

Gibson movie on Christ continues to be flashpoint as debate rages on

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Those who come to the movie without a strong religious background will be given plenty to ponder, and many will be sent scurrying back to the New Testament to compare the movie with the ancient Gospel texts.

They'll soon discover that

the Bible is far more restrained than the gory Hollywood treatment.

Scripture discreetly states that Jesus was scourged, spat upon and struck on the head. But the Gospels provide no elaboration on the Romans' abuse of Jesus, which the movie turns into a

meditation on human cruelty.

Jesus (Jim Caviezel) is savagely whipped by sadistic Roman soldiers wielding metal chains. Blood splatters and oozes. After the Nazarene is dragged away, mother Mary (Jewish

actress Maia Morgenstern) stoically mops up the sacred blood from the pavement.

On Golgotha, Mary's face and robe are smeared with blood as she kisses Jesus' feet and cradles his corpse. This isn't Michelangelo's pretty Pieta. In one non-bib-

lical, gruesome touch, a bird pecks out the eyes of the bad thief crucified with Christ — nature's retribution for mocking Jesus.

Gibson, who directed, funded and co-scripted the

film, explained in e-mail responses, "I tried to make it as realistic as possible. I wanted the audience to feel like they were really there, witnessing the events as they had actually happened."

Megachurches make big deal of production

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California, megachurches' holiday extravaganzas cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and involve hundreds of cast members and volunteers.

"When a normal 300- to 400-person church has a Christmas pageant, the Sunday school class parades through and sings songs and does a re-enactment of the birth of Jesus," said Scott Thumma, a Hartford Seminary researcher who studies megachurches. "And everyone says, 'This is a wonderful thing.'"

"Well, a megachurch can't do it at that scale. They do it at a scale that is 10 to 50 to 100 times larger. It very much becomes this grand performance," he said. "This is just a megachurch doing megaministry."

At the 28,000-member Bellevue Baptist Church in Cordova, Tennessee, just outside Memphis, 165 vocalists sing from 11 tiers built into a 46-foot (14-meter) Christmas tree.

Joined on stage by a "Sanctuary Orchestra" and a "Victory Marching Band," the singers stand amid 1,800 feet (540 meters) of garland, 1,050 ornaments, 69 wreaths and more than 7,500 computer-controlled lights.

It's an eye-popping sight that even the unchurched can appreciate.

"It's to glorify God and help people find a relationship with God in the person of Jesus Christ," said the Rev. Larry Thompson, Bellevue's minister of communications.

A few Sundays before Christmas, the Prestonwood parking lot is as full as the shopping mall down the street.

Poinsettias and decorated trees abound as families in their holiday best sip Starbucks coffee sold at the church, wait in the buffet line at the church's Main Street Cafe and browse through one of two Christian bookstores. The Dallas Cowboys' game plays on the big screen in the main dining hall.

It's about an hour before the Sunday matinee performance of the Christmas festival. Tickets sell for \$17 to \$24 at the church box office. Most of the 13 performances this year sold out; the last one was Dec. 14.

Prestonwood won't divulge its production costs or revenues, but the performances drew more than 70,000 people. At the minimum price, that amounts to \$1.2 million.

Church officials say the

sheer magnitude of the pageant demands charging for it.

Plus, they say, the price is about one-third of what someone would pay to see a major theatrical production in Dallas.

"A lot of times, if you don't charge for something, people don't think it's any great value to go see it," production manager Cyndi Nine said. "I will tell you, we have many members who buy tickets and give them to friends."

From dancing gingerbread men and a Santa rocket to a toy machine that makes life-size Raggedy Anns, light-heart moments mark Act I of the three-hour production.

Act II features a medley of Christmas songs by the 500-member Prestonwood choir, giving way to Act III and the Gospels' story of Jesus' life, complete with a high-tech light show heralding the resurrected savior's ascension to heaven.

Walter Dean, a 58-year-old Methodist, paid \$24 for a floor seat. He nudges the guy beside him when three 2,000-pound (900-kilogram) camels trek up a stage ramp specially designed to handle their weight.

"I bet that's the first time you've seen camels in a church, isn't it?" he whispers.

Or a donkey. That's what Mary rides as she and Joseph make their way to Bethlehem.

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DECEMBER NEWSLETTER - PART THREE
J. M. LITTLE - TEACHER

My friends, as a deceived heart, the greatest thing that can happen to you is for the Holy Spirit to awaken you to the fact you are a lost sinner (Eph. 2:1). If you are never awakened to your lost condition by the Holy Spirit, when you die, you will be awakened to spend eternity in Hell. If you cannot go back to the time you were awakened to your lost condition, and tell what God saved you from, and what God saved you to, then you are not saved. I visited in more than one Bible study and Christ is not known in those Bible studies. They speak of Christ like they speak of George Washington, far away and historical. Christ is not a living reality to those church members, including the pastors. That is the tragedy we face today in religious circles. Is Christ real to you, my friend? He is to me. Every day I think; "what if the Lord had not awakened me to my lost condition and saved me by His grace?" I'd be going on in the religious world and on the road to Hell, or in Hell. But I'll never cease to praise the Lord for redeeming me by His Blood. What a Lord! What a Saviour! Has the Lord redeemed you? But when a soul does not know Christ he has to have something tangible to hold to like this pagan worship called Xmas. You're going to hold to something in this world because you do not know Christ. You are religious, attend church, work in the church, teach, preach, and sing in the choir. But you do not know Christ as a living reality to your heart. Don't call me judging, and don't say I'm being smart. I am just setting the truth before you about the tragical and deceived state you are in, my friends. I was there for years. I know what I am talking about.

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Galatians 6: 9

- And let us not be weary in well doing for in due season we shall reap if we faint not.

- WELCOME -

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— Della Reese, Entertainment Legend.
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