



Jewish-Christian Relations

Insights and Issues in the ongoing Jewish-Christian Dialogue



"The Passion of Christ": Concerns and Recommendations in Anticipation of the Forthcoming Film

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Department for Ecumenical Affairs, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. January 5, 2004

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The portrayal of the Passion of Jesus is one of the most difficult subjects in the history of Jewish-Christian relations. Whenever and however it is told, the Passion sets the Jew Jesus, his Jewish disciples, other Jewish leaders, a larger Jewish community of considerable diversity, a Roman governor, Roman soldiers, and God in a complex web of relationships.

Because Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism developed into separate faith communities, each claiming to be the authentic continuation of biblical Israel, the Passion story has also borne the weight of conveying Christian understandings of how such a separation came about.

Tragically, portrayals of the Passion over many generations have led to the virulent

condemnation of Jewish communities, with Christians lashing out to punish those they had learned to call "Christ-killers." This doleful history demands a special vigilance from any who portray the Passion today. The Passion has the power of the gospel, God's power to bring life from death. We must not allow the libels of former ages to compromise it in our time.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has committed itself to "live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people" (1994 Declaration to the Jewish Community). Our Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations include reminders that "the New Testament . . . must not be used as justification for hostility towards present-day Jews," and that "blame for the death of Jesus should not be attributed to Judaism or the Jewish people." In keeping with these commitments, we view with concern recent public reports regarding the forthcoming film on the Passion by Mr. Mel Gibson.

Recognizing his stature and influence as a film producer and celebrity, we can expect that Mr. Gibson's project will shape or reshape understandings of this central Christian story for millions of viewers. It is imperative that such influence be exercised with due regard for the powerful heritage of the Passion as gospel truth for Christians and as human tragedy for many Jews. It is possible to use the occasion of this major media event to build understanding and goodwill among Jews, Christians, and many others.

We therefore urge the following:

We urge **pastors and educators** of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to learn the history of Passion portrayals and their consequences for the Jewish community. We urge them to study more deeply the gospel portrayals of the Passion and to grasp the distinctive proclamation of each gospel writer, in order to lead their congregants and students in well-informed analysis of Passion portrayals, including Mr. Gibson's. We urge them to teach boldly in their congregations and to make public witness to this church's commitment to confess its faith and preach its gospel in ways that will not demean, malign, or harm the Jewish people.

We urge **members** of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to renew their familiarity with the Passion story by reading and studying the gospel portrayals. We urge them to become informed about the issues that surround the challenging task of portraying the Passion in dramatic or cinematic form. We urge them to consider the many levels at which messages about the characters in the Passion are conveyed in such a production, such as the sound track, staging, costuming, and lighting, and to become better-informed viewers.

We urge **Mr. Gibson** to give due regard, in the final editing of his film, to its historical accuracy and to its portrayal of Jewish characters. He has been widely quoted as aiming to produce the most accurate historical portrayal of Jesus' Passion ever filmed. This goal requires that he give credence to the critique of historical scholars who are expert in the period, cultures, and sources of this story. We believe that he aspires to produce a film that will neither stir antisemitism nor lend itself to antisemitic exploitation. Individuals and organizations that work regularly to counter and diminish antisemitism can aid him in fulfilling that aspiration.

We urge **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregations, civic organizations, and people of good will everywhere** to afford opportunities for study and dialogue about Passion portrayals, including Mr. Gibson's film after it is released. No one portrayal can express the whole truth of the Passion or summarize the understanding of the whole Christian church about it. Open discussion and analysis of the Passion whenever it is portrayed will assist Jews and Christians and others in our communities to understand one another, the diversity of our respective views, and the Passion itself as central to Christian faith.

CONSULTATIVE PANEL ON LUTHERAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

Dr. Franklin Sherman (chair)
Associate for Interfaith Relations
Department for Ecumenical Affairs
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Chicago, Illinois

Dr. Peter A. Pettit
Assistant Professor of Religion
Director, Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding
Muhlenberg College
Allentown, Pennsylvania

Dr. Darrell Jodock
Drell and Adeline Bernhardson
Distinguished Professor of Religion
Gustavus Adolphus College
St. Peter, Minnesota

The Rev. John Stendahl
Pastor, Lutheran Church of the Newtons
Newton Center, Massachusetts

Dr. Esther Menn
Associate Professor of Old Testament
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

Dr. Karla Suomala
Assistant Professor of Religion
Luther College
Decorah, Iowa