That's Not What Jesus Would Have Done

"That's not very Christlike!" I have often heard a version of this refrain leveled against Christians, especially more conservative Christians. Jesus said to care for the poor, why are you advocating against affordable housing? Jesus said to love your neighbor, so why are you harming LGBT kids?

Did the gospel authors hear the words of Jesus firsthand from Jesus himself? That's an argument for Biblical scholars to have, but in general, the consensus is that even though two of the gospels are named after Jesus' disciples, they were not written by the disciples, and are second- or third-hand accounts. So how do we understand the words of Jesus in the gospels? As a sort of truism, what survives in the form of the canon of the New Testament is what people decided they wanted to copy and pass down to the next generation of Christians. What did they decide was important? What gets passed down, and what gets discarded? This next part may sound weird, but bear with me. When I read the Bible, I think about advertisements.

I'm guessing you've heard it said that if the product is free, then you are not the customer. If there are ads, the advertisers are the customers. Whether it's TV, YouTube, podcasts, or social media, the people paying for the service are the advertisers, not the users. And what exactly are they paying for? They're paying for a little piece of our minds. We watch, read, or listen to the ads, and our neural pathways are altered, ever so slightly, to make room for the memories of the ads. Maybe you're not susceptible to the ads, but in aggregate, enough people's brains are changed in such a way that once they've seen that one cola soda brand in a positive light countless times, their behavior is modified and they give that brand a little bit of their money. In aggregate, that money sustains the corporation, keeping it alive and increasing its power.

But we don't turn on the TV or scroll social media to see the ads. The ads are a drain on our minds, a negative force in our lives. We don't like seeing ads. But we tolerate this negative force because of the content in between the ads. The negative drain on our minds is countered by positive content, creating a net positive on the whole. Content and ads are in balance with each other. If we see too many ads with our content, then we will decide that the cost of watching the ads is not worth the benefit of seeing the content. And when there are too few ads, the corporations (or content creators) may decide that the cost of producing the content is not worth the benefit of the ad revenue. So content is created at the cost of sustaining our system of corporate capitalism.

In the Bible, there is content that is beneficial to the believer, and there is also content that is not, but it sustains systems of power by capturing some of the attention from those same believers. The two are not easily separable, because they are in balance with each other. The authors of the gospels say that Jesus talked about love, forgiveness, and helping the poor. And he also talked about self-denial, hell, and obedience. Jesus said that you should not divorce your spouse except in

the case of marital unfaithfulness, which keeps people in abusive or simply unhealthy relationships, and dependent on churches. He said that hell awaits people who don't obey him, promoting fear and religious trauma, and making people listen and obey their pastors. Jesus said that even looking at a woman wrong is a sin, which has led to guilt and shame for people whose behavior has hurt absolutely no one, but keeps those people constantly asking for forgiveness and going back to their churches. And he also said to love your neighbor as yourself, which has inspired billions to act charitably toward their neighbors, and promotes well-being in believers, since we are deeply social and empathetic creatures. The negative drain on our well-being that sustains churches is countered by the positive content that helps improve our well-being in other ways, creating an overall net positive.

It's not always clear what in the Bible is positive content, and what is negative ads. People will disagree, of course. I think that Jesus' teachings about forgiveness miss the mark, because viewing forgiveness as a command has lead to predatory people being allowed to continue to harm others instead of being evicted from our communities. Others may see the same teaching and find comfort and usefulness in understanding that letting go of anger helps them live better lives. Non-Christians and progressive Christians may see whole books like 1 and 2 Timothy as the ads, the hangers-on that attached themselves to the real meat of the New Testament to try to introduce patriarchy and gender inequality into the belief system.

But even evangelical Christians who think that every word of the canon is utter truth may be able to recognize ads that don't come from the words of the Bible, but from their pastor's interpretation, for example. One interpretation that personally bothers me is the teaching that people's gender is determine by their genitals, or genetics. I've never found a verse that explicitly says this in the Bible, only inferences and interpretations. Similarly, you can't find any passage in the Bible that defines premarital sex as a part of the "sexual immorality" that Paul and many authors rail against.

(Explanation: I linked to a page on the Greek word "porneia" which is often translated "sexual immorality." Even though this page includes a definition of "fornication" for porneia, this definition is not supported by how the word is used in the rest of the New Testament. It is used in lists of sins without context to clarify the definition, by Jesus to describe marital unfaithfulness, and by Paul to describe incest. You can verify this yourself by going through the 25 times the word is used.)

These ads hurt people, but they survive because they increase the power of the institutions that uphold them. Think of the guilt that causes people to confess their sexual sins and recommit themselves to their church, or the fear of the trans deviants that keeps people actively promoting their version of Christianity out of anger.

When we tell people to behave like Jesus behaved, we're not just giving power to empathy and love as taught by a good man in the first century. We are also giving power to the church as an institution. Love and empathy are central to our lives as humans. We are social animals, hardwired to cooperate with others for our survival. I have seen beliefs take that empathy and twist it into something less than pure love. When love includes thinking about a hypothetical punishment after death, anything that avoids that suffering after death becomes loving, even if that "love" looks like suffering during life. The love that comes from the Bible is used to oppress anyone who doesn't conform to the strict standards of the Church.

So what do we do when we see Christians, who would otherwise be loving people, upholding oppressive systems of power instead of love towards their neighbors? If they are oppressing trans people, it's not helpful to tell them to love like Jesus loved, because attached to the message of love is this ad that loving a trans person means not letting them be trans. We can scream at them all day that they need to be loving to trans people, and they will simply agree, and continue believing that they are loving trans people by taking away their healthcare. Deconstructing the teachings of Christianity is something that comes easily to me, since I've done it once already when the stakes were eternally high. It's much harder for evangelical Christians who are told that even doubting any part of their faith is one step away from sin or everlasting torment.

Becoming aware of what we are doing that's not serving the causes important to us is a good first step. We need to think carefully about where to put our energy to effectively work towards change. I don't actually have a full answer here. I keeping thinking about this problem and coming up with contradictory answers. Right now, I don't think using the Bible to convince people to be more loving is effective, because the Bible carries many messages that contradict love. But it's also going to be impossible to ask conservative Christians to stop believing that the Bible is inerrant.

Perhaps appealing to our shared humanity and empathy on an emotional level is a better answer. Everyone has an innate sense of empathy. If we draw that out, it can create cognitive dissonance in people that believe that the Bible teaches love at the same time as causing suffering. This dissonance will lead to people reinterpreting the Bible to match with their sense of empathy. For right now, that's the best answer I have. We're up against powerful forces, and we need to be as wise as serpents in how we live with our fellow humans. Remember that people aren't the enemy. The systems are the enemy. Even people who enjoy power through their place in the hierarchy are themselves being victimized by the hierarchy. Good luck out there, and stay safe!

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