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The Libertarian Jesus

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By Michael Gerson
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Compassionate conservatism began with some questions: Is it possible to apply conservative and free-market ideas -- school vouchers, the promotion of community and faith-based institutions, the encouragement of wealth-building and social mobility -- to the task of helping marginalized Americans? In the wake of liberal failures, do conservatives offer any hope to addicts and the homeless, to disadvantaged children in need of mentors and adequate education, to people living among the broken glass of durable poverty?

This project found conservative champions: [Jack Kemp](#), Dan Coats, Steve Goldsmith, [George W. Bush](#).

But compassionate conservatism has come under criticism for a variety of reasons. For some, it is fundamentally at odds with fiscal conservatism -- no social priority is deemed more urgent than balancing the budget. For others, it is a violation of their vision of limited government -- the state's only valid purpose is to uphold markets and protect individual liberty. But by drawing these limits so narrowly, such critics would relegate conservatism to the realm of rejected ideologies: untainted, uncomplicated and ignored. And by leaving great social needs unmet, they would grant liberalism an open field and invite genuine statism.

Now comes another charge -- that compassionate conservatism is actually opposed by the Bible. "Common sense and the Scriptures," argues Sen. [Tom Coburn](#), "show that true giving and compassion require sacrifice by the giver. This is why Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell his possessions, not his neighbor's possessions. Spending other people's money is not compassionate."

It is not my purpose to pick on the senator from Oklahoma (once again); he is a man of principle. And he is merely restating a fairly common view: that compassion is a private virtue, not a public one, and that religious conscience concerns the former and not the latter.

But this is a theological assertion, not a political one. And as theology, it is flawed.

It is true that Jesus was not a political activist; he joined no party and issued no Contract With the Roman Empire. But it is a stretch to interpret his personal challenge to the rich young ruler as a biblical foundation for libertarianism.

The Jewish tradition in which Jesus lived and taught demanded that just rulers make a minimal provision for the poor, including no-interest loans and the distribution of agricultural commodities. (Look it up: Exodus 22:25-27 and Deuteronomy 24:19-21.) The apostle Paul held a high view of government's role in promoting justice and urged the willing payment of taxes -- a biblical demand more severe, for some of us, than all those sexual prohibitions. And Jesus's followers, fanning out along Roman roads, eventually expressed strong views on slavery, infanticide and the debasement of women -- political views that followed naturally from their belief in a radical equality before God.

The great evangelical reformers of the 18th and 19th centuries -- from John Wesley to [William Wilberforce](#) to Lord Shaftesbury -- certainly believed that the teachings of Jesus had implications for enslaved Africans and children toiling in mills. Shaftesbury, a lifelong Tory, focused in Parliament on the plight of the mentally ill, on young chimney sweeps who often died of testicular cancer, on the 30,000 homeless children of Dickensian London. One biographer wrote of Shaftesbury: "No man has in fact ever done more to lessen the extent of human misery or to add to the sum total of human happiness."

This, one assumes, is a historical judgment a conservative politician would covet.

The argument that government is often a flawed instrument to improve social conditions has merit. There are limits to take-a-number-and-wait bureaucratic compassion -- and tremendous advantages to the commitment and sacrificial love of volunteers. Which is precisely why compassionate conservatism looks first to the expansion of private, community responses to poverty and need.

But the scale of these needs is sometimes overwhelming. Private compassion cannot replace [Medicaid](#) or provide AIDS drugs to millions of people in Africa for the rest of their lives. In these cases, a role for government is necessary and compassionate -- the expression of conservative commitments to the general welfare and the value of every human life.

For millennia, artists, thinkers and politicians have shaped their image of Jesus, often into a mirror image of themselves. But the goal of Christianity is to allow Him to shape us, not the other way around. And just as Jesus the leftist revolutionary is a distortion, so is Jesus the libertarian.

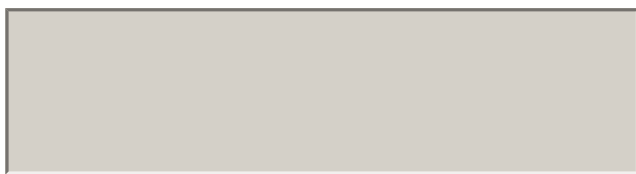
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