

A telling story: Christians live by faith, not certitude

From the Editors in the [April 20, 2004](#) issue

A rabbi noted recently that when Jews and Christians view Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*, they tend to see two different stories—and neither seems to appreciate or understand the reactions of the other. A perceptive observer of Christianity, the rabbi pointed out that Christians don't all see the same story either. For some, this film version deepens their faith and intensifies their zeal to share the gospel. Others are horrified by Gibson's seeming insensitivity to Jewish concerns and by his emphasis on the sadistic torturing of Jesus.

Like a family arguing over its genealogy, Christians disagree about how to tell our own story. We disagree over exactly what happened, over the significance of what happened, and over how the story has played itself out in history. With four canonical Gospels that differ in their particulars, we cannot know exactly what happened. As for interpreting events, the New Testament gives us different images and metaphors for grasping the meaning of Christ's death.

Moreover, no story is complete without taking into account its ripple effect—what Christians have done with the story. On the good side is that as the gospel spread through the Mediterranean world and beyond, untold numbers of people experienced forgiveness of sins, liberation in Christ from oppressions of various sorts, and hope for the future. On the bad side is that Christians often used coercive means to spread the gospel. Do we tell that part of the Christian story too? When we share the faith do we also confess the sins of the Christian community itself?

Humility, a Christian virtue, is part of the gospel story, too. It applies to how we tell our story, and not just our personal demeanor. As the late Lesslie Newbigin pointed out, the Christian story is incomplete and ongoing—we don't know how it will turn out—and so we live by faith and not by certitude. In addition, we know that other people have alternative and conflicting stories. We should have the humility, then, to listen to their stories.

Acknowledging our sins, individually and corporately, in the past and in the present, should be how we embody the good news—the good news that God welcomes us into his community despite our sins. In extending hospitality toward others and working toward the reconciliation of humanity, Christians say as much about the meaning of the gospel story as any recital or formal interpretation of it.