

COMMENTARIES ON 'THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST' by Keith D. Herron: An unethical evangelism_22304

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COMMENTARIES ON 'THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST': An unethical evangelism: one pastor's perspective

By Keith Herron

This is the week "The Passion of the Christ" will be unleashed on the world, and the opening of Mel Gibson's film on the brutal crucifixion of Christ does not bode well for the church.

Evangelical churches have been buying mind-boggling numbers of tickets and booking whole theaters for weeks now in a feeding frenzy that staggers the mind.

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—Keith D. Herron**

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The manager of a local theater complex reported that one church bought 1,000 tickets and booked the theater for a 6: a.m. showing of the film on Wednesday, the day of the film's opening. The church reported the tickets would be given away freely to church members with the purpose they would bring their non-Christian friends.

Today's multi-screen cineplex is the cathedral for modern culture and the template for churches that wish to drop staid traditionalism that's made them invisible to those outside the walls of the church. The church's unabated desire to reach an elusive contra-Christian culture shows a numbing willingness to outshock the culture with the ancient story of Christ's sufferings that's safely sanitized.

On Wednesday, evangelical churches will be inviting non-believers to Gibson's movie and then forcing a moment of decision on people who will have been jolted into a psychological moment of traumatic shock that resembles a victim pulled from an accident.

Reports from the many advance screenings describe the audience as stunned into raw silence. Many are in tears and unable to move. The film's rating was at first considered a candidate for the NC-17 category because of the vivid drama and violent realism. Jody Dean, CBS News anchorman in Dallas, described the movie as an experience "on a level of primary emotion that is scarcely comprehensible."

Churches should consider that testimony when pushing its members into attending the movie. Children and youth should be kept from seeing brutality that even the jaded movie industry deemed graphic.

Many churches have bought enough tickets to make agreements with the theater management to intrude into the silence of the close of the movie by offering the crowd an invitation to make commitments of salvation to Christ.

While attempting to “strike while the iron is hot,” the church in its attempt to open the doors of heaven to a culture that seldom shows such interest in things divine may become like the Christian zealots who march in front of the Planned Parenthood offices with overly-magnified pictures of aborted fetuses. Such fervor goes beyond anything Jesus would have done. Jesus was not about shocking people into faith. His methods for reaching people came from love and compassion.

Manipulating people in a moment of emotional distress is not evangelism. That kind of “invitation to Christ” comes from the Hell House approach that seeks to shock people into the kingdom. An experience many psychologists would consider traumatic does not make for disciples, only victims of the church’s inability to communicate the transforming character of Christ to our culture. This kind of raw, sensationalistic evangelism only highlights the church’s failure to communicate adequately with the world.

What response should the church consider?

Thoughtful, kind compassion of the kind that Christ offered Thomas would be a sound notion. Many have historically labeled Thomas as “unbelieving.” Perhaps Thomas was so jolted by what he saw on Calvary he was traumatically closed off and numbed into disbelief. Christ in kindness offered him his hands and opened up his robe for inspection giving him the space and the reflection to put the pieces together in his own mind until the picture of faith could be embraced.

The church has an opportunity for dialogue with the culture in the coming weeks about the Jesus who showed love all the way to the end. It shouldn’t blow this chance for meaningful conversation by turning it into a peep show with a pressure to make decisions in a moment of psychological vulnerability.

© 2004 by Keith D. Herron, senior pastor of Holmeswood Baptist Church in

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