

PASSION-PRESTONWOOD
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[INTRO]

Religion and Hollywood are often at odds over the content of movies. Ideas of morality are often used to condemn films with violence or graphic scenes and language. But with Wednesday's premiere of Mel Gibson's controversial film, "The Passion of the Christ," many Christians are actively promoting an R-rated film in their churches, a film many believers hope to use as a tool for evangelism. From member station KWBU in Waco, Texas, Michael Hagerty visited one such congregation. (:20)

(Church-bells-natsound— :03)

On the outside, Prestonwood Baptist Church, in the North Dallas suburb of Plano, resembles a small sports arena. On the inside (**Inside-natsound— :04**) it resembles a mall. The facility's arcing outer concourse is lined with a restaurant, a coffee shop and several bookstores selling Christian literature and music. This Sunday morning churchgoers were lining up for movie tickets.

Tammy-Rhodes— *"What's your name?...Tammy Rhodes..."* (:06)

Tickets-natosund— (:22)

The tickets were for Mel Gibson's new film "The Passion of The Christ," and members of the church have access to some 3,000 free tickets purchased by fellow Prestonwood member Arch Bonnema. As churchgoers worship in the 7,000-seat congregation, others pick up their reserved tickets at a will-call booth in the church's outer concourse.

Tammy-Rhodes— *"R-H-O-D-E-S?...Here you go. Ya'll have a nice day."* (:06)

Bonnema is a local businessman who used \$42,000 of his own money to buy 6,000 tickets for the opening day of the film at a local multiplex. Thanks to his efforts, "The Passion" will show on all 22 screens in 30-minute intervals from 6:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.—before the theater opens for regular business. Bonnema gave 1,000 tickets to a local seminary, another 1,000 to area charities and then the rest to family and friends. But he still had some left over.

Email-request— *"I emailed six of my friends in the DFW area. In three days I had 23,000 email requests."* (:13)

Bonnema saw a screening of the film a few weeks ago. He said he's heard the crucifixion story countless times growing up. However, the vivid images in the film had a more profound effect on him. He compared his experience to the reaction many veterans had after seeing Saving Private Ryan.

War-movies— *“They said: ‘This is the way it was.’ That’s what ‘Passion’ did to me...it’ll really bring home the sacrifice Jesus made.” (:11)*

His fellow congregants share his enthusiasm. Anticipation for the film is high at Prestonwood, where references to the movie are easy to find. A book about the crucifixion of Jesus— with a forward written by Mel Gibson—sits on the shelves in one of the bookstores. Posters throughout the building and church bulletins bear images from the movie and the question “Who Really Killed Jesus?” which is the topic of today’s sermon by Prestonwood’s pastor, Dr. Jack Graham.

Who-killed-Jesus— *“God put him on the cross. God the Father offered himself as the bloody sacrifice for you and me. That’s who killed Jesus.” (:13)*

Graham points out that Gibson’s only appearance in the film, which he directed, is when his hand is shown nailing Jesus’ to the cross. Graham says Gibson obviously understands that his sins—and those of all other humanity—are why Jesus was murdered.

Graham’s sermon seems a direct response to allegations of anti-Semitism in the film. While the church’s leaders are calling for sensitivity concerning what the Jewish people have suffered in the past, they also call the charges of anti-Semitism unfounded. Bonnema agrees.

Hate— *“This isn’t first anti-Semitic arguments that have come up with the story of the crucifixion...some people look for any excuse to hate...There’s nothing anti-Semitic in the film. Nothing.” (:16)*

In addition to concerns about charges of religious bigotry, the church is also apprehensive about the graphic violence in the movie, which is rated “R” for scenes depicting the torture and execution of Jesus. Dr. David McKinley, an associate pastor at Prestonwood, says it puts the church in the unfamiliar position of advocating an R-rated film.

R-rated— *“We believe it is rare and exceptional as a film because of the nature of what it is...we believe it is reality of Christ and what happened to him. And it wasn’t a pretty picture.” (:13)*

Despite the controversy, members of Prestonwood view the film as an opportunity to share their faith. For Bonnema, who bought the \$42,000 worth of tickets, he just hopes “The Passion of The Christ” will touch believers and nonbelievers like it touched him.

First-thoughts— *“I thought if it made me want to be a better person, it’s gonna make others want to too.” (:06)*

For *Day to Day*, I’m Michael Hagerty in Plano, Texas.