

glendalenewspress.com/news/opinion/tn-vsl-0331-intheory,0,6763034.story

Glendale News Press

In Theory: Jesus, the ultimate fighting champion

12:54 PM PDT, March 30, 2011

Q. A growing number of evangelical churches are embracing Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) as a way of attracting and converting young men. Pastors of these churches say that they're using MMA not only to toughen up the message of Christ, but also to combat their fear that churches have become too feminized, with too much emphasis on kindness and compassion and not enough on responsibility and strength.

Some of the churches not only hold gatherings to watch televised MMA fights and give lectures using the bouts to explain Christ's battle for his beliefs, they also host fight nights between members of their congregations and claim the mix of faith and fighting is intended to promote Christian values. Brandon Beals, the lead pastor of Canyon Creek Church near Seattle, said, "Compassion and love - we agree with all that stuff, too. But what led me to find Christ was that Jesus was a fighter." FightPastor.com offers Warrior Camps to "to prepare mature Christians to lead fearless, courageous, and bold lives," and lists one of its aims as "we want to make Jesus look good."

This mix of machismo and faith has come in for some criticism, with one pastor saying, "I don't live for the Jesus who eats red meat, drinks beer and beats on other men," and adds, "[w]hat I have a problem with is. . . we somehow speak with great conviction that Jesus would have endorsed MMA." Robert Brady, of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, says that the emphasis on fighting "so easily takes away from the real focus of the church, which is the Gospel."

Is combining a violent sport with Christ's message the best way to spread the word? And does Christ really need to be "toughened up"?

Answer:

Please excuse me if I see the use of Mixed Martial Arts as a way to get men into evangelical churches as a marketing tool, not a theologically grounded message. Jesus was certainly a fighter for the rights of those who were marginalized, but not in the physical sense.

The only example we have in the Bible of Jesus using physical force was when he was reported to have overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. In fact, many did not join the early Christian movement because they were hoping for a soldier to fight for them against the Romans and Jesus was not that person.

Certainly Christian churches can encourage any number of activities to promote their congregations, but using a violent sport as an example of Jesus' message is, at best, a stretch and, at worst, a sacrilege. I understand the desire to bring young men, a largely absent demographic, into Christian churches. But what they do not need is more misogynists of a bygone era. Compassion is not just a feminine trait, and inequality of women and men is an issue that can no longer be supported by thinking people. Patriarchy is not a Christian virtue.

My hope would be that these churches would try to find ways to increase membership that do not involve men beating each other up. Maybe they could encourage men to be both powerful and compassionate and women to share in the management of the family and the church. Just because some men would like to make Jesus tougher does not make it true. Jesus' ministry has a great many important messages, but violence is not one of them.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

As an ordained minister and spiritual leader, I can certainly understand the challenge of creating a message that is appealing to potential new congregants, both young men and young women.

However, the message that Unity interprets from Jesus' ministry has very little to do with outer, physical actions but everything to do with his inner message about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is a spiritual message that is best taught through spiritual principles, such as inner peace, being poised and balanced and being one with divine wisdom and love.

When I think of our Elder Brother as a “warrior,” I consider his spiritual qualities of passion, courage, faith and strength. He was able to do all things through his belief in God as his source (father). He knew God as the One Power and One Presence (Our Father) and through his conscious connection with his father, he overcame every form of limitation, even physical death.

The Rev. Jeri Linn

Unity Church of the Valley

La Crescenta

For years, sports-based outreaches have been effective in reaching out to the lost and building fellowship among believers. It's something fun and interesting to do together to build relationships and to establish credibility upon which we can share the good news about Jesus Christ. That's assuming the activity isn't inherently evil.

Though I wouldn't say MMA outreaches are wrong, I'd be concerned that such fighting would create hostility among participants. Of course, that could happen with any other sport as well. Still, an MMA ministry might be the best way to reach some people, so it's probably just as effective as any other method of ministry.

Jesus doesn't need to be “toughened up.” The Bible is a record of his fearless faithfulness to the father. Jesus fasted for 40 days. He kept preaching publicly, even after the religious leaders plotted to kill him. He healed people on the sabbath in the presence of those he knew intended to use his kind act against him.

Jesus stood silent during three bogus trials and endured flogging, beatings and the torturous horrors of the crucifixion. He did all of these things in obedience to the father and for the salvation of all who receive him. We “make Jesus look good” by being honest about what he did for us, by living our faith out publicly in a world that is hostile to him and by obeying his commandment to love God with all of our hearts and to love others as we love ourselves. And if you think that doesn't take guts, just try it.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

I think it's genius. The only thing I wouldn't do is try so hard to link it all to Christ's teachings. Why not just let

it be a fellowship thing, one of the few things the church offers specifically for men? To get and keep men in church is ministry enough; do your teaching on Sundays, and let them alone on fight nights.

Shoot, we've taken away their exclusive control of the priesthood, the money and the governing boards of the church; why not at least let them keep the fighting?

I wonder aloud sometimes about why men have disappeared from the church, why church has become so predominantly female. My husband answers, "Gee, I don't know; but it might have something to do with the flowers and candles and soft music and talking about feelings?" He makes a fair point.

And, I am not at all against having sweaty men in gym shorts dancing around the church basement for an evening.

I say, let 'em brawl. Go, men, go!

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George's Episcopal Church

La Cañada

This is just an outreach method. We develop and change these as trends come and go. They are good from the standpoint that they reach certain people in that specific season, with that particular method. Many other techniques will work at that time as well.

However, I do know God to be creative. He has brought so many people to him through us, his disciples. Our uniqueness and our passions lead us to create programs and methods that flow from who we are. As long as we adhere to Biblical principles, there can be rich fruit from doing a wide variety of creative things to reach people for Christ.

When I was a youth pastor, God used my abilities and creativity to bring in teens from high school by developing a talented worship band. Young people with musical ability came in and I trained them up. These kids gave their hearts to God and learned how to witness to others. This is what the Great Commission is all about.

As far as the Gospel being too much grace and compassion, I think it is hogwash. I also think it may not be accurate to say Jesus would not approve of MMA. We all just stay in our corners and enjoy the giftedness of others. Some may lean more toward compassion, others more toward Christ as a fighter. It doesn't matter unless something is theologically inaccurate or there is no fruit being born.

My simple belief is that we all need to take the Gospel as a whole into context then reach out and do our part, not saying our way is better and not criticizing each others' methods.

The Rev. Kimberlie Zakarian, LMFT

Montrose

As a Jewish rabbi, I am obviously not an authority on Christianity. Nevertheless, since I am a religious leader, I

will take the liberty of commenting on this interesting trend and sharing my thoughts.

Regular readers of this column know that I generally support innovative approaches to attract people to worship services and spread religious knowledge. In that context, I feel that offering traditional martial arts lessons or self-defense seminars as a way to bring people through the doors of our houses of worship — or even simply as a community service — is an idea with some potential. It's good practice to have adults, and even children, learn various fighting methods in order to protect themselves and prevent personal harm.

It is also a great way to exercise (which would certainly benefit our statistically overweight population), and many participants boost their self-discipline and powers of concentration.

However, today's brutal spectacle of mixed martial arts (also known as cage fighting) is very different from traditional forms of karate or judo; by combining elements of kickboxing, wrestling and other physical combat, this sport seems to maximize bloody violence.

Let's face it: These fighting shows represent human nature at its most savage. Pitting two highly-trained human beings against each other and watching them inflict physical harm brings to mind gladiators and the dreadful, sub-human sport they practiced in the Roman arena. This is no way to bring people closer to God.

I feel that the message coming from the churches that embrace mixed martial arts and use it to project a belligerent combination of "faith and fighting" is detrimental to the real meaning of spirituality. Frankly, I can think of 101 better ways to engage our youth and interest them in religion.

I fail to see the wisdom in turning to such a base sport as cage fighting to attract new congregants. On the contrary, I believe that an aggressive approach to religion can be damaging in the long term and may even alienate many people who need to be brought in.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center

As one of those wimpy, kind and compassionate feminized pastors, I put this question out to the church guys to get a fuller response. I got all kinds of answers. So here is the not-quite-cohesive view from Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church:

In one form or another, this idea of males fighting in a Christian context has been around for ages. The Salvation Army, for example, continues to run boxing clubs around the country. These give boys and young men a place to test and use strength and skill, while also learning discipline around when and how to use it. Some boys have fathers who will tussle safely with them — they can test their limits and know that their father will never let it go too far. Some boys don't have that, and these clubs and coaches offer this very important part of growing up.

I, and some of the guys, question whether that is what is happening in an alleged Christian MMA environment. We get the part where a cool happening attracts guys and creates an opportunity to share the gospel; but we share a concern that the message and methods of Jesus have been tweaked beyond recognition into justification for violence without boundaries. New bumper sticker ideas included:

"I bleed for Jesus — But the other guy bleeds more!"

"My family visited church —and all I got was this bloody nose."

We agreed that Jesus does not need toughening up, but that his followers need to be toughened up in the areas where Jesus actually excelled. As a leader, he gathered a team of young men and trained them to articulate a new vision for religion, politics and economics. He showed them how to build a faith-based movement for change by working as a team and raising up new leaders as they went. He demonstrated inner strength and courage by never giving into corrupt authority and always standing up for truth — even when that led to death. That's tough enough for us.

The Rev. Paige Eaves

Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church

No, Christ doesn't need to be toughened up! Anyone who would let himself get crucified and then say, "Father, forgive them," is tough enough already. Really, what we all need to do is redefine just what "being tough" means.

I liked John Wayne's movies, but the Jesus type of toughness is not the same as the John Wayne type. We all like it in a movie when the bad guy gets what's coming to him, and I suppose we all laughed at Clint Eastwood's line in one of the "Dirty Harry" movies, when he says to some dirtbag, "Go ahead, make my day!" But those raw emotions that we all feel come from our "darker" sides, and I for one can't imagine Jesus delivering a line like Clint's.

Again, we need to redefine what we mean by "being tough." I'm sorry, macho American males, but I'm one who believes that anyone who would follow Jesus needs to leave his "kick-butt" feelings behind. And something else: I'm as interested in growing the church as the next person — but a church full of macho guys isn't worth the trashing of the gospel message.

Read again the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, and pay special attention to verses 39-42. Here is the "turn the other cheek" suggestion by Jesus, plus the idea of giving up not only one's coat but one's cloak as well. Jesus is also quoted there, saying to give to everyone who begs from you, and we're told not to refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. These are the Master's Martial Arts, and they are more concerned with giving than with striking.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

As a middle-school kid, one of my favorite TV shows was "Kung Fu." David Carradine played a half-Chinese religious monk that wandered the American Wild West saving innocent settlers and defending himself in every episode from ornery hombres.

He walked about trying to live peacefully, but the six-gun world of stagecoach robberies and lynch-mob law perpetually intervened. Because of his monastic martial arts training, he overcame the bad guys, righted wrongs and ended every episode walking off into the sunset. Though the character didn't represent my faith, I still thought it was a good model that could translate.

Helpless people are just that, helpless. Trained people are not, and trained Christians can be a force for good. It may be that for too long Jesus has been presented as rather effeminate, a person who couldn't hurt a fly, who

was primarily a lap for children and who walked around giving everyone the peace sign.

We forget that he was a leader among men, that he could walk on water, command the elements, endure the cross and, with a word, cause an entire military squad to fall on their tunic'd backsides (John 18:6).

I have no problem with Christians studying martial arts to both ensure peace and reinforce the masculine bond it engenders. I have studied several styles myself, and my high school-aged son currently holds a few belt-ranks at Sunland Martial Arts, where he is currently learning Tae Kwon Do. They cut me some financial slack there for being a Christian minister, and for that I thank them very much.

I do have personal qualms with the type of Ultimate Fighting Competition that can leave participants with broken bones and such. It makes sense to have those after life-and-death combat, but it seems a hefty price for sport. I don't get the fun in that, but apparently others do. The Bible says, "whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1Co 10:31), and if men can embrace a tough sport with a strengthened faith, then God bless 'em.

The Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church

Mixed martial arts as part of a religious mission seems absurd to me.

Further, disparaging a belief system centered on love and compassion as "feminized" (and remind me, why is that a bad thing?) offends even me, with my squishy humanist atheist views.

OK, some young men like living and watching risk. So take them on outings to watch other guys hurt each other or sponsor/view fights at church. If you see no better, more effective way to appeal to them by more civilized means, that is not my call. But don't claim such violence is in line with Christ's teachings.

Want to display responsibility and strength? Tackle a fully-loaded diaper with elan. Be a loving, savvy Dad to an inexplicably, inconsolably weeping infant in the middle of the night for the umpteenth night in a row. Get rid of angry wasps under the porch. Earn a living day after day while doing your share at home, etc. This is just a sampling of what manly men all across the belief spectrum do routinely.

Anyway, what's so manly (or trendy) about mixed martial arts? Throw in hair-pulling and it sounds like standard dispute resolution for my sisters and me, ca. 1960.

Roberta Medford

Atheist

Montrose