



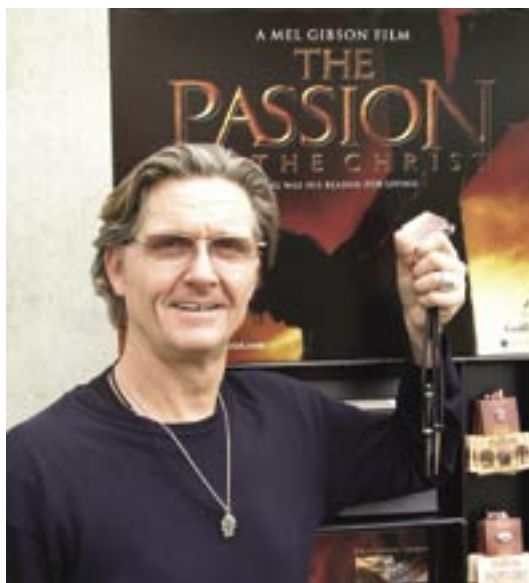
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Christian businesses have faith in 'Passion'

Tie-ins: Firms rally behind Mel Gibson's account of Jesus' death as a way to spread their message and boost their profits.

By John Woestendiek, Sun Staff

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More than 30 years ago, a one-time surf bum walked into a Christian bookstore, got saved and started making rings that heralded his newfound spirituality - first as a hobby, then for profit, though that was not the point.

Business just got better for Bob Siemon, especially in the 1990s, when he seized upon a phrase coined in a 100-year-old book and began marketing "What Would Jesus Do?" jewelry. Sales soared, though that was not the point.

Then last month, Siemon cut a deal with actor-director Mel Gibson. In exchange for paying royalties to Gibson's movie company, Siemon has become the official marketer of The Passion of the Christ jewelry - bracelets, lapel pins and other trinkets that, while

promoting the movie and building Siemon's business, will also spread the message of Christianity.

And that, Siemon says, is the point.

Bob Siemon Designs is one of three companies that, under licensing agreements with Icon Films, are manufacturing and distributing official The Passion of the Christ products - jewelry, coffee mugs, books and inspirational art available primarily through the Internet and Christian bookstores.

Not unlike movie toys packaged in a fast food "Happy Meal" (though nothing that crass is planned), the religious knick-knacks are aimed at both promoting the film and capitalizing on its success. It's a self-perpetuating cycle that Christian retailers have long been familiar with: Their products sell Christianity, Christianity sells their products.

The same can be said, and has been, about Gibson's movie, which opens Wednesday. While debate rages over whether The Passion's vivid depiction of Christ's suffering and crucifixion may evoke anti-Semitic feelings, evangelicals are both promoting and plan to use the film as a tool to bring converts into the fold.

"It's going to have a huge impact," Siemon said by phone from his studio in Santa Ana, Calif. "I actually think that this movie is going to start a revival of Christianity in America, if not the world."

Large industry

The link between commercialism and Christianity is nothing new. In the Middle Ages, merchants cashed

in on pilgrimages, selling candles, lodging and meals to Christians passing through. Today, it is a \$4 billion-a-year industry in the United States; through the Internet, customers can buy everything from an “authentic” crown of thorns to Jesus and Mary bobblehead dolls.

“In the U.S., people have been selling Jesus and Mary stuff since Colonial times,” said Stephen Prothero, chairman of the department of religion at Boston University. “There has always been a group of purists that sneers at it. ... There have always been people who think religion should be above the market.”

Amid all the other debate around *The Passion of the Christ*, concerns that Gibson may be making millions off *Christ* have not emerged as an issue. Rightfully so, in Prothero’s view.

“Every other movie sells stuff related to it, why shouldn’t he?” Prothero said.

Whether it’s to give the movie a push or get one from it, Christian-oriented companies are taking steps to associate themselves with the film, officially and unofficially.

Christian bookstores are stocking up - not just on official movie products, but on Bibles and other merchandise in anticipation of new customers.

“We’re beefing up our Bible section,” said Vicki Lego, a manager at Greenleaf Christian Books on Joppa Road in Baltimore. “I think it’s a great opportunity to reach people who maybe haven’t been reached before ... people who leave the film knowing they maybe need a new Bible, or a first Bible.”

Only two other companies have been licensed to make and distribute *Passion*-related products - Tyndale House Publishers of Illinois, which is printing photo books, and CarpenTree, an Oklahoma-based manufacturer of inspirational art.

But tie-ins and promotions to the movie don’t

end there.

A wide range

ScriptureMail, a company based in Richmond, Va., that provides e-mail service, announced this week it will offer free e-mail accounts for one year to anyone who agrees to have Isaiah53verse5.com - the verse the movie opens with - be part of their e-mail address. E-mails sent under the account contain a link that allows the recipient to read the entire verse.

It’s a limited-time offer, starting next week on Ash Wednesday and lasting until Easter Sunday.

Sara Hunt, public relations specialist for ScriptureMail, said the makers of the movie “know we’re doing it, and they are delighted.”

Also hitching his wagon to the movie is NASCAR driver Bobby Labonte - or, more accurately, his car’s primary sponsor, Interstate Batteries chairman Norm Miller. Miller, a born-again Christian, says being able to promote Jesus and the movie at the same time is a “double hit.”

In last weekend’s Daytona 500, the hood of Labonte’s car, in addition to ads for batteries and anti-depressants, featured the movie’s paint scheme and logo - but not a depiction of Christ, who is portrayed in the movie by actor James Caviezel.

Caviezel was at Daytona, too, though - in Labonte’s pit during the race, which was won by Dale Earnhardt Jr. Labonte finished 11th.

Souls over sales

Dan Hobson doesn’t make “cheesy Jesus stuff,” and his 28-year-old, Tulsa-based company, CarpenTree, doesn’t worship profits above all else. Like most of the more than 2,400 members of the Christian Booksellers

Association, Hobson will tell you his company is more interested in souls than sales.

“We’re there because we believe in Jesus,” said Hobson, 54. “We believe in doing the right things, and that the right things will lead to profits. ... We apply His principles in business.

“Mel Gibson says the same thing,” he added. “That’s why he did this film. We’re not shy in the least bit about making a profit, but that’s not the primary goal.”

Under its licensing agreement, CarpenTree is producing and selling framed prints of scenes from the movie - including a close-up depicting a nail being driven through Christ’s hand. Gibson used his own hand in that scene.

The response to the Passion products so far, Hobson said “has been incredible, and when the film hits I perceive it will be even more incredible.”

Bob Siemon Designs has filled a half-million orders, each of which is accompanied by a “witnessing” card featuring the movie’s logo and six scriptural quotations. The company expects the products to account for 15 percent of its total sales in the coming year.

Siemon’s Passion products include lapel pins - one with a replica of the cross from the movie, one with Aramaic letters spelling the word passion. Other products will include necklaces, charm bracelets, key rings and hand-carved nails on leather cords.

Siemon’s marketing manager, Dwight Robinson, said Icon Films was seeking only the most tasteful products. “They were really focused on making sure everything was ... classy. There aren’t going to be any action figures.”

As a teen-ager in Southern California, Siemon found his needs - spiritual and otherwise - pretty much met by his bicycle and surfboard. It wasn’t until age 19 that he realized what he was missing.

One day, while a junior college student, he walked into a small Christian bookstore in the San Fernando Valley. The owner asked him if he knew Jesus Christ, then prayed with Siemon over the jewelry counter. For the next year, almost every day, Siemon returned to the store and read the Bible with the shop owner, until they finished it.

Siemon - who made his first ring by cutting off a piece of his bicycle handlebars with a hacksaw when he was 12 - engraved the ring he wore with the words “Jesus Saves” after his first meeting with the store owner. Then he made a similar ring for the store owner, and anyone else who asked.

“Then one day it dawned on me, like the light bulb getting screwed in, that there are millions of Christians around the world who want to share their faith just like I want to share mine,” he said. “It’s nice to have a constant reminder, be it on your finger or around your neck, that you can make it through whatever happens.”

Siemon began selling rings through other Christian bookstores.

Early this month, Siemon, 53, watched the movie at the annual convention of the Christian Booksellers Association in Indianapolis, after which he urged those in the industry to be prepared for an onslaught of new customers.

“This isn’t about product,” he said. “It’s about people being saved.”

‘A constant reminder’

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