

# Who Does God Want Me to Invite to See *The Passion of the Christ*?: Marketing Movies to Evangelicals

James Y. Trammell  
*High Point University*

This article explores the dominant themes of *The Passion of the Christ*'s marketing campaign to better understand the role and tactics of marketing in the religious media economy. In particular, this marketing-centered textual analysis covers how *Passion*'s purported accuracy, authenticity, rating, and use as a proselytizing device were framed to appeal to evangelicals' skepticism of mainstream Hollywood ideals, R-rated movies, and potential sacrilege of the subject matter.

Religious faith in general, and Christian faith in particular, is not merely a competitor in the abstract marketplace of ideas (e.g., Moore, 1994). It also plays a dominant factor in the actual marketplace of goods. This power of profitable religious texts is apparent in the success of the 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*. Director Mel Gibson's re-telling of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion could have been stymied for many reasons. The script was not in English, and the story was told in subtitles. The movie was released in February, a relatively slow month at the box office. It failed to secure a contract with a top-tier distributor, so Gibson contracted with a distributor more accustomed to smaller, art-house productions. Most interestingly, *Passion* was an overtly religious movie, more Sunday School lesson than Saturday night blockbuster. *Passion* could have flopped for these reasons and more. Instead, it grossed more than \$600 million.

*Passion*'s marketing is a testament to the collision between religious belief and cultural consumption and is an example of how texts in the religious media economy are promoted to appeal to the evangelical subculture. This article explores how *The Passion of the Christ* was marketed to evangelicals to better understand how religious groups are targeted as niche audiences. In particular, it analyzes the marketing materials produced by Outreach, Inc., to evangelical churches that were distributed for air during Sunday services. This analysis relies on a framework that positions media marketing as a growing factor in evangelical religious life. In doing so, the article covers the dominant themes of *Passion*'s marketing in order to more fully explore the role the marketplace plays in the power of religious texts.

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Correspondence should be sent to James Y. Trammell, Nido R. Qubein School of Communication, High Point University, 833 Montlieu Ave., High Point, NC 27262. E-mail: jtrammel@highpoint.edu

## RELIGION, MEDIA, AND MARKETING

Both religion and media play key roles in how we make sense of the world. Simply put, religious faith addresses questions of meaning and purpose, while media are the means through which we approach those questions. The entities of religion and media are at times interwoven into explicitly evangelical Christian texts, including Christian music, movies, and other forms of media art.

Despite (or perhaps because of) this use and power of media texts in religious faith, many scholars and critics debate whether the marriage of religious belief with mass media accommodates evangelical Christianity or complicates it. On one extreme are critics who take a Durkheimian (1915) approach to religion, arguing that the sacred (i.e., all that is set apart for holy purposes) ought to be intentionally and explicitly separate from the profane (i.e., all that is ordinary, everyday, and pedestrian). This approach suggests that any merger of religion with a consumable good cheapens the faith at best, and at worst renders the faith impotent (e.g., Miller, 2003). Neil Postman (1985) summarizes this perspective well: “Everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away [in electronic media]: there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no spiritual transcendence” (pp. 116–117).

On the other extreme are critics who see the marriage of religion with the marketplace less as sacrilege and more as a possible site of virtue. “If we immediately assume that whenever money is exchanged religion is debased,” writes Colleen McDannell (1995), “then we will miss the subtle ways that people create and maintain spiritual ideals *through* the exchange of goods” (p. 6, emphasis in original). Tom Beaudoin (2003) frames consumption as an opportunity to exercise Christian belief. He calls believers to make socially conscious purchases and reject goods manufactured by an exploited workforce as part of their mission to do good in the eyes of the Lord. Others argue that the Christian faith must embrace the culture of consumption and marketing to be relevant in mainstream society. The \$3 billion revenue from Christian media in 2001 alone suggests that many evangelicals have comfortably embraced religious media goods as a complement to their religious life (Haley, White, & Cunningham, 2001).

The critics on both extremes attempt to answer “what does religion do with the marketplace?” by centering their discussion more around the nuances of the faith and less around the nuances of commerce. The marketplace inherently influences, if not determines outright, the media texts that are produced and distributed. All media texts—religious or otherwise—are *commodities*, and as such they must abide by certain market-driven expectations despite any religious themes or applications the text may have (Smythe, 1977; Meehan, 2007; Wasko, 2003; Gitlin, 1985). If the text cannot attract consumers and thus turn a profit for its producers, then the text will not be distributed, rendering moot the discussion of how the religious faithful appropriate media. This role of media within this religious media economy is based less on intrinsic religious power or messages and more on the economic power of marketable, consumable goods (Hendershot, 2004).

This is not a new idea—religious people have been targeted as a consumer base for decades. However, the means by which the faithful have been targeted and the implications of such marketing tactics have been relatively ignored in scholarly literature. *Passion* is a notable site for understanding how religious media are targeted to evangelical Christians. Common sense suggests that the niche audience of American evangelicals would eagerly buy tickets to

*Passion* to see their savior portrayed on the big screen. Ticket sales corroborate this argument: the opening weekend's \$125.2 million gross was bolstered by churches that bought blocks of tickets. It is too simplistic, though, to attribute *Passion*'s success strictly to its Christian-friendly content. The past few decades have seen other films with explicitly Christian themes not fare as well. Some of these movies alienated the broader, mainstream audience through an overtly proselytizing intent (e.g., *The Omega Code*, *Left Behind*); other films alienated the religious faithful with their perceived blasphemy (e.g., *Last Temptation of Christ*, *The Rapture*) (Lyons, 1997; Rendleman, 2002). Producing a religion-themed movie does not necessarily result in a blockbuster, no matter how large the Christian audience.

Rather, *Passion*'s unique success can be attributed in part to how it was marketed directly, intentionally, and successfully to evangelical churches through several media: from promotional DVDs designed for air during Sunday worship services, to proselytizing material featuring stills from the film, to Web sites addressing the movie's appeal to evangelical believers. The filmmakers also solicited support from the better-respected evangelical leaders, promoted the actors' and producers' religious beliefs, and framed the film as a tool that evangelicals could use to spread the Gospel. This media blitz was unprecedented—practically no other religious movie before *Passion* had such a widespread campaign.

Despite the significance and saturation of *Passion*'s marketing, scholarship into the campaign is nil. Peter Maresco (2004) surveyed *Passion*'s marketing to reveal how its tactics compared to other religious-centered films. Although his work is well-intentioned, it fails to address the messages embedded in the marketing materials—Maresco acknowledged the marketing but did not address what the marketing means in regards to the marriage of religion and media. Further, acknowledging that campaign's appeal to an evangelical audience is only half of the story. The evangelical consumer has been generally skeptical of products from outside the religious lifestyle industry that invoke Jesus, regardless of the marketing tactics used in the past (e.g., Rendleman, 2004; Schultze, 1996). Yet *Passion*'s marketing was able to succeed where other campaigns failed, turning a movie about Jesus into a blockbuster.

*Passion*'s unique marketing and box office success leads us toward a few questions. How did *Passion*'s marketing effectively penetrate the evangelical culture? How did this marketing overcome tensions between the evangelical culture and media consumption? What does *Passion*'s success suggest about how the faithful appropriate media and marketing into religious life?

## ANALYZING *PASSION*'S MARKETING

Quality religion and media scholarship relies on social scientific methodologies and methods that explore the embedded messages of a text to better understand the relationship between these messages and their consumers (e.g., Buddenbaum, 2002; Acosta-Alzuru, 2003; Hall, 1975; Hoover, 2002). These analyses culminate in a "study of style, language, expression and rhetoric directly into the study of social meaning" (Hall, 1975, p. 17). In this vein, my analysis integrates *Passion*'s marketing campaign's role in media consumption with religion's role in meaning-making.

Effective textual analysis relies on two general steps. The first step centers on what Stuart Hall called a "long, preliminary soak, a submission by the analyst to the mass of his material"

to familiarize oneself with the sources and to shape the project's sites of inquiry (1975, p. 15). I selected the Outreach, Inc., *Passion Church Resource DVD* (see Figure 1) as "the mass of my material" for two principal reasons. First, the DVD was created with the explicit intention to promote the movie to, and in, evangelical churches. Second, the DVD was distributed to thousands of evangelical churches, giving it a broad reach within the evangelical subculture ("Christian Marketing," 2004).

The Church Resource DVD contains three main chapters: "Intro to the Pastor," which features an introduction to the DVD and the movie by evangelical author and apologist, Lee Strobel; "See the Movie Preview," which features an extended trailer produced for air during

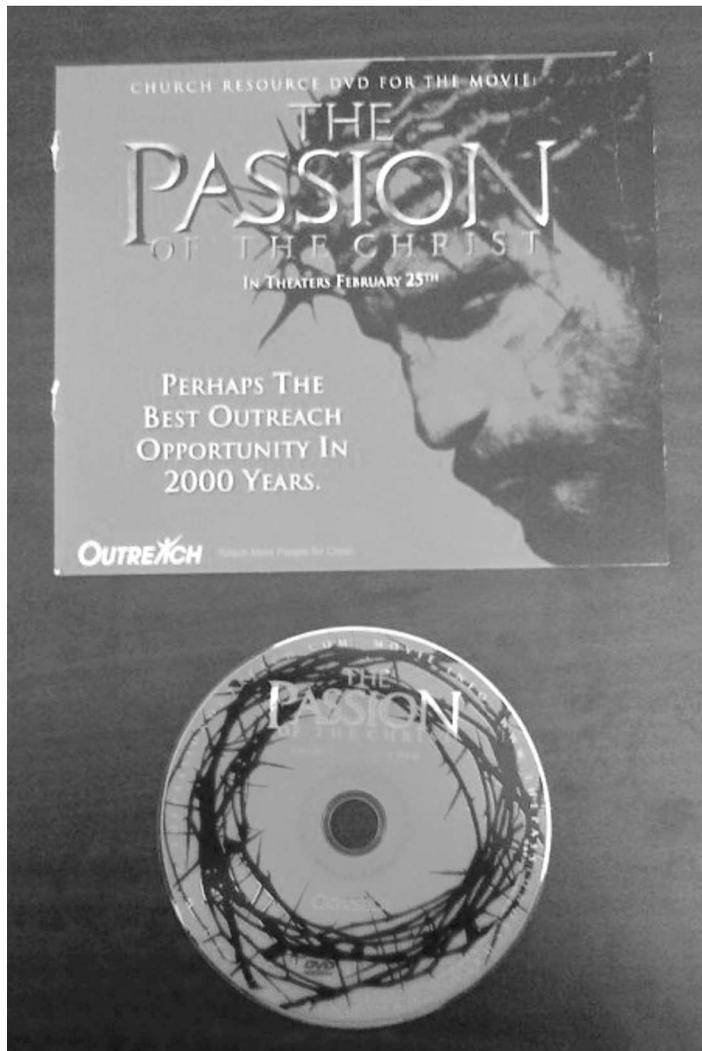


FIGURE 1 The Outreach, Inc., *Passion of the Christ* church resource DVD and cover.

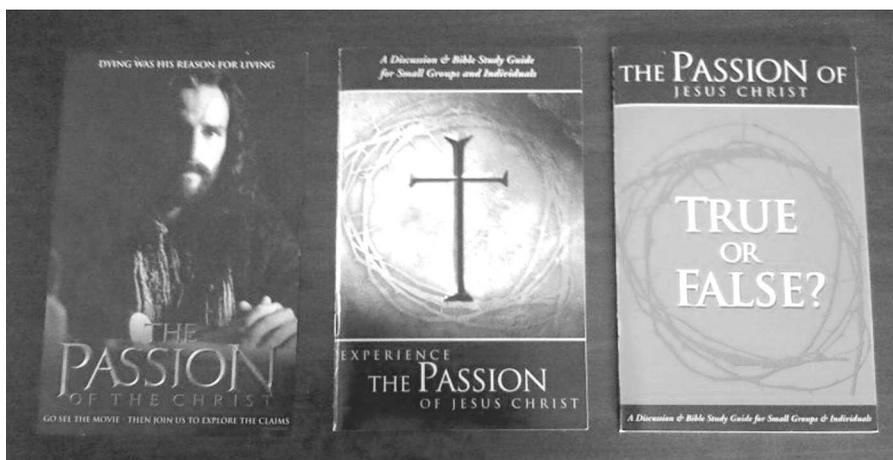


FIGURE 2 From left to right: A mailer for churches with a still from *Passion* on one side (the text at the bottom reads: “Go see the movie. Then join us to explore the claims”); two discussion and Bible study guides based on *Passion* for church small groups.

church services; and “Q&A with Mel Gibson & Jim Caviezel,” which features interviews with actor Jim Caviezel and director Mel Gibson. The DVD also includes three other chapters consisting of still frames: “Quotes & Endorsements,” in which blurbs by evangelical leaders promoting *Passion* scroll through the screen; “Outreach Ideas,” which feature monthly and weekly plans for churches to promote *Passion*; and “Outreach Resources,” which feature the booklets, banners, and other *Passion*-themed material available for church use (see Figure 2).

In addition to reviewing the DVD, the analysis also explored *Passion*’s press coverage with a particular emphasis on how the movie was marketed to evangelicals. These stories, pulled from the national wire services and newsweekly magazines archived on Lexis-Nexis, supplement the analysis of *Passion*’s marketing tactics by covering how evangelicals responded to the film’s marketing, testifying to the success of *Passion*’s media campaign.

Hall’s second step for a solid textual analysis is a close analysis of the source material with particular emphasis on identifying dominant themes. Four dominant themes of *Passion*’s marketing campaign to evangelical Christians become apparent through their emphasis and repetition in the materials: *Passion* is a purportedly accurate movie; *Passion* is a purportedly authentic movie; *Passion* does not suffer from an R-rating; and *Passion* serves as a powerful proselytizing device.

## DOMINANT THEMES IN *PASSION*’S MARKETING

For evangelicals to embrace *Passion*, the filmmakers and marketers first had to convince the faithful of its *accuracy*. Conservative evangelicals tend to evaluate a film’s merits on how closely it aligns with their beliefs (Rendleman, 2002). If these viewers believe a movie does not accurately or positively portray their faith, they will reject it at best, and denounce it as heresy at worst (Romanowski, 1996; Schaffer, 1990, pp. 55–82).

The responses to the 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ* serves as a cautionary example. *Temptation* features Jesus less as a powerful, confident savior and more as a weak, reluctant messiah. The movie crescendos to a sequence which includes, among other things, Jesus having children with two women, and Jesus being rebuked by Judas for renouncing his divinity. Evangelicals predictably rejected *Temptation*, engaging in reactionary campaigns ranging from peaceful protests to vandalism (Lyons, 1997, pp. 146–192).

Like *Temptation*, *Passion* was also scrutinized for embellishing the Gospel account of the crucifixion. In particular, some objected to the inclusion of Anne Catherine Emmerich's apocryphal crucifixion account *Dolorous Passion of Our Lord* to flesh out the biblical account of the crucifixion (Neff, 2004). More notable, though, were the critics who argued that *Passion* portrays Jews in an anti-Semitic light, arguing as Rabbi Eugene Korn did that the movie "portrays Jews in the worst way as the sinister enemies of God" (Medved, 2004). The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) warned *Passion* "portrays Jews as bloodthirsty, sadistic, and money-hungry enemies of Jesus," while its director Abraham Foxman feared that such a depiction would "fuel hatred, bigotry and anti-Semitism" (Medved, 2004; Grossman, 2003).

Despite these critics' objections to and arguments against *Passion*'s portrayals of Jews and the crucifixion, the film was framed to evangelical churches as a uniquely accurate account of Jesus' final days. Lee Strobel was perhaps the most significant endorser of *Passion*'s purported accuracy. Strobel is a widely read, best-selling evangelical apologist who has defended and advocated for the theological and cultural tenets of evangelicalism in mega-churches through his *Case for Christ* book series and as host of the *Faith Under Fire* television program. He used this cultural cache to laud *Passion* on the Outreach, Inc. DVD:

I've spent my life studying the evidence for the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I've interviewed leading experts about it. But until I sat and I experienced this motion picture for myself [it was] as if I was sitting in a front-row seat to history and watching it unfold. (Outreach, 2004c)

Although the DVD does not directly address Anne Catherine Emmerich's influence on the script, it does emphasize Mel Gibson's efforts as a director and storyteller to tell the crucifixion story accurately. "I'm trying to make [the movie] as authentic as I possibly can," Gibson argues to Christian pastors on the Outreach, Inc. promotional DVD, "right down to the clothing, right down to the eating customs of the Jews and the old law" (Outreach, 2004b). *Passion*'s marketers also note Gibson's decision to make actor Jim Caviezel look more Semitic through special effects and highlights the film's Aramaic dialogue as further evidence of its purported accuracy (Outreach, 2004b).

The DVD does not directly address the ADL's claim that *Passion* portrayed Jews inaccurately. However, Gibson addressed these concerns in interviews, screenings, and press junkets. He downplayed the anti-Semitic accusations by highlighting Jesus' death as an empirical, accurate fact, and argued that all people, Jewish and otherwise, are to blame for Jesus' death: "For culpability, look to yourself. I look to myself" (Neff, 2004, p. 32).

*Passion* was not only sold for its accuracy, which implies the movie is empirically sound, but it was also sold for its purported *authenticity*, which implies an acknowledgment of, if not subscription to, the film's religious themes. A text can be an accurate portrayal of a religious faith, but the economy of religious media demands that the artist also portray a seemingly authentic religious devotion. Many evangelicals evaluate art as an extension of the artist's faith

(Schaffer, 1990). Oftentimes, the artist's religious convictions serves as a litmus test to the degree evangelical audiences embrace a text (Rendleman, 2002). The examples of Christian artists who floundered in the religious media economy as a result of perceived religious impiety are legion.

Some of the more prominent stories spread about *Passion's* authenticity centered on how Mel Gibson's Catholicism directly influenced his filmmaking (Chattaway, 2004; Outreach, 2004c; Neff, 2004). Gibson framed his desire to produce *Passion* as a testimony of sorts:

I came to a difficult point in my life and meditation on Christ's sufferings, on his passion, got me through it. Once I started meditating on the passion, really going deep into it in my own mind and heart, then I began to understand it, to believe. That's the version I put on film. (Breznican, 2004)

Gibson took this soul-searching rhetoric further, telling Christian leaders at a prescreening at the Willow Creek megachurch that *Passion* "turned up the heat" on his relationship with God (Neff, 2004, p. 35). In other interviews with religious media, Gibson noted that the Catholic devotion among the cast and crew was so strong that each workday began with Mass (Neff, 2004, p. 30).

The film not only "turned up the heat" between Gibson and God; Gibson also suggested that it raised the ire of Satan himself. He framed the production experience as a frontline in the battle between the believers who created the movie and the demons that purportedly tried to impede its progress and success. Gibson told interviewers that spiritual warfare against *Passion* led to "complications . . . to block certain things. And the closer you are to a breakthrough point, the more vigorous it gets, so that you know when the opposition is at its greatest, you're close and you have to keep pressing on" (Neff, 2004, p. 32). Gibson blamed Jim Caviezel's persistent headaches during production to "something otherworldly here" (Outreach, 2004b), believed the Holy Ghost was present during the filmmaking, and attributed Hollywood's skeptical reaction to *Passion* to "a whole other realm" outside our own (Flynn, 2004). "There have been a lot of obstacles thrown in the way," Gibson said in his DVD message to Christian pastors. "There's a lot of . . . what would you call it . . . poltergeist activity. A lot of stuff. . . . And I understand that it's the other realm. . . . I believe that it is a very real thing and I've taken steps to wherever I can to put on some armor" (Outreach, 2004b).

One of those obstacles to *Passion's* success could have been *the film's R-rating*. There is practically no room for a violent, R-rated movie in the Christian media marketplace. Movies that portray sex or violence are oftentimes rejected by the most conservative Christians. Further, many evangelicals avoid all R-rated movies outright (Romanowski, 1996; Schaffer, 1990, pp. 55–82). It seems, then, that *Passion* should alienate many Christian viewers: the R-rated movie graphically depicts Jesus' flogging, torn flesh, and bloody wounds. *Time* magazine film critic Richard Corliss (2004) called *Passion* "the goriest story ever told," and suggested its "bloodletting" would cause most filmgoers, evangelical or otherwise, to wince (pp. 64–65).

Even though these shots could have easily kept evangelicals from the theaters, Gibson's film did not suffer from these bloody scenes or its R-rating. In fact, *Passion's* marketing suggested that the graphic torture scenes were critical to the movie. It argued that the R-rated scenes were necessary for the film to remain faithful to the Bible (Outreach, 2004b). The R-rating was framed less as a sign that the movie contains content that would offend religious sensitivities and more as a testament to the film's perceived accuracy and authenticity.

“This film wasn’t made with regard as to what rating it might get,” opined Lee Strobel. “It was made with regard for reality. . . . One thing [*Passion*] doesn’t do, friends; it does not glorify evil” (Outreach, 2004a). *Christianity Today* wrote that “many traditional Christians . . . will see this film and feel Gibson has sprinkled them with the saving blood just as the Israelite priests sprinkled the atoning blood on the alter” (Neff, 2004, p. 35). Actor Jim Caviezel agreed, comparing the film’s violence with *Schindler’s List* and *Saving Private Ryan* and suggesting that the graphic torture scenes contribute to *Passion*’s quality rather than distract from it: “There is nothing gratuitous in the film. The violence is there for a purpose” (Outreach, 2004b). Some flatly dismissed concerns that the movie was too violent, arguing that *Passion* is “hardly more graphic than the junk many adults allow their kids to see on TV. And this violence has a purpose” (Tolson & Kulman, 2004, p. 38).

*Passion*’s marketing argued the film’s “violence [with] a purpose,” as well as its purported accuracy, authenticity, culminate into a movie-going experience that would appeal not only to the faithful but to the un-churched as well. *Passion* was not framed as a mere film, its supporters argued: it was marketed as “perhaps the best *outreach opportunity* in 2000 years” (Outreach, 2004b, emphasis added).

This strategy of framing a movie as an outreach opportunity should not be surprising. Evangelicals have used movies as a proselytizing device in the past, using the appeal of movies in one way or another to make the faith more attractive to non-Christians, or as object lessons to help believers approach their faith in different ways (Romanowski, 2001; Schultze, 1996). What makes *Passion* stand out, though, is the degree to which the movie was framed as a distinctly powerful witnessing tool. Outreach, Inc. suggested that *Passion* would not merely convert sinners into saints; rather, *Passion* was sold as a conduit that would bring people to church. *Passion* would help filmgoers experience Jesus in a powerful, visceral way, they argued, and leave audiences with many questions that the church could answer for them, including: “Is Jesus God? Why did Jesus have to die? Is Jesus the only way to God? Is Jesus alive?” (Outreach, 2004a).

Lee Strobel in particular praised *Passion*’s potential to turn sinners into believers. He described watching the movie as “a powerful and life-changing experience” and claimed that non-Christians who saw early cuts have been influenced to read the Gospels (Outreach, 2004c). “I just want you to imagine God using your church to reach seekers through this movie. . . . It’s going to bring millions of people, spiritual seekers, to churches around the land” (Outreach, 2004a). His endorsement culminates in a call to believers to bring people to the movies as a means to eventually bring them to church:

I believe God has a role for you and for me sharing this message with unbelievers. And that role can be summed up in one word, and that word is “invite.” Invite your friends and your family members to first experience this movie, and then invite them to come to church with you. . . . Ask yourself, “Who does [God] want me to invite to see this movie?” (Outreach, 2004c)

## CONCLUSION

*Passion*’s marketing penetrated the evangelical culture primarily by addressing evangelicals’ key points of resistance to movies. The campaign acknowledged and alleviated concerns that

*Passion*, like other movies, would offend Christian sensitivities, either by portraying Jesus in a less-than-flattering light, by portraying the crucifixion inaccurately, or by being rated R. In particular, the marketing blitz centered on *Passion*'s purported accuracy, the filmmakers' purported authentic Catholic faith, the virtue of the film's inevitable R-rating, and the film's potential to convert filmgoers to Christians.

To summarize these points, it is fair to say that the marketing ultimately appealed to evangelicals' *faith, taste, and mission*. In regard to their faith, evangelicals heard from the marketing that *Passion* aligns with their beliefs, since the director purportedly made a conscious effort to tell the story as it was, culminating in an experience that Lee Strobel called "sitting in a front row seat to history" (Outreach, 2004c). Their aesthetic sensitivities were affirmed through framing the film's R-rating and gratuitous violence, two factors that generally keep conservative Christians out of movie theaters, as critical factors to *Passion*'s power. Finally, by framing *Passion* as "perhaps the best outreach opportunity in 2000 years," evangelicals could associate the film with a proselytizing purpose (Outreach, 2004b).

Although these marketing tactics were apparently successful, what is most interesting is what the campaign did *not* do to attract Christians: it did not take the broad population of all American Christians for granted as a guaranteed audience. The marketing campaign seems tailored to a particular subculture of Christian believers—that is, conservative evangelicals—rather than to the general population of American Christians. In other words, the marketing did not suggest that general Christian audiences should see *Passion* merely because it featured their savior or re-told the crucifixion story. Instead, it suggested that evangelicals in particular should see *Passion* because it appealed specifically to evangelicals' faith, taste, and mission.

Still, although *Passion* was sold directly to the evangelical community, it was forced to conform to the economic expectations of all media texts, secular or otherwise. *Passion* was obligated to generate revenue, if not break even, to ensure its distribution. To be sure, the filmmakers got a generous return on their investment in *Passion*, not so much in how many souls were saved by the film (as the film's marketing suggested), but rather in the money the film made off of the ticket sales those same evangelicals poured into the box office.

It is tempting to argue that evangelical belief was exploited by *Passion*'s marketing as a means to make money. However, this may be a too simplistic explanation of the relationship among evangelicalism, media, and marketing. Evangelicals embraced *Passion* as an empowering force, one whose purported accuracy, authenticity, and proselytizing power (as framed by the film's marketing) adequately spoke to and represented their beliefs. In other words, the campaign may have taken cues from evangelicals on how to market the movie—framing the film specifically to appeal to their beliefs—but *Passion* had to *conform* to believers, not the other way around. The media text did not render evangelicalism impotent, as some have suggested could be the ultimate result of the merger of religion and media (e.g., Miller, 2003; Postman, 1985). Rather, the marketing acknowledged evangelicals as a powerful force in the religious media economy, one whose beliefs, tastes, and mission must be appeased.

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