Jesus Christ: Social Justice Warrior

Author’s Full Name

University of Memphis

Author Note

This paper was prepared for Senior Project, Lorraine Meiners-Lovel, Instructor.
Abstract

Jesus lived in a time where the rich become wealthy by feeding of the vulnerable. These people in power did all they could to keep their power, regardless of the effects on those beneath them. Many of the challenges still exist today. Many times, people use their Christian beliefs as a means of justifying their actions of hate. By conducting a true study of the life of Jesus, the teachings from the Bible, and applying them to the events of today, it becomes very clear what types of actions would be supported by Jesus and could be considered true to the Christian identity.

*Keywords: Christian, love, compassion, core truths, nonviolence, resistance*
For centuries, people have used religious beliefs to justify their actions and behaviors. In the eleventh century, Christians used religion as an excuse to invade and attack the Seljuk Turks. In 1996, Eric Robert Rudolph used his Christian beliefs as motivation for setting off a pipe bomb at Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta, Georgia, during the Olympic Games (Juergensmeyer, 2003, p. 30-32).

Sadly, these are just two examples of countless numbers of violent acts that have been performed in the name of religion. “Also, surprising, at least to some, is that terrorist acts have been justified by Christian principles” despite the love your neighbor teachings at the core of Christianity (Juergensmeyer, 2003, p. 19). The definition of a Christian is one who believes in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. But what does that actually mean? Many times, the preaching of Jesus and other biblical texts regarding the life of Jesus, are taken out of context to support violent acts and terrorism. Over time, this method of understanding Christianity began to shift from just supporting certain acts of violence to supporting certain political stances and issues.

According to Gaines M. Foster (2002), this practice began when Wilbur F. Crafts opened an office in Washington D.C. in 1985, proclaiming himself to be a Christian lobbyist. For over a quarter of a century, Crafts worked with churches and religious leaders to take Christian morality and have it written as federal law. Some effects of these laws were “to limit divorce, to control sexuality, and to restrict or prohibit the use of narcotics and alcohol” (Foster, 2002, p. 799).
While not all of these laws remained, the precedent had been set that religious morals could very easily be used to shape those in power to pass laws and effect change in the country.

An example of this can be seen through the preaching of The Rev. Billy Graham, which “...focused not on the pressing issues of his time … but on personal conversion and salvation” (Greer, 2018). The belief that salvation could be found through a personal relationship with Christ and by giving your life to Christ eventually began to challenge believers to remove themselves from societal issues and focus on their personal salvation. After all, it was through personal relationships with Jesus that the troubles societies were facing would naturally resolve on their own (Greer, 2018). However, the effects of this type of understanding Christianity can be very harmful. “Over Graham’s lengthy public ministry, white evangelical Protestants wedded themselves socially and politically to a form of religion that theologian Dorothee Sollë referred to as “Christofascism” (Greer, 2018).

This form of Christianity is one that perpetuates the status quo and keeps the Christians in power and “...and retain[s] all the ills of white Christian society like patriarchy, colonization, and heterosexism” (Greer, 2018). To better understand how deeply rooted these issues are within the Christian world, religious studies professor and author Gary Dorrien makes the argument that “For most of the past century the mainline churches have adopted a strategy of accommodation to the dominant culture…” (Dorrien, 1997, p. 365).

Considering the practice of Christianity should be about a person conforming their beliefs and practices to those of Jesus, there is danger when the beliefs of Jesus are used to confirm a self-created ideology. As author Anne Lamott puts it, “You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do” (Lamott, 2000,
p. 31). After years of practicing this type of Christianity, has it finally gone too far? Does the Bible state that a Christian should be pro-life or pro-choice? What sermon has Jesus given in regard to the LGBT community? Was Jesus a social activist? While church and state may be separate, a person’s morality is very much a result of their religious beliefs. If a very large amount of the population makes political decisions based on their religious beliefs, it is imperative that they have a better understanding of what the life of Jesus would have actually been like. By understanding Biblical text in context, then it would become clear that Jesus was a very significant social justice activist and to be a Christian today means to support social justice issues.

**Life and Morals of Jesus**

In a sermon given by Marcus Borg in 2014, he states that the “number one rule of biblical interpretation in three words: context, context, context.” It is imperative to place scripture in its appropriate historical context when reading and studying texts. The church has a “long habit of reading the Bible in poor ways” that it has skewed the core truths that the Bible teaches (Brueggeman, 2016). There are many obstacles the church can face when trying to read the scripture in appropriate manners. One main challenge according to Capon, is the difficulty of familiarity. When scripture is read, the reader approaches the text with a preconceived notion or a presumed mindset about what the meaning of the Bible. If the reader decides that the main focus of the Bible is morality, then every passage in the book would have to contain some lesson on morals. Similarly, if a reader hears that they are reading the Parable of the Prodigal Son, then they may instantly think back to a simplified version of this parable that they learned in Sunday school. The key to approaching scripture and reading in a way that would best serve the reader,
is to do so with an open mind (Capon, 2002, p. 1-9). By placing the passages of the Bible in their proper context and avoiding any preconceived notions about the text, the reader may be able to understand the stories and parables in a different, more appropriate and less harmful manner.

If being a Christian means to follow the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, then it would make sense to have a clear understanding about the life of Jesus. Jesus, born of Joseph and Mary, was raised in a traditional Jewish family during the time of the Roman occupation of Judea. In the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, a small sentence can give a lot of information about the potential upbringing of Jesus. After it was announced that she was pregnant, Mary’s “husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly” (Matthew 1:18-19, NRSV). When this passage is placed into context, it is clear that Joseph and Mary had entered into a marriage contract in accordance to Jewish tradition. Based on tradition, once the couple became engaged, the woman would not move into the house of her husband for at least a year. When Mary becomes pregnant during the year that she was not living with her husband would give Joseph just cause, in accordance with the laws and traditions, to divorce his wife (Burge & Hill, 2012, p. 956). Because of the manner in which Joseph approaches the situation and the “righteousness” in which he plans on executing his plan legally, it is a safe assumption that Joseph was a faithful member of the Jewish tradition. A man who followed Jewish customs and law, read the Torah and knew its lessons. If that is the case, then it would be safe to say that Jesus would have been raised in a household that read the Torah and obeyed the laws.
This is not merely an assumption but proven to be accurate the more you look at scripture. Even though there are few verses in the Bible that tell stories of the teenage years of Jesus of Nazareth, there are enough to defend the claim that Jesus was raised in a proper Jewish household. In the Gospel of Luke, there are passages claiming that the family completes “everything by the law of the Lord” and how they travel to the temple of Passover every year (Luke 2:39, NRSV). Once it is clear that Jesus was raised in a devout Jewish family, then that is the context in which all passages regarding the life and teachings of Jesus must be read.

Once placed into the proper context, then a study of the teachings of Jesus will provide a better understanding of the core truths within the message of Jesus. This can most easily be seen through a study of a passage from the Gospel of Matthew:

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to anyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you (Matthew 5:38-42). Taken out of context, this passage “became a divine ultimatum to slaves and servants to accept flogging and blows obsequiously” (Wink, 2003, p. 3). The preconceived notion when reading this passage tends to be one of a call to accept punishment and act as a “passive Christian doormat” when faced with injustice (Wink, 2003, p. 9). When placed into proper context this passage takes on a whole new meaning.

One of the first steps in properly understanding this passage from Matthew is to make sure there is a clear understanding of the language being used. When the Bible was translated
from Greek to English, not every word kept the same connotation. In the original Greek in which the Gospel of Matthew was written, the phrase “Do not resist an evildoer” has a very different message (Wink, 2003, p. 9-11). A more appropriate translation for this phrase would be “Do not retaliate against violence with violence” (Wink, 2003, p. 11). Jesus follows this saying up with three examples that reinforce this notion of nonviolent resistance to evildoers. In the first example, Jesus says to turn the other cheek upon being struck. At first glance, this comes across as a passive response and a way of submitting further to an aggressor. However, in reality, turning the other cheek would strip the aggressor of the power they believe they have over the oppressed. By carefully paying attention to the details within the passage, it becomes obvious that the first strike Jesus refers to would be a right handed, backhand slap. That would be the only manner in which a person could strike the right cheek of a person while using their right hand. The thought of using one’s left hand was out of the question. The left hand was only used for unclean tasks and the use of the left, even to strike an inferior, would result in that person suffering days of exclusion from society for their actions. After the initial backhanded slap, the act of turning the other cheek would expose the oppressed person to only one other form physical attack, a forehand punch. Based on the society norms at this time, to punch someone with a fist means that the attacker views that person as an equal (Wink, 2003, p. 13-16). In this case, when placed into proper historical context, Jesus is teaching a group of oppressed people how to nonviolently resist their evildoers and demand that they be looked at and treat as equals.

Jesus continues with another example that when placed in context, gives more advice on nonviolent resistance. To fully understand this section of the passage, again, it must be read within the historical context in which these events would take place. The person being sued
would only own two articles of clothing, a cloak and a coat. When a person was in debt, they would be taken to court and sued for their coat. This was done as a sign of humiliation to the one being sued. When night time came, the prosecutor would then return the coat (in accordance with Jewish law), before suing them again the following morning. This was the process done to force the debtor into selling their property to cover their debts. Since land ownership was passed on from generation to generation, it was very rarely sold. Owning land was a sign of authority and power. Therefore, the prosecutor was systemically working towards removing any form of authority the debtor had by owning land, until they were forced to give up any ownership of their land. Once the oppressor succeeded in taking ownership of the land, they would then force the debtor to work in the field as well to pay off any remaining debt. Jesus’ response to this was to give up your cloak when you are sued for your cloak, leaving the debtor naked (Wink, 2003, p. 17-21). This is only place that understanding the cultural meaning of nakedness based on the time period is imperative to our understanding of this reading. “Nakedness was taboo in Judaism, and shame fell not on the naked party, but on the person viewing or causing one’s nakedness” (Wink, 2003, p. 20).

The third example given by Jesus deals with direct interactions with Roman soldiers. One way the Roman army constantly reminded the Jewish people of their inferiority, even in their own land, was that at any time, a soldier could force a Jewish citizen to carry their packs. These packs would typically weigh anywhere from 60 to 85 pounds. However, in an attempt to limit the anger and pushback from this law, it was also unlawful for a soldier to force a Jewish citizen to carry the pack farther than a mile. To track this, mile markers were set up along the highway so that a soldier knew when a mile had been covered. At the end of this mile, the act of
attempting to go a second mile would switch the role of power. The soldier would either have to beg and plead for their pack to be returned or face severe consequences based on military law (Wink, 2003, p. 21-26).

One thing that becomes clear when the teachings of Jesus are placed into proper historical context is that there is a very clear call to action. Anyone who is oppressed is called to “seize the moral initiative” and “find a creative alternative to violence” (Wink, 2003, p. 27). This was a message that Jesus not only preached but he also lived. Throughout the New Testament, there are countless stories of historical deeds referred to as acted parables (Capon, 2002, p. 427).

An acted parable “…is an episode in Jesus’ ministry in which his deeds rather than his words carry the freight of what he is trying to communicate (Capon, 2002, p. 427). During Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the crowds cheer and shout “Hosanna” while waving leafy palm branches in the air. All symbols for the royal entry of a king who has come to save them. However, unlike the warrior king the crowd had hoped for, one who would come to lead the people into battle to free them from their oppression, this king comes riding on a donkey. The symbolism of riding on a donkey, not only fulfills the prophecy found in the book of Zechariah, but also announces that the arriving king is a king of peace. Jesus not only preached a gospel of nonviolence and resistance, he lived out this message until his dying day (Capon, 2202, p. 430-434). As Dr. Walter Brueggemann points out repeatedly in his lecture, Jesus did not die give the world salvation; that was merely a byproduct. Jesus died because he stood up against a predatory system of economy and demanded justice (Brueggemann, 2016).

**Applying the Teachings of Jesus to Modern Day**
As it has been previously stated, the purpose of Christianity is to follow in the teachings and life of Jesus of Nazareth. This does not simply mean that reading scripture and studying the life of Jesus or his teachings makes you a Christian. This continues in the poor method in which the church has been reading the Bible for years. The act of reading the scripture with the idea that the text is meant to speak only to the soul for a better personal understanding of the Holy Spirit is no longer good enough (Goodenough, 1967, p. 245). This approach is sharply criticized by Glen H. Stassen, claiming that this approach “lacks concrete content” and even citing that the author of this study “…can find no real content in the gospel idea…” (Stassen, 2003, p. 136). To apply scripture to modern day life, there must be an appropriate “context within which the church has to read the Bible and try to practice the economic ethic that is commended in the text of the Gospel” (Brueggemann, 2016). By reviewing the teachings and life of Jesus and realizing the importance of historical accuracy and context when it comes to reading scripture, a new approach to understanding and applying these messages can be used to portray a more accurate view of what it means to live a life in a manner in which Jesus of Nazareth would agree.

Once this has been established, then an analysis of modern day problems can begin. Instead of seeking to find similar issues, it is important to seek the core truths. Once the focus of religion shifted to become a personal relationship, the focus become more about “an individualistic pursuit of success or emotional satisfaction that places very tenuous selves at the center of a meaningless world” (Dorrien, 1997, p. 366). A result of this approach to religion also began to affect people’s morality. These events combined to create an economic system not too different than the one that existed during the time of Jesus. According to Brueggemann, the core truth that has not changed from the time of Christ to today is that the economic systems in place
or economies of extraction. An economy of extraction is one in which the powerful people exploit the vulnerable people to achieve wealth (Brueggemann, 2016). By focusing on this core truth, it becomes evident of what the role of a Christian should be in today’s society.

In addition to an understanding of how the society of today is similar to that of the time of Jesus, there must be an understanding of the core truths taught by Jesus. Through his life, Jesus was known as a pacifist, one who would not respond in violence. Jesus practiced this method of nonviolence so much that “the exaggeration emphasizes nonresistance as a nonnegotiable for Jesus’s disciples” (Burge, 2012, p. 967). However, the nonresistance was only if to resistance meant to retaliate in violence. Nonviolence is very clearly a core truth of the teachings of Jesus but it would not be fair to stop at something as simple as nonviolence. As previously stated in the works of Walter Wink, Jesus was a proponent of nonviolent resistance. Countless times through the New Testament, Jesus preaches on finding creative solutions of resistance that do not involve violence or direct retaliation. However, Jesus did preach on nonviolently resisting evildoers. When this is taken into account, the sore truth then becomes nonviolent resistance to evil.

Jesus also preached a Gospel of love. In the New Testament alone, the word love appears 221 times. This may not sound like much given the size of the New Testament, when outside of articles and prepositions and other commonly used filler words, only Father, Lord, Jesus, Christ, Heaven, and Faith appear more (NRSV, 2315-2386). When asked what the most important rule of them all was, Jesus responds by giving a new commandment, saying to them:

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You
shall love your neighbor as yourself’ On these two commandments hang all the law and prophets (NRSV, 1780).

After hearing this passage, it becomes clear that love and compassion are both very core truths in the teachings of Jesus. Which comes as no surprise considering since these commandments are direct quotations from Deuteronomy (6:5) and Leviticus (19:18). Love and ‘compassion, like holiness, was firmly grounded in the Jewish tradition” (Borg, 1991, p. 13). Again, the fact that aspects of the Jewish faith have become core truths of the teachings of Jesus make complete since once his life is understood in proper context. After all of this, love, compassion, and nonviolent resistance to evil prevail as core truths of the teachings of Jesus.

Social Activism

In an attempt at painting a visual portrait of Jesus, Marcus Borg described Jesus as “a charismatic healer or ‘holy person’, a subversive sage who undermined conventional wisdom and taught an alternative wisdom, a social prophet, and an initiator of a movement…” (Borg, 1991, p.12). When we use these four lenses to look at Jesus, then he becomes more “political than we are accustomed to” (Borg, 1991). But, to disregard something that is new and different to a preconceived notion would go against the new appropriate manner in which the Bible should be read. Jesus was a political figure. There can be truth found in the Billy Graham approach to religion. Yes, if all Christians lived a life for Christ and in accordance with the teachings of love and compassion then the issues of society would disappear. However, evil still exists in the world today. The Christian response to evil based on the core truths of the teachings of Jesus would be to stand up against that evil. The only way for to restore a moral society and overcome an economic system of extraction “is to renew America’s morally generative communities of
memory, especially its religious and activist communities” (Dorrien, 1997, p. 367). Activism is at the core of the teachings of Jesus. Preaching a message of love that stands up against evil.

The core truths of the Bible are love, compassion, and a nonviolent resistance to evil with an obligation to stand against the oppressor in support of those being oppressed. Combine this with the core truth that an economy of extraction existed during the time of Jesus and still exists today. If Jesus gave his life to fight this type of economy and preached lessons on how to stand up for equality and justice, then it would be a very clear and obvious prediction to claim that Jesus would once again stand against the oppressors of today’s economy of extraction.

Once there is a realization that the economy today is the same system of extraction that existed during the time of Jesus, then it may be easier to apply the lessons from the New Testament to problems today. Combine this revelation with a more appropriate way of reading the Bible, then it becomes possible to “learn to read the Bible well, [and then] the connection to social justice is inescapable” (Breuggemann, 2016).

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I asked if Jesus ever preached or taught on abortion or same-sex marriage, and whether he would have been a proponent of social activism. The answer to the first two questions are no, Jesus did not speak on the topics of abortion or any of the issues facing the LGBT community today. However, his core truths are love and compassion. Therefore, when seeking answers to today’s problems using the core truths of the Bible, love has to be at the center of it all. To apply these truths to abortion means to love the baby and the mother and to handle the situation accordingly, in love to both. To love one and attack the other goes against the core truths of the Bible and are therefore not Christian. In regard to same-sex
relations and the LGBT community, a topic that Jesus does not discuss, it is very important to again use the core truths, love and compassion. When this is the approach taken in dealing with issues of today, it becomes clear that society does not handle these situations in a Christian manner. In any circumstance, if a person uses violence or aggression in the name of Christianity, then that person does not understand the true meaning of being a Christian. If Jesus would come back today, there is no doubt that he would be a very active, nonviolent, social justice warrior.

References


Borg, M. J. (2014). *Jesus and resistance to evil*. Lecture presented at Calvary Episcopal Church, Memphis, TN.


Stassen, G. H. (2003). It is time to take Jesus back: In celebration of the fiftieth anniversary