

If the teachings of Jesus were truly followed



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Everyone has an opinion when it comes to the “true gospel” or the “way of Jesus.” That’s obvious. There’s a long history of sectarian theologians and other revered authorities telling us what Jesus said and what he meant. Out of the literally thousands of branches splintered off the Christian Tree, there are hundreds who claim to be “true disciples of the “Way” who “know the mind of Christ.”

This may be a troubling thought, but as I see it, if the teachings of Jesus were authentically followed, there would be no Church as we know it, no Bible as we know it, no Christianity or theology as we know it. These may sound like radical statements, but I see no serious way around it: we have Churchianity and a spiritualized Jesus, which have little or

nothing to do with the ethical teachings of the one known as Jesus of Nazareth. He is spiritually worshipped, but not seriously followed.

Here’s what I mean. Doesn’t it make more sense to live a life guided, not by scripture verses, sermons or creeds set in stone, but guided by a living practice of love, compassion and justice? Is it too difficult to bear in mind and take to heart a transformation of faith and belief into flesh and blood practice, as Jesus himself did?

A reader claimed I was discouraging people from reading the Bible (which I am not). They said I’m “robbing” people of any comfort or peace they may find in the book (I’m unsure how being critical of fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible is taking anything from anyone). I felt the need to respond, especially after hearing the reader’s criticism of people who “simply” find solace by walking in nature, or “simply” show kindness; in their mind, this is not “pleasing God.” What do you say to that? It seems to me, if a person seriously reads the “good news” and comes away defensive and

judgmental, they may have missed a central point of religious teachings.

I often wonder why we need so many reminders to do good, to be good. Is it because we simply have poor memories or is it possible we don’t care? Centuries before his time, Jesus’ own Hebrew Bible included the ethical text: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19). Over 500 years before Jesus, another teacher in a land far from Palestine, said: “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you” (Master Kung — Confucius — Analects 12:2, 15:23, 5:11. Unlike the Gospels, this instruction is repeated several times, then expanded on: “If we are not able to serve others, how can we serve spiritual beings?” 11:11). To be a complete human being, according to the Chinese philosopher, one has to practice radical “reciprocity” — acting toward others with virtuous humanity and love.

Several passages in the Qur’an instruct believers not only to believe, but to act with intentional compassion. “Those who believe and do good works, [Allah] shall house in lofty dwellings of

the Garden underneath which rivers flow” (Surah 29:58). While, like other scriptures, the Qur’an was written for one community of believers, the instruction is clear: “Give to the kinsman his due, and to the needy, and to the traveller. That is best for those who seek the face of Allah.” (Surah 30:38).

The Hindu Bhagavad Gita (“Song of the Lord”) states that the one who seeks wisdom will “learn that by humble reverence, by inquiry, and by service” (4:34). Gautama Buddha taught the path beyond suffering leads through “right actions” and to “do no hurt or harm” (“Discourses of the Buddha”). And, right to the point here, Buddha says: “Even if a person recites a large number of scriptural texts but...does not act accordingly...they have no share in the religious life” (“Dhammapada” 1:19).

Each tradition has a built-in reminder to the forgetful disciple: scriptures, preaching, proud claims of faith and belief, mean very little if you don’t practice

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the basics.

Unfortunately, we often hear a message in sacred scriptures: Do good, for a good reward; treat others well, so you will be blessed; as well as treat others badly, and you will be badly punished. Like faith, there is reward or punishment for believing correctly or not. If we think of this in the context of a truly loving family, it's hard to see how threats

are a positive motivation for doing the right things. "Obey or else" is similar to "Believe or else." There can be consequences for children not obeying parents, but the healthiest approach is to teach a child the benefits of doing good, without holding a stick over their head.

Believing is not following.

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