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NASHVILLE (ABP)-While Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" will graphically show movie audiences the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross, it's up to Christians to explain why Jesus went through the pain of the cross, Christian leaders say.

"The film will teach them what Jesus did," said Morris Chapman, president of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, in a written advisory to churches. "We must teach them why he did it."

Jesus (Jim Caviezel) sits with the apostles at the Last Supper in a scene from "The Passion of the Christ," a film produced and directed by Mel Gibson. (Photo © Icon Distribution Inc.)

In an hour-long interview on ABC's "Primetime," Gibson acknowledged the movie covers only the last hours of Jesus' life, giving viewers an incomplete record of his life and message. But he said the movie is an accurate account and the one he felt inspired to make.

In recent weeks, Gibson has screened the controversial movie for religious leaders nationwide. Conservative and evangelical leaders have emphasized the evangelistic potential of the movie, noting many viewers leave the theater in tears and distraught over the gruesome crucifixion story.

"I have to say that my heart was stirred to the very core," Chapman told members of the Executive Committee last week.

SBC President Jack Graham added, "You'll never get closer to the cross this side of heaven" than by watching Gibson's movie. "It's absolutely wonderful that in these days the cross is being lifted up for all to see who Jesus is," Graham added. "... You can't watch it and stay the same."

Many Christian companies are selling evangelistic materials geared to viewers of the movie, calling "The Passion" an unprecedented witnessing tool. But others are worried all the attention from Christians eager to win converts could taint the movie's impact.

The film, set for release Feb. 25, Ash Wednesday, is rated R for violence. Some viewers say it is shocking or even "unwatchable" because of the brutality of the crucifixion.

Mel Gibson is part of a traditionalist Catholic sect that has retained the Latin mass and rejects the modernist reforms of the Vatican II councils. "The Passion" is based on a literal reading of the crucifixion accounts of the four New Testament gospels and was intended to be shocking, Gibson said.

Early criticism of "The Passion," even before filming began, leveled charges of anti-Semitism against Gibson. Jewish critics have since said that Gibson, though not himself anti-Semitic, would inspire anti-Jewish feelings with the film.

Gibson reportedly deleted one controversial quotation from Matthew in which the Jewish mob accepts responsibility for the crucifixion. The dialogue, though still in the film in Aramaic, does not appear in the subtitles. The entire movie is in Aramaic and Latin, with English subtitles.

In interviews with Newsweek and "Primetime," Gibson said the film does not blame Jews as a group. "We're all culpable. I don't want to lynch any

Jews. ... I love them. I pray for them.” He told “Primetime” that anti-Semitism is “un-Christian.”

Meanwhile, Jewish film critic Michael Medved, a frequent and respected critic of Hollywood, warned fellow Jews they were missing the point.

“The organized Jewish community and its allies in interfaith dialogue may not welcome 'Passion,'" he said, “but overreaction will provoke far more anti-Semitism than the movie itself. ... By agonizing so publicly about the purportedly anti-Semitic elements in the story, the Anti-Defamation League makes it vastly more likely that moviegoers will connect the corrupt first-century figures with today's Jewish leaders.”

The SBC's Chapman said: “As conservative evangelical Christians, we love the Jews and the Jewish nation. We respect them as God's chosen people. We know he sent our Savior through the Jewish people.

“Since the Jews called for the death of Jesus, does it mean they were the sole persecutors of Jesus? No, a thousand times no,” he said. “Then who nailed Jesus to the cross? We did. The entire human race nailed our Lord to the cross.”

Chapman acknowledged Gibson's conservative Catholic beliefs but said those views, even if wrong, do not keep people from seeing a true picture of Jesus in the movie. Chapman quoted another Executive Committee staff member who said God can use “those who are theologically deficient to effectively accomplish his purposes.”

Frank Ruff, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' field representative to the SBC, declined to take issue with the view of Catholics as “theologically deficient.”

Ruff said films like “The Passion” are “our 21st century stained-glass windows. It makes more of an impact than just words.”

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