

The Passion of the President: Ronald Reagan on Christ and the Crucifixion

By Dr. Paul Kengor

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Long before the editorial pages of the New York Times flogged Mel Gibson for his film or denounced George W. Bush for citing Jesus Christ as his favorite philosopher, they assailed Ronald Reagan for his thoughts on the Nazarene Carpenter.

In January 1984, President Reagan dared to utter the "J word" before the annual convention of the National Religious Broadcasters. "He promised there will never be a dark night that does not end," Reagan said of Christ. "And by dying for us, Jesus showed how far our love should be ready to go: all the way."

This was too much for the New York Times, which unleashed the wrath of its judgment. Reagan, complained the Times editorial board, had presented the speech "not while worshiping in his church but in a Washington hotel."

"You don't have to be a secular humanist to take offense at that display of what, in America, should be private piety," the aggrieved newspaper lectured. "It's an offense to Americans of every denomination, or no denomination, when a President speaks that way."

Reagan was, after all, "the President of a nation whose Bill of Rights enjoins Government from establishing religion, aiding one religion, even aiding all religions." By the Times' estimation, Reagan's utterance had somehow constituted an attempt to establish a state religion.

None of this deterred Reagan. According to speechwriter Ben Elliott, when the president received condemnation from the likes of the New York Times, "He wore it like a badge of honor."

Reagan boldly brought Christ's name into completely secular situations. At Kansas State University in 1982, he appealed to the "admonition of the Man from Galilee to do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Reagan personally inserted that line into the speech himself.

That said, President Reagan tried to avoid Christ-specific remarks on occasions where he knew Jews would be in the audience. He cared deeply about persecution of Jews, particularly in the Soviet Union. However, when addressing an explicitly Christian group, he did not shirk from speaking of the figure he called his Savior.

Indeed, in editing his own speeches, the 40th president sometimes went further: On one occasion, he took a draft by speechwriters Peggy Noonan and Ben Elliott, in which they wrote that Christmas is "the day that marks the birth on Earth of the Son of God," and added that Christmas is "the birthday of the promised Messiah, the Son of God." (Italics added.) Such additions by Reagan were common. "He didn't make a big deal about it," said Elliott. "He would want a change like that and would just write it in."



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Citizen Reagan often wrote of Jesus Christ in private correspondence. He was not shy about Christian apologetics. He once pressed an interviewer: "How can you write off the prophecies in the Old Testament that hundreds of years before the birth of Christ predicted every single facet of his life, his death, and that he was the Messiah?"

In a March 1978 letter to a Methodist minister who expressed doubts about Christ's divinity—and accused Reagan of a "limited Sunday school level theology"—Reagan responded:

"Perhaps it is true that Jesus never used the word 'Messiah' with regard to himself (although I'm not sure that he didn't) but in John 1, 10 and 14 he identifies himself pretty definitely and more than once. Is there really any ambiguity in his words: 'I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me?'... In John 10 he says, 'I am in the Father and the Father in me.'" And he makes reference to being with God, "before the world was," and sitting on the "right hand of God..."

"These and other statements he made about himself, foreclose in my opinion, any question as to his divinity. It doesn't seem to me that he gave us any choice; either he was what he said he was or he was the world's greatest liar. It is impossible for me to believe a liar or charlatan could have had the effect on mankind that he has had for 2000 years. We could ask, would even the greatest of liars carry his lie through the crucifixion, when a simple confession would have saved him? ... Did he allow us the choice you say that you and others have made, to believe in his teachings but reject his statements about his own identity?"

Reagan employed this specific argument a number of times, echoing C. S. Lewis's classic "liar, Lord, or lunatic" line from "Mere Christianity."

This is the tip of the iceberg on Reagan's distinctly Christian faith. And yet, perhaps the principal difference between Reagan's reflections on Christ and those of Mel Gibson or George W. Bush is that we totally missed Reagan's (aside from the vigilant New York Times). Only now are we recognizing this crucial side of the historical Reagan—at a time when Ronald Reagan approaches the moment when he will learn the truth about Christ's divinity and the crucifixion.

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