece of conservatism.

When the movie debuted in February, there was a palpable reaction among audience members. After watching it a week after it opened, my sister-in-law Nichole felt sickened. That weekend, the 24-year-old nurse resumed her church attendance, something she had neglected since her wedding in a Catholic church last year. "I felt guilty that someone would take so much abuse for me," she told me.

She is not alone. Across the country, from my own community in Northwest Ohio to California, from New York to Washington State, churches have reported an increase in attendance. The "unchurched" are being coaxed into services by their friends, co-workers, parents, or family. This is no accident. When the film was released, there was an active push by various denominations of churches. From Catholic to Protestant, these churches have taken the hype surrounding the film and used it to fill their pews.

The promotion of this film (and by extension, this agenda) has been accomplished by two main tactics: Gibson's defense of the film's messages and presentation against his critics, and the use of the film by churches for outreach. As the film was being produced and reviewed, much of the critical debate centered on its overwhelming violence and its potential anti-Semitism. While the anti-Semitic accusations have subsided somewhat, the worldwide furor over its violence has not. Gibson has attempted to defend the film's blood on artistic grounds. In interviews, he repeatedly emphasizes the need for violence to portray the Christ story. "I wanted it to be shocking," Gibson said in an interview with Diane Sawyer. "And I also wanted it to be extreme. I wanted it to push the viewer over the edge ... so that they see the enormity — the enormity of that sacrifice — to see that someone could endure that and still come back with love and forgiveness, even through extreme pain and suffering and ridicule." In another interview, he states, "I wanted to overwhelm people with it."

While there is nothing wrong with "pushing the viewer over the edge," Gibson has gone further in his defense of the film: "Critics who have a problem with me don't really have a problem with me in this film. They have a problem with the four Gospels." "[The film] adheres pretty well to the Gospels." The millions of

dollars' worth of people who have seen the film have done so in large part because of the tacit promise that Gibson has made to his audience in these and other interviews: simply put, you must see this film, you must accept it, because to see this film and not like it is to not believe in the Gospels. To not believe in the Gospels is to be bound for hell. Thus, the viewer is compelled to be in the audience, and when the viewer is offered a black-and-white choice in terms of accepting or rejecting the content of the film, the idea of "overwhelming" takes on a whole new meaning.

Further, these Gospels are presented in way that has been lauded by many Christians as "realistic." The Pope was legendarily reported as saying, "It is as it was"; i.e., the film is accurate. These viewers are taking Gibson's Jesus literally when he replies to Pilate's question, "Quid est veritas?" ("What is truth?") with, "I am truth." It is as if faith so demands a visual representation of Christ that the film is no longer a film; it is real.

However, the Gospel according to Mel is replete with unanswered questions. Since the film does not offer the reasons of Jesus' sacrifice, since this truth is external to the film, the film is part of the culture of worldly, human punishment. The viewers leave the theater, not edified about love, faith, and hope, but sickened, with Gibson's tacit message, "there's no salvation for those outside the Church," on their minds.

For a viewer such as Nichole, the lack of answers leads her to the place that promises them: her church. She and her new husband now plan on making church a part of their lives. Indeed, many churches are presenting their Passion-oriented sermons as the answers to the questions posed by the film. They realized the potential for family outreach immediately. "We have planned a four week sermon series to give the rest of the story — birth, death, and ascension" states Pastor Citerin of the Dayspring Assembly of God in Bowling Green, Ohio. Many other churches are following this same tactic (offering "the rest of the story" or "picking up where the movie left off") because of the film's reticence to show any aspect of Jesus' life other than his brutal murder. These efforts are paying off with increased attendance.

Additionally, in many churches, each parishioner was given two tickets and was asked to see the film with a non-churchgoer. The highly influential Rev. Rick Warren endorsed

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the film and is currently using it in sermons at his evangelistic Saddleback Church in Orange County, California. As he reports, the results of this outreach are astounding: "Over 600 unchurched community leaders attended our VIP showing [of the film]; 892 friends of members were saved during the two-week sermon series. Over 600 new small groups were formed, and our average attendance increased by 3,000." These "lost" people included not only businessmen and politicians from Orange County, but "lost" members of families, particularly teens and young adults. Rev. Warren is proud of these youth-oriented results: "[...] the largest Gen-X church in America is Saddleback with over 20,000 names under 29 on our church roll."

To Gibson, these numbers help justify the risky move of self-financing the film. Accordingly, he is surprised and pleased by the use of his film by evangelicals: "I've been actually amazed at the way...the evangelical audience has—hands down—responded to this film more than any other Christian group." These evangelical churches, prodded by the marketing firms such as Outreach, Inc., are using *The Passion* as a tool to reach non-churchgoers. It is, as the heading on www.ThePassionOutreach.com proclaims, "The greatest outreach opportunity in 2000 years."

Not only has the evangelical community promoted the film, but many conservative writers, thinkers, and radio hosts as well. Rush Limbaugh was person shown by Gibson an advance copy of the movie in his home, and since then he has actively promoted it. He recognized the need for a popular vehicle to educate the public about Christ. "I mean, I know everybody's heard of Jesus and everybody's heard of the crucifixion supposedly, but [do they know] the things leading up to it[?] Look, I can tell by watching the news. There's millions of Americans that have no clue about this story." Furthermore, he sees the film as America's awakening to the power of the Christian Right: "And I think there are a lot of leftists in this country actually thought that they had dispatched with the Christian right. They had successfully gotten rid of Pat Robertson and Falwell and characterized them as a bunch of fluke kooks, and then here comes Mel's movie. And they're reminded just how many Christians there are in this country." Religion and politics are intimately intertwined in Rush's promotion of the film, and he, like many other commentators, felt overwhelmed by Gibson's portrayal of the crucifixion.

The intimate connection between the powerful visual medium of film and the powerful dogma of Christianity becomes alarming when we consider the current political climate. As Karl Rove, Bush's chief political advisor, noted in 2001, a large

proportion of the 19 million religious conservatives did not vote for Bush in 2000. "Just over 4 million of them failed to turn out and vote," he said. "And yet they are obviously part of our base." Rove astutely notes that, in this upcoming election, these voters must be mobilized to win a close contest.

This is not a mistake to be repeated. This year, the Bush campaign is seeking to organize a massive, grassroots effort aimed at local institutions like churches and religious groups. The *New York Times* recently received an email, addressed to a Pennsylvania pastor, seeking to use his influence with his congregation to sway voters to Bush. In the message, Luke Bernstein, coalitions coordinator for the Bush campaign in Pennsylvania, wrote: "The Bush-Cheney '04 national headquarters in Virginia has asked us to identify 1600 'Friendly Congregations' in Pennsylvania where voters friendly to President Bush might gather on a regular basis." The goal is to recruit volunteers and pastors to distribute literature at church services.

Even if the Bush team discontinues this potentially illegal activity, religious organizations do use their influence to sway their congregations. Catholic Answers, a Catholic evangelical group, offers a voter's guide at www.catholic.com/library/voters_guide.asp. Here, Christians seeking voting advice get information on five "non-negotiable" issues to help them decide who is in line with the faith. Among these non-negotiable issues are "wedge issues" such as abortion and gay marriage, which the Bush campaign is counting to mobilize support.

This is, of course, supported by the policies of the Administration. Bush's record of promoting a "culture of life" by limiting reproductive rights, of "fulfilling America's mission" by waging wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, of supporting an amendment to the Constitution to define marriage as between a man and a woman, and of funding faith-based programs with federal money, are all overtly tied to his religious views and agenda.

This last issue has come under fire from groups such as Americans United for Separation of Church, who allege that churches that have endorsed Bush in the past are receiving large grants for their faith-based initiatives. According to their website,

During the Republican Party's 2000 national convention, the Rev. Herbert H. Lusk II, heartily endorsed Bush for president in a satellite television uplink from his church. Since that time, Lusk has repeatedly advocated for Bush's "faith-based" initiative that seeks to fund church-run social service programs. [...] (on June 23), the Associated

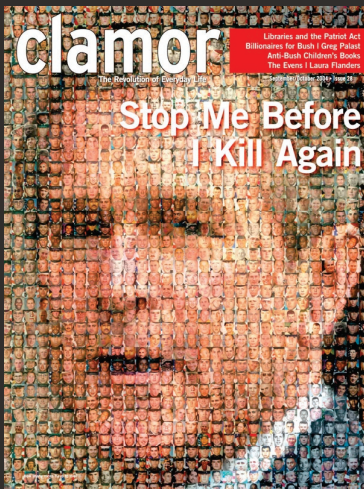
Press reported that the church's charitable operation, People For People, has been awarded a nearly \$1-million "faith-based" grant. The article also noted that Lusk hopes President Bush's "faith-based" agenda will help garner more black votes for the president's re-election bid. Lusk told the AP that Bush "is worthy of the African-American vote."

Coincidentally, Gibson welcomed the deputy director of Bush's Office of Faith Based and Community Initiative, David Kuo, to an early screening of The Passion.

The relationship between film and politics, implicit or explicit, is nothing new. From the surge in numbers the KKK experienced when Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, the beautiful and terrible Nazi propaganda *The Triumph of the Will*, the films of Frank Capra during World War II, to Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, film has a proven power to motivate a country or demographic. If Bush wins this fall, Gibson and the religious community will be some of the people to thank.

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