

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT OF ALL

If you wanna be Christian, that's cool, but you should follow what Jesus taught instead of how he got killed. Focusing on how he got killed is what people did in the Dark Ages, and it ends up with really bad results.

—*Stan Marsh*, *South Park*

My parents brought me up to hate President Richard Milhous Nixon. Now I don't mean a legitimate dislike over the Nixon administration's involvement in Vietnam or an understandable disgust that Tricky Dick's personal paranoia led to Watergate. Rather, I was taught pure, unadulterated hatred for a man that I later learned was a practicing Quaker—a fellow Christian, if you will. Even though my late father, the Rev. Dr. Karl Claudius Garrison Jr., was a self-proclaimed progressive priest and professor, his group of peaceful quasi-religious hippies taught me to love everyone. Except, of course, for the Establishment, da man, and of course, Republicans.

So as a young adult, I did what anyone does when raised by left-wing extremists—I joined an adult Campus Crusade Bible study and became a Young Republican. These religious Republicans stood ready to embrace me, provided I was willing to join them in chanting “Demonic Democrats” and other similar slogans. My tenure with these two groups was short-lived after I professed my abject horror at the rise of the Moral Majority and questioned whether Reagan's trickle-down economics was simply a polite euphemism for whizzing on the poor. Clearly, I wasn't their kind of true red, white, and blue believer. I was an improper Christian.

Where Is the Love?

John Whitehead of the Rutherford Institute notes, “Christ’s message of love does not square with much of what we hear coming from certain quarters of modern evangelism—a religion steeped in an ‘us versus them’ mentality.” What happened to the concept of the Christian community as a unified body of believers? Author and pastor Brian McLaren states, “The name of Jesus, whose life and message resonated with acceptance, welcome, and inclusion, has too often become a symbol of elitism, exclusion, and aggression. This pains me, and I imagine it pains Jesus too, who was himself Jewish and knew what it felt like to be treated with disdain.”

As McLaren points out, this hatred of the other is nothing new. At the time of Jesus’ birth, the Samaritans and the Jews had been at each other’s throats for literally hundreds of years. At the time when Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:25–37), the concept of a Samaritan coming to the rescue of a Jew would have been considered just as incongruous as if, say,

Man is the only religious animal
... that loves his neighbor as
himself, and cuts his throat if
his theology isn’t straight.

—Mark Twain, *Letters from
the Earth*

a Focus on the Family follower
marched in the New York City
LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and
Transgender) Pride Parade today.
But as the parable made clear, the
Samaritan was considered the Jew-
ish man’s “neighbor.” By implica-
tion, that means the definition of

“neighbor” has to be expanded to include all of God’s children, including those of different social classes, races, creeds, and even political affiliations.

When Jesus commanded His followers to “go and do likewise” by following the example of the Good Samaritan, he challenged the early church to look beyond its comfort zone. His disciples were required to obey the Greatest Commandment by showing His love and kindness to *all* people, because everyone was their “neighbor” (see Matthew 22:37–40 and Mark 12:28–31). The early Christian

church cut across the various hierarchical lines that divided people. It did not seek to dominate the political establishment or maintain the status quo; rather its goal was to spread the universal love of Christ. In doing that, it transformed the world.

Pat Preaches

Unfortunately, the words of the Greatest Commandment have been repeated ad nauseam to the point where the radical message of Christ has been lost in our “yeah, right” cynical culture. Sometimes this cynicism is warranted. For instance, let’s take a look at the pronouncements of televangelist Pat Robertson. In his teaching on the Greatest Commandment, Robertson proclaims that “a person must dedicate the totality of his being to a self-giving love for God. Every aspect of his nature must focus on loving God.”

Say what? I mean, is this the same Pat Robertson who in August 2005 issued a Christian fatwa against a democratically elected world leader? I would challenge anyone to tell me what is “loving” about declaring to a worldwide televised audience that “if [Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez] thinks we’re trying to assassinate him, I think we really ought to go ahead and do it.” Robertson later apologized, but halfheartedly. He tried to weasel out of it by claiming that he didn’t really say we should assassinate him but that our “special forces should take him out.” Millions of viewers who saw the show or a tape of that segment know exactly what he said—that it would be cheaper to assassinate Chavez than to wage a costly war against him. But no matter how you slice this baloney, God makes it pretty clear that vengeance is his business and not ours (see Romans 12:19–21). In a few brief moments, Robertson managed to flush over two thousand years of Judeo-Christian teachings down the toilet.

As I witnessed that notorious segment on *The 700 Club*, my “judge that you not be judged” button got jammed. I’m trying to fix it, but it keeps short-circuiting on me. Maybe I’m not being Christ-like, but I get pretty ticked when a brother in Christ suggests that

it's OK to kill people who cause us political grief. Then again, this is the same dude that made this comment: "If I could just get a nuclear device inside Foggy Bottom [meaning the State Department], I think that's the answer." Clearly, his most recent assassination comment wasn't the first time he has suggested that murder could represent a viable solution, even if he meant it in jest.

Let's see how Pat Robertson demonstrates his love for his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. According to Pat, "You say you're supposed to be nice to Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Methodists. . . . Nonsense. I don't have to be nice to the spirit of the Antichrist."

There are those who would disagree with Robertson's picks for who embodies the spirit of the Antichrist. Fellow televangelist Robert Tilton declared Ole Anthony, founder of Trinity Foundation, to be the Antichrist. Then you have the Sex Pistols, who state that they are an Antichrist, as does "Antichrist Superstar" Marilyn Manson and lots of other wannabe satanist rockers. Also, just about every world leader who opposes the United States tends to get tagged "the Antichrist." Seems to me that certain religious leaders might be using this term a bit too loosely. I mean, some people who have been called the Antichrist, like Hitler and Saddam Hussein, are truly evil, but we're talking here about the epitome of evil, the baddest of the bad. When it comes to discerning just who is going to duke it out with Christ when the Second Coming hits, it seems to me it would help if we were all on the same page.

But guys like Pat never seem to let facts get in the way of a good story. For instance, how many people know that Robertson ain't a reverend? He likes to put on the posture of being a preacher, but he gave up his ordination as a Baptist minister in 1988 when he decided to run for president. I can see where people would still make the honest mistake and call him "Reverend Robertson." As host of *The 700 Club*, he prays for healing (provided your faith overrides your sense of reason and you funnel your fortunes into his pocket). And even though he's a layman, he preaches his interpretation of the Word of God to an average of one million American

viewers daily. Some viewers, like me, watch Pat & Co. for comic relief and research purposes, but many people take this man's ramblings seriously or else he wouldn't be so filthy rich.

Though Robertson seems to be cuckoo for Christ, even he acknowledges that there are consequences to not following Jesus' teachings. He states, "A person would break the great commandment if his spirit was partially centered on making money to the exclusion of God."

Now, let's just see how well Pat puts this teaching into practice. Although I can never claim to know what's in someone's heart, it seems to me, at least on paper,

that Robertson really, really likes making money. Lots of money. According to British journalist Greg Palast, Pat has a net worth estimated at between \$200 million and \$1 billion, a fortune he amassed through moneymaking

If we were really biblical, our agenda would cut sharply across the issues.

—Ron Sider, president,
Evangelicals for
Social Action

ventures including African gold and diamond mines, the Kalo-Vita vitamin pyramid scheme, the Bank of Scotland, the Family Channel, and the Ice Capades, as well as Age-Defying shakes, antioxidants, and protein pancakes. So is Pat guilty of not practicing what he preaches? Anyone who tunes in to more than a minute of *The 700 Club* can figure out pretty quickly that Pat's application of the Greatest Commandment does not extend to those godless heathen Democrats, feminists, and other political infidels that dare to thwart what *Fortune* magazine terms his "quest for eternal life." Lest you think I am exaggerating here, check out the dude's 1992 best-selling book *The New World Order* for a complete description of what the world would be like if Robertson ruled it.

As I've just noted, Pat's a good talker, but it's no wonder we're in such a mess—while guys like him are PR geniuses when it comes to talking the talk, they appear to be walking away from Christ's teachings.

Putting Principles into Practice?

The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) created a position paper, “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” to explore the religious-political mess we’re in these days. This document was created by two dozen scholars who bridged the spectrum of conservative to liberal evangelical thought encompassed by the organization’s forty-five thousand churches, which represent fifty-two denominations. Among the signers of this document we find such luminaries as James Dobson, chairman of Focus on the Family; Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention; Charles Colson, president of the Prison Fellowship ministry; and Rick Warren (the *Purpose Driven Life* dude). We’re talking about the big guns here.

According to this document, “We will differ with other Christians and with non-Christians over the best policies. Thus we must practice humility and cooperation to achieve modest and attainable goals for the good of society. We must take care to employ the language of civility and to avoid denigrating those with whom we disagree.” I dunno about you, but I’m not seeing too much coming from Colorado Springs, home of Focus on the Family Ministries, that strikes me as humble and civil. If you know what I mean—and I think you do.

Ted Haggard, founder and pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs and president of both the NAE and the World Prayer Team, talks once a week to President Bush. If Ted, as NAE president, by any chance emphasizes to the president the importance of putting these principles into practice, it doesn’t exactly show; “cooperation” isn’t the word that comes to mind to describe the Bushies’ treatment toward those with whom they disagree. Is George W. Bush ignoring Ted Haggard’s pastoral guidance when it comes to those “difficult” parts of the Greatest Commandment? In his case, that means the need to extend Christ’s love all of humanity, including those pesky liberal Democrats.

broadcasting the good news?

As a working journalist, I often hear about interfaith peace walks, prayer services, community service days, and other gatherings that are designed as an opportunity for genuine fellowship, but these events seldom, if ever, get any media attention. Yes, having Jews, Christians, and Muslims holding hands together in solidarity isn't as titillating as watching Christians cat-fighting *Crossfire*-style, spotting a disgraced televangelist or a pedophile priest doing a perv walk, or witnessing footage of a Jewish community center that's been defaced with swastikas. But why is there this overexposure on the underbelly of the faith community? What if the glare of the media spotlight were refocused to show the Good News at least every once in a while?

(By the way, I admit that in my work for *The Wittenburg Door*, I definitely slam those who follow their own self-interests rather than following the commandments of Christ, but if you read my interviews, you'll see that I do profile those that walk the walk as well. So I try to be a bit balanced here. But I confess that this can be a challenge, mainly because the bad stuff is just so darn juicy. Also, most church-related press material puts me to sleep before I finish reading it.)

I wonder what our nation's capital would be like if every politician who accepted a campaign contribution from one of the 110 million or so Americans who support the NAE decided to follow the principles advocated in this document. Imagine what would happen if they all stop bickering about displaying the Ten Commandments and focused instead on living out the Greatest Commandment.

Conversely, many progressives continue my late father's legacy of loving all humanity except when it comes to their conservative brothers and sisters in Christ. Take, for example, the New York Open Center, an organization that describes itself as New York City's leading center for holistic learning and culture. It joined forces with the National Council of Churches of Christ USA, People for the American Way, the *Village Voice*, *The Nation*, and Americans United

for Separation of Church and State to sponsor a post-2004 election conference titled “Examining the Real Agenda of the Religious Far Right.” This daylong event included seminars with topics like “Christian Jihad” and “Is an Unholy American Theocracy Here?” Hmmm . . . methinks they are open more to ridicule than to serious debate, since this warlike language makes me wonder just who is included in their seemingly “open” society. If this group practiced true openness by engaging in constructive dialogue with its perceived “enemy” about Jesus’ teachings on specific social issues instead of engaging in name-calling, it might just get somewhere.

According to its brochure, the Faith and Politics Institute provides Congress with opportunities for moral reflection and spiritual community, drawing universal wisdom from a range of religious traditions. Through its conferences, seminars, and retreats, this institute strives to strengthen political leadership that contributes to healing the wounds that divide the nation and the world. This effort has attracted the attention of leaders including Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, a Republican from Tennessee and a medical doctor; the internationally renowned Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn; Anglican Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane of South Africa; and House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi of California.

I, for one, am encouraged by the sight of religious leaders and political luminaries lending their support to an interfaith movement that encourages members of Congress to pray and listen to one another. But frankly, based on what I’ve witnessed on Capitol Hill, I’m wondering just how many congressmen and staff members who participate in these programs actually implement these principles. These days, I feel like I’m witnessing a full-scale war of words as Christians on both sides of the political spectrum blast their opponents to bits instead of attempting to come together in prayer as fellow believers asking for God’s guidance. The Dalai Lama offers these words of wisdom: “Unfortunately, love and compassion have been omitted from too many spheres of social interactions for too

long. Usually confined to family and home, their practice in public life is considered impractical, even naïve. This is tragic.”

Radical Love in Action

Martin Luther King Jr. keenly observed that the very center of Jesus’ teachings focused on the need to love one’s enemy. “Hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe,” he said, adding that somebody must have enough religion and morality to cut off this hatred and inject that strong and powerful element of love within the very structure of the universe. As Candace Chellew-Hodge, founder of *Whosoever*, an online magazine for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Christians, points out, “The political implications of this message are enormous. If the hearts and minds of the people are changed and they demand that people love their neighbor as they love themselves and they begin to design society in that manner, then naturally their government will change.”

During Habitat for Humanity’s 2000 Jimmy Carter Work Project held in New York City, I saw this love in action as former President Jimmy Carter and New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani proved that at least for a moment, a Southern Baptist and a Roman Catholic from opposing political parties could work together toward the common goal of providing affordable housing. Throughout this week’s festivities, I experienced a bit of the kingdom here on earth as people of all faiths from across the country came together to help families achieve the dream of home ownership.

As Christians, we are brothers and sisters in Christ, and that means we’re a family. In all but the

We work side by side with poor families who will be able to own the houses because Habitat follows the biblical prohibition against charging interest. This has been an enjoyable and heartwarming experience for us and many others to put our religious faith into practice, and it demonstrates vividly the importance and difficulty of reaching out to needy people.

—Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values*

Unless you know how to love your neighbor, you cannot love God. Before placing an offering on the altar of God, you have to reconcile with your neighbor, because reconciling with your neighbor is to reconcile with God.

—Thich Nhat Hahn, *Taming the Tiger Within*

most dysfunctional of families, there is some degree of love extended toward others in the family, even though you may hate their guts at any given moment. Heck, while I seriously doubt that Dick Cheney will ever don a rainbow-colored Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG) T-shirt, unlike some conservatives who shun their homo-

sexual children, he has made it clear that he loves his lesbian daughter, though he disapproves of her lifestyle.

If you claim to be a Christian, you must love even those whose political views you may despise, for they too are children of God and part of the Christian family. That means no hurling nasty epithets toward those with whom you disagree, even if your comments contain a grain of truth.

Loving your neighbor doesn't mean you should turn a blind eye to your neighbor's behavior. Actions like beating the bejeezus out of POWs, depriving God's children of food and shelter, or telling Mother Earth to go take a hike clearly go against Gospel teachings. By all means, examine the policies advanced by politicians who claim to be speaking for Christ to see if their pronouncements reflect the Gospel Truth or the whims of those who are bankrolling their campaigns. But when you preach against ungodly behavior, pray about how to frame the discussion, so you are honing in on the policy and not the person. Disagree with what they say but continue to love them as brothers and sisters in Christ. It's that hate-the-sin-but-love-the-sinner business. Deal with it.

As a religious satirist, I have major problems trying to implement this commandment; I know from firsthand experience how difficult it can be to put Christ's radical love into daily practice. It seems next to impossible, but Jesus considered it our number one priority. That's why they call it the Greatest Commandment.