

The Kirk assassination and the scandal of enemy love

The kind of love Jesus taught may not be popular. But the alternative has already shown its rotten fruit.

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September 12, 2025

photo of biblical "Love your enemies" passage

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News of Charlie Kirk's death had not even reached the internet when the celebration began. He spent his life defending right-wing ideology; he helped Trump get elected, twice; he attacked everything from gun control to LGBTQ rights. Didn't he deserve it? Across the darkened halls of social media, from TikTok to Twitter, left-leaning posters gleefully made jokes and posted memes the way they would for any other pop culture event. Along with the jokes there were the typical scolds and counter-scolds, debates over decorum and speaking ill of the dead, punchy tweets like "We cannot have empathy for White supremacists," and millions of Americans united only in their anger.

It would be shocking were it not so familiar. Political violence in the past decade has followed the same pattern with alarming regularity, as if scripted beat for beat: someone is shot (it could be a liberal figure or a conservative one), some make appeals for turning down the temperature, others redirect blame, people online celebrate or mourn, rinse and repeat, ad infinitum.

The waves of violence and celebration cut against the heart of Christian teaching—Jesus famously taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us—but even some left-leaning Christians celebrated Kirk's death, just as they did the death of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson in December. In the age of assassinations and the social media mob, enemy love is as big a scandal as ever.

What is it about enemy love that seems so impossible, so naive, despite being a plain commandment of Jesus? Look at the social media tides, and a common pattern emerges: a special mix of pleasure, anger, and hurt that feeds on itself. Schadenfreude is sweet and always has been, and for many people the instinctual first reaction to hearing news like Kirk's death is joy. In its own right, that first surge of feeling is a vice—"Do not rejoice when your enemies fall," says Proverbs—but it takes on a life of its own in the faceless social media hive mind. Like contagion, righteous anger moves in groups. It only takes a critical mass of people to give permission for antisocial, antidemocratic behaviors. To celebrate a death on one's own is sadistic; to celebrate a death with thousands of online strangers is to join the party.

And their anger spreads all the more quickly because it is rooted in real hurt. When Brian Thompson was killed, revelers told stories of their own experiences with UnitedHealthcare, from denied claims to mountains of medical debt. Real injustice makes violence and celebration seem almost obligatory—at least, as angry online posters would have us think. But this is the nature of sin: to be bigger than we can understand, to ensnare us and surround us in ways we cannot even perceive. Sin is hardest to escape when it wears the mask of justice. Death celebrations partition the world into good and evil, convincing posters they are on the side of good—all while concealing the fact that every one of us is a mix of just and unjust, and every one of us will have sins to answer

for on the last day.

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People's skepticism toward enemy love—how can *I* love *them*?—lies in part in the fact that love does not turn enemies into friends. No amount of empathy can erase our enemies' misdeeds, and perhaps (the argument goes) to love an enemy would be to excuse their deeds. Under this view, love is zero-sum; if I love an oppressor, I can't love the oppressed. And many of Kirk's actions, such as his absurd attacks on the legitimacy of the 2020 elections, did genuine damage.

But enemy love is so hard, and so necessary, exactly because the enemy we love truly is an enemy. Jesus recognizes this fact, asking, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?" The love we are obligated to live out as Christians is most important when it is hard. I can love my partner, my friends, and the people who think the way I do. Can I love the person whose life's work is the antithesis of all that I hold to be true? Can I call my enemy a child of God?

Loving an enemy is difficult, even countercultural. Maybe the one thing left and right can agree on is hatred, the notion that somehow ridding ourselves of the "right" people would finally make our society just. Love those who love you, hate those who hate you. It's us or them.

This way of viewing the world applies the logic of transaction to our human actions. To love my enemy, in this understanding, is like lending money to someone who won't pay me back. Yet the example Jesus taught, in word and deed, is transcendent, not transactional. Transactional love is egoism by another name, my choice to love people for the good things they can bring me, a closed circuit which lets in nothing beyond myself. Transcendent love is the love of God, freely given to all, without consideration for their worth—given, not earned. Transactional love is zero-sum, but transcendent love has left behind transaction altogether.

My love for an oppressor does not at all mean hatred for the oppressed. As Catholic educator Paulo Freire argued, the end of oppression in fact liberates oppressed and oppressor alike—because oppression dehumanizes them both. It is impossible to imagine Jesus, who forgave even his executioners, rejoicing at the death of a sinner. Jesus loved until the very end, without making exceptions, and his is the model Christians must imitate.

This is the sort of love lacking in our tumultuous political moment, but it is exactly what we need. [Evidence suggests that](#) the normalization of political violence only leads to more violence. Insisting on nonviolence is the first crucial step toward rebuilding democratic cultural norms. If a public figure's views are enough to warrant their opponents to become judge, jury, and executioner, then no one is exempt from the danger. Yesterday was Minnesota state representative Melissa Hortman; today is Charlie Kirk; who knows what tomorrow could bring?

The kind of love Jesus taught may not be popular. But eye-for-an-eye justice has already shown its rotten fruit, and it's time for something that works. The job of Christians in dark days like these is to let their light shine. That can mean speaking against the culture of violence; it can mean praying for our enemies; it can mean supporting their well-being even when they don't support ours; it can mean treating everyone with kindness, not just the people we happen to like; it can mean refusing to harden our hearts in the face of injustice.

It cannot mean inciting political violence and pouring fuel on the fire for the next assimilation—something we've been seeing from people, including Christians, of all political stripes. That has to end, not only for the sake of democracy but for the sake of the gospel.