

Editorial

The year 2004 witnessed a renewed interest in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, reinvigorated discussions of and inquiries into the identity and mission of Jesus of Nazareth. On the one hand, Gibson's film evoked controversy and division in some sectors of American society. Debates regarding the content and potential impact of the movie filled newspapers, magazines, talks shows, Internet discussion boards, chat rooms, etc. Epitaphs such as "revisionist," "simplistic," and "anti-Semitic" were attached to the movie by its opponents in an attempt to impugn and discredit its depiction of the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ. Some were actually afraid that the movie would spawn physical violence (which of course did not happen). On the other hand, the film was eagerly anticipated and warmly received by many. *The Passion of the Christ* set new attendance and financial records for a movie of its kind. Many Christians viewed the movie as an opportunity to discuss spiritual matters and to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Churches rented entire theaters not only for their own members to view the movie, but also as a means of reaching out to their respective communities. A local Baptist church in the area where I lived erected a large tent on a parking lot beside the local theater in order to dialogue with and witness to movie-goers following their viewing experience. The film provided a timely reminder that the life and death of Jesus Christ leave no room for neutrality.

In light of this renewed interest and, even more so, in light of the worthiness of this subject, this edition of the *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* will examine various facets of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The subject of Christology is, in many ways, an

inexhaustible topic. We are under no illusions that a publication such as the *JBTM* can even begin to scratch the surface of all the important issues involved in this area. We believe, however, that the articles contained herein provide a sampling of topics vitally important for a biblical understanding of the identity and the mission of our Lord. We are also of the conviction that a right understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ is absolutely essential for a healthy, biblically-based church ministry.

In the first article, Dr. David S. Dockery provides for us a basic, theological overview of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Originally delivered as an address at Union University, the monograph calls modern Christians back to the primary and essential elements of our faith. Dockery seeks “to explore the basic themes that help us understand the biblical and theological aspects of the gospel message. Prayerfully, this effort can help unify and strengthen the church, help us proclaim faithfully the good news of the gospel, and advance the cause of Christ.” In many ways, Dockery’s article is a basic course in systematic theology. Both those new to the Christian faith and those well familiar with Christian doctrine will benefit from Dockery’s discussion. The importance of the subjects addressed cannot be underestimated because, as he notes in his introduction, “The heart of genuine evangelism must be a firm theological foundation.” As Dockery rightly notes, our evangelistic mission is the tangible expression of our theological convictions.

Two articles address differing aspects of the atonement of Jesus Christ. Dr. Kevin D. Kennedy seeks to answer recent criticisms directed at the penal substitutionary view of the atonement. In their recent book, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts*, Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker call on Christians to examine their assumptions about the meaning of the death of Christ. Dr. Kennedy notes that

“Green and Baker argue that the penal substitution theory of the atonement is a misinterpretation of the constellation of biblical images which describe the death of Christ.” In answer to their claims, Kennedy believes that “the criticisms of the penal substitution view of the atonement offered by Green and Baker demonstrate that they have misinterpreted this view.” Dr. Kennedy answers the criticisms of Green and Baker by comparing their understanding of the atonement with John Calvin’s understanding of the penal substitutionary view. Not only does he conclude that their representation of the penal substitutionary view is invalid, he also contends that a substitutionary view of the atonement is a “more balanced and biblical explanation of the predicament in which humanity finds itself” and “is far more satisfying” than the proposal of Green and Baker. Dr. Wayne S. Hansen tackles the subject of the extent of the atonement. After providing an overview of the classical positions on this subject, Dr. Hansen attempts to construct a model that he believes is more biblical. After noting that the Bible contains passages that support both the unlimited atonement and limited atonement perspectives, Hansen suggests “that there may be another model for explaining this perplexing topic which brings greater consistency to each side of the discussion and at the same time does greater justice to both sets of verses.” Although not everyone will agree with his conclusions, Dr. Hansen’s thought provoking article does redirect us away from visceral, emotional debates and back to serious exegetical, theological investigations, where such discussions rightfully belong.

Dr. Jeff Cate provides a two-fold service for us in his article, “The Passions of the Christ.” First, Dr. Cate supplies an insightful, theological critique of Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ*. He offers critical, scholarly commentary for many of the movie’s more controversial and less understood elements. Dr. Cate particularly highlights and discusses the Catholic biases and themes presented in the film. Second, he investigates the legitimacy of the

attempt to construct a harmonized, singular version of the events the life and death of Jesus, as was done in the movie. Cate concludes that the integrity of the unique and complex theological interpretations of the events of the incarnation revealed in each Gospel should be preserved. Evangelicals in general and Baptists in particular would do well to heed the advice of Dr. Cate as he notes, “It is important that, as these four separate Gospels are studied, the details of each are not lost in the process of trying to describe what took place in the singular event of Christ’s passion.”

Other aspects of Christology are additionally explored in this edition. Dr. Steven L. Cox examines the issue of the Jewish charge of blasphemy against Jesus. Dr. Cox presents an exegetical and historical investigation of the development and nature of blasphemy. Cox astutely concludes that, in their charge of blasphemy against Jesus, the Jewish authorities were themselves committing blasphemy against God in their mockery of Christ. Dr. Edward P. Meadors attempts to engage the rampant religious pluralism and universalism so common in our day. In arguments biblically based and cogently expressed, Dr. Meadors argues passionately for the singularity of Jesus Christ as the only way to an eternal relationship with the living God. As he states, “The following essay attempts to explain in clear, honest terms why Jesus is the only way to God and why awareness of this truth is *good news* and not bad, comforting truth and not disturbing doctrine, a challenging charge and not an excuse for lazy, simplistic dogmatism.” Dr. R. Larry Overstreet tackles the subject of the omnipresence of Christ. Dr. Overstreet addresses the question of Christ’s omnipresence from an exegetical/theological interpretation of John 3:13. Overstreet concludes that, “While Christ was speaking to Nicodemus, both His human and divine natures were in the presence of Nicodemus, but beyond this His divine nature was also in heaven at the same time.” Although some may disagree with his findings, Overstreet’s

conclusions certainly stimulate further inquiry into this profound, mysterious aspect of the incarnation.

In his article, “Setting Jesus Free from Postmodern Reconstructions: Was Jesus a Galilean Jew or a Jewish Hellenist?” Dr. Steven M. Ortiz leads us on an archeological journey into the first century world of the New Testament. Dr. Ortiz identifies the many attempts of modern scholarship to construct the true, or “historical,” Jesus. Employing an archeological-apologetic method, Ortiz reveals the numerous fallacies of many modern attempts to reconstruct Jesus. In answer to the question, “Was Jesus a Galilean Jew or Jewish Hellenist?” Ortiz responds that Jesus was a Galilean Jew. He notes, “Those who start with the archaeological data can only arrive at the conclusion that Jesus belongs in a 1st century Jewish context.” Dr. Ortiz concludes that, “If you really are honest with the archaeological data, Jesus does not need to be liberated from the theology of the early church, but from the theological and political overlay of vogue New Testament scholars.” For Ortiz, the archeological evidence supports and validates the biblical witness that Jesus was and is the Messiah.

On another subject, the Baptist Center and Broadman & Holman Publishers are sponsoring our second annual conference. The theme of this event is “The Mission of Today’s Church.” The dates for the conference are Feb. 10-12, 2005, and the event will again be hosted on the campus of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. We have assembled some of the best and brightest minds in Baptist life. Each will address his particular topic with the mind of a theologian and the heart of a pastor. Information about topics and registration can be found at <http://www.providencelearningcenter.com/mission2004.htm>.

Until the Lord returns, may He find us faithful,

Stan Norman, Editor