

What Would Jesus Deconstruct?



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What Would Jesus Deconstruct?

*The Good News of Postmodernity
for the Church*

John D. Caputo


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In His Steps— A Postmodern Edition

In 1896, Charles Sheldon, a pastor in Topeka, Kansas, wrote a book titled *In His Steps*.¹ The subtitle of Sheldon's book, *What Would Jesus Do?* fueled the later "WWJD" industry—the bumper stickers, T-shirts, and bracelets that boldly pose a question to which the Religious Right is sure it knows the answer. My hypothesis is if our friends on the Right really mean to *ask* that question instead of using it as a stick to beat their enemies, they are in for a shock. The book has gone through numerous editions and there are estimates—no one knows for sure—that it has sold some 30 million copies, putting it right up there with the Bible. If so, it will perhaps do no harm if I propose a new edition, let us say a Postmodern Collector's Edition, a special two-disk DVD set that will contain Sheldon's text on one disk and numerous bonus features that will include a postmodern running commentary on the other. Imagine Jacques Derrida running in the steps of Charles Sheldon, or maybe just out there jogging alongside him down some country road in turn-of-the-century Topeka. That is a bizarre image, unforgivable really, and I beg the forgiveness of everyone concerned: of those who love the question "What Would Jesus Do?"—I love it too, although I am also afraid of it and think it is a very tricky two-edged sword—

and of my deconstructionist friends, who are appalled to see me associate deconstruction with the politics of rural Kansas and a question that has been condensed to bumper-sticker simplicity.² What gives me the courage to go on is that in both Jesus and deconstruction forgiveness enjoys pride of place and that the most perfect form of forgiveness is to forgive unforgivable offenses, like the one I here propose to commit. I pin everything on the hope that we have all done something we are ashamed of and no one will have the courage to cast the first stone.

What Would Jesus Do?

Sheldon hit on the idea of holding his congregation's attention by way of a series of weekly sermons that would in fact be a serialized novel, with cliff-hanger endings each week that would draw the congregation back on the following Sunday, an idea that the creators of TV series like *24* have since seized on with great success. In the opening chapter—it was published a year later as a book—a homeless man, in his early thirties (the traditional age of Jesus at his death), disturbs the decorum of the Sunday morning services of the First Church of Raymond, the most proper and prosperous church in town. Were I to produce a film version of the book I would look for someone like the Henry Fonda of *Grapes of Wrath* to play this character, someone soft spoken but whose words rise up from the depths. The choir has given a particularly excellent rendition of “Jesus, I my cross have taken, All to leave and follow Thee.” The pastor, Rev. Henry Maxwell, has just concluded a stirring sermon on 1 Peter 2:21: “For hereunto were ye called; because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that ye should follow his steps” (I have retained language of the King James Version used in the novel for a reason). Then, at just that precise moment, the bedraggled young man comes forward and addresses a startled congregation:

“I’m not an ordinary tramp, though I don’t know of any teaching of Jesus that makes one kind of a tramp less worth saving than another. Do you?” He put the question as naturally as if the whole congregation had been a small Bible class. He paused just a moment and coughed painfully. Then he went on. (*In His Steps*, 8)

He recounts a Dickensesque story of misfortune. He has lost his job as a typesetter, his wife died in a desperate New York City tenement (owned by Christians), and he can no longer care for his daughter, who now lives with a friend. After reporting his futile attempts to find help in their community despite three days of trying, he concludes:

It seems to me there's an awful lot of trouble in the world that somehow wouldn't exist if all the people who sing such songs went and lived them out. I suppose I don't understand. But what would Jesus do? (*In His Steps*, 10)

Then he gives a “queer lurch” and falls in a heap on the church floor. A doctor rushes to his side and reports, “He seems to have a heart problem.” That is as close to a double entendre as you will find in Sheldon, for whatever physical ailments the man's poverty has caused, he certainly has a broken heart! Is he dead or alive? Will he recover? The picture fades. Come back next week if you want to find out.

The following Sunday the faithful in Topeka packed the church to learn that the man had later died in the home of Rev. Maxwell. That proves to be a week of fateful soul searching for the pastor, who finds himself face-to-face with the man's dying words, which he in turn puts to Raymond's best: Are you ready to take the pledge? To do what Jesus would do? A shudder is sent through the powers that be in town—the local college president; the editor of the town newspaper; the superintendent of railroads; and one Virginia Page, an heiress who had just inherited a million dollars, “a statuesque blonde of attractive proportions,” which is evidently how such matters were put in 1896 Topeka (we have since come up with other language). The novel goes on to tell the story of the transformation that takes place in the lives of everyone.

Thus was born the question “What would Jesus do?” Because Sheldon failed to secure a proper copyright, the book was allowed to gain a wide circulation. Sheldon distributed what royalties he did receive among his numerous charitable causes. *In His Steps* is not going to make it on most “Great Books” lists. It is sentimental and a bit simplistic; it is preachy and a bit pietistic; its characters are thinly disguised props for ideas; and the King James version of the Bible it uses is a good fit for its stilted and theatrical style.

Still, it would be excessively snooty for an academic like myself to dwell on its literary limitations, which is basically to congratulate myself for not having written a book that has sold 30 million copies. The book has a certain charm and a few dramatic twists that probably passed for cliff-hangers in Kansas, and it has managed to communicate something of permanent and central importance about the gospel, about its prophetic message of generosity toward the most dispossessed and disadvantaged, and about the serious social obligations of Christians. It got this message out to large numbers of Christians, well beyond the numbers reached by much weightier tomes of theology or scholarly articles in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.

I commend the reading of this book to Christians, left, right, and center, not all of whom may realize today where this famous question comes from. It will be an eye opener to the Christian Right, who, having tried to blackmail us with this question, will discover that the slogan they have been wearing on their T-shirts and pasting on their automobile bumpers all these years is a call for radical social justice! That may precipitate a spate of garage sales all over suburban Christendom, where well-scrubbed Bible thumpers will seek to rid themselves of such subversive paraphernalia or, at the very least, to keep them away from the children. (The Left, by contrast, would stand to pick up some bargains were it not so terrified of religion.) So even if, as I concede, Charles Sheldon is no Charles Dickens—or Reinhold Niebuhr or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for that matter—he is the author of a question that has captured the minds and hearts of millions of Americans today, and he is worth another look.³

Trained at Phillips Academy, Brown University, and Andover Theological Seminary, Sheldon was a formative influence on the Social Gospel movement, and he put the gospel personally into practice. He spent periods of time living among the poor and working class of Topeka, including time in “Tennesseetown” (the “Rectangle” in Raymond)—a large black ghetto not far from his church—to which he dedicated considerable attention. He was a critic of racism in the church and of the Ku Klux Klan in particular; and he advocated equality for women in the church—they figure prominently in *In His Steps*—and in society at large.

Sheldon called for personal transformation and personal responsibility, which was his evangelical side, but at the same time

he was attentive to the larger issue of the need for social and structural transformation, which was his Christian-socialist side. His focus on alcoholism is typical. He thought alcoholism was in part a matter of character and willpower, which is certainly true, but he also understood that it was a social problem and very much a function of systemic poverty and unbridled capitalism. As the statuesque Virginia Page says, “The saloon furnishes material to be saved faster than the settlement or residence or rescue mission work can save it” (*In His Steps*, 127). Or as Jim Wallis, one of the leading figures in the current movement for a progressive evangelical Christianity, likes to say, it’s not enough to keep pulling bodies from the river; we must go upstream to see who is throwing them in. Not only do hearts have to be changed, but the system has to be fixed. Sheldon’s solution—Prohibition—was ill conceived—the Irish would never go for it—but one can see what he was thinking about. Alcoholism was the drug scene of his day, before the days of hard drugs and the massive violence on the streets that accompanies it, and it required something more radical and more thoughtful than telling people to just say no, which is easy to say and, besides, allows us to keep our money in our pocket. Sheldon was also a great advocate of Sabbatarianism, which is also very evangelical and offensive to the modern secular lifestyle. But Sheldon viewed this issue in terms of an unfettered capitalism that, already benefiting from a twelve-hour workday in the days before effective labor laws, wanted a seven-day work week. The Christianity of *In His Steps* is an interesting mix of the personal and the structural, of generosity of spirit accompanied by social consciousness and a prophetic politics. Sheldon wanted to bring the kingdom of God to earth, or at least get a running start on it by following in Jesus’s steps.

John Howard Yoder criticizes Sheldon’s Jesus for being a kind of blanket moral template, a universal moral paradigm, which just stands for anything good—like a walking, talking categorical imperative—and not paying attention to details. By this Yoder means pacifism.⁴ Philosophers reading this book—I am assuming a lot here—might be led to wonder how much mileage can be gotten out of asking a substitute question like “What would Socrates do?” Take the case of Alexander Powers, superintendent of the local railroad in *In His Steps*, who took measures to improve the working conditions of the railroad employees but who resigned

after blowing the whistle on the company when he discovered it was in violation of interstate commerce laws. Superintendent Powers could easily have gotten that far with Socrates, who taught that the good of the soul is virtue and that the only true evil is the evil that we do, not the evil that is done to us for doing good. In fact, there is a precedent for Sheldon's question in the philosopher Epictetus, who asked what Socrates or Zeno would do.⁵ So one central problem among the many problems posed by this question is to determine what is the *specifically* Jesus-like thing that we are called to do.

Sheldon's novel influenced theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the founding fathers of a theology of the Social Gospel. This theology brought the teachings of Jesus to bear on problems of social justice, like poverty, public health, underfunded schools, child labor, slums, the conditions of immigrants, and war and peace. The Social Gospel theology flourished in the first half of the century and was prominent throughout the New Deal days. Later, its prophetic spirit could be felt in the work of Martin Luther King Jr. and liberation theology. Today it is present in movements like Jim Wallis's "Sojourners/Call to Renewal."⁶ Sheldon's own popularity fell on hard times with the collapse of Prohibition, which made for an ironic end given that one of the things Jesus did do was drink wine—in moderation! Jesus did not use the wine shortage at Cana to announce the new law of Prohibition but to make more wine for the party (not to mention Socrates, who was famous for being able to drink all night and still keep his argument straight). Sheldon thought that if there were "saloons" in Galilee, Jesus would have spoken out against them.

I refer to that only half in jest because it raises a problem that goes to the heart of asking, "What would Jesus do?" It is too easy to use this question to spiritually intimidate our enemies, which is why the question is so frightening. The question should be turned first to ourselves so as to put ourselves in question—"in the accusative," as Levinas would say—instead of being used as a beam, as in a two-by-four, to slam others. The question is tricky, not a magic bullet, because everybody left or right wants Jesus on their side (instead of the other way around). It requires an immense amount of interpretation, interpolation, and self-questioning to give it any bite—and if it is not biting *us*, it has no bite—lest it be just a way of getting others to do what I want them to do but

under the cover of Jesus. The “would” in the question carries all this weight; it is the bump in the road of following in his steps. The “would” draws us into what contemporary philosophers call “hermeneutics,” the theory of interpretation. How big a bump “hermeneutics” is can be gleaned from Nietzsche, who said “there are no facts, only interpretations” (and quoting Nietzsche is the best way I know to clear a room of evangelical Christians). So another question posed by the question “What would Jesus do?” is how much work can it actually get done once we appreciate its complexity. It does not make things easier, only harder. That is why I here call on the aid of deconstruction—another evangelical room clearer—which I sometimes camouflage as “radical hermeneutics,” to help us out.

Adding a Dash of Deconstruction

Consider the fate of Sheldon’s question. The heroes of Sheldon’s novel renounce the profit-making motives that drive capitalism and give up luxury and success for the sake of living among and working on behalf of the poorest of the poor. They are evangelical counterparts to people like Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The ever-growing extremes of rich and poor in today’s globalized capitalism remind us of the “Gilded Age,” the world of the Carnegies and other moguls of unregulated capitalism, in Sheldon’s world. But the original force of Sheldon’s question has been turned upside down in the barrage of bracelets and televangelists preaching personal wealth as a sign of God’s approval.

With that in mind, let us revisit Sheldon’s opening scene, the lovely Sunday morning, a gathering of “the best dressed, most comfortable-looking people in Raymond,” the beautiful choir, the eloquent pastor:

Suddenly, into the midst of this perfect accord and concord between preacher and audience, there came a very remarkable interruption. It would be difficult to indicate the extent of the shock which this interruption measured. It was so unexpected, so entirely contrary to any thought of any person present that it offered no room for argument or, for the time being, of resistance. (*In His Steps*, 6)

An incongruous and unsettling figure, uncomely and uncanny, disturbs the Sunday serenity. Hitherto comfortable lives are turned upside down. Jobs are lost, careers are abandoned, fortunes given away, businesses go under, divisions are introduced among friends and families, parents are turned against children; harmony becomes cacophony. What would Jesus do—if he ever showed up some Sunday morning? Turn things upside down. The last would be first, the meek and poor would inherit the earth, the hungry would be given good things, and the rich would be sent away empty (Luke 1:53). Do you think he would bring peace? No, not peace, but the sword. Would he preach “family values”? No, he advocates hating father and mother for the kingdom of God. Instead of being confirmed in our ways and congratulated on our virtue, we would stand accused, looking for the log in our own eye rather than the sliver in the eye of the other. “Jesus is a great divider of life,” Sheldon says (*In His Steps*, 113).

To put Sheldon’s point in other words, we who are sometimes known to use the ungodly idiom of contemporary French theory might say: into the sphere of the “same” (the familiar, the customary, the business-as-usual of Sunday services) bursts the “advent” or the “event” of the “other,” of the “coming of the other,” which makes the same tremble and reconfigure. In these other words, Sheldon’s strategy is to open the novel with a scene of *deconstruction* (whose honor, like Mary Magdalene’s, I hope to see restored!). In Sheldon’s story the homeless man’s identity (Jack Manning) is revealed in the next chapter. I could imagine, in the manner of the supernaturalist films of our day, like *The Sixth Sense*, leaving him nameless, an unknown and mysterious placeholder, thereby suggesting a miraculous appearance of Jesus himself come to the town of Raymond for a new holy week, during which he suffered and died again. What I will analyze as the “event”—what’s really happening there—that stirs within the figure of Jesus is that of a deep deconstructive force or agency. Mark C. Taylor once famously described deconstruction as the hermeneutics of the death of God.⁷ But in the view I am advancing here, deconstruction is treated as the hermeneutics of the *kingdom* of God, as an interpretive style that helps get at the prophetic spirit of Jesus—who was a surprising and sometime strident outsider, who took a stand with the “other”—and thereby helps us get a fix on Sheldon’s sometimes slippery question. In my view, a deconstruction is good news, be-

cause it delivers the shock of the other to the forces of the same, the shock of the good (the “ought”) to the forces of being (“what is”), which is also why I think it bears good news to the church.

Contrary to what you may have read in some Christian presses, the “other” is not the devil himself but a figure of the *truth*, a truth that has been safely closeted away or repressed. Notice that Sheldon’s unnerving “tramp”—one of Derrida’s last books was titled *Rogues*—this figure of the “other,” does not rant and rave: “There was nothing offensive in the man’s manner or tone. He was not excited, and he spoke in a low but distinct voice” (*In His Steps*, 7).

He speaks simply, quietly, but the impact of his words is lost on no one. Things get deconstructed by the *event of truth* that they harbor, an event that sets off unforeseeable and disruptive consequences:

Gradually the truth was growing upon him that the pledge to do as Jesus would was working out a revolution in his parish and throughout the city. Every day added to the serious results of obedience to that pledge. Maxwell did not pretend to see the end. He was, in fact, only now at the very beginning of events that were destined to change the history of hundreds of families not only in Raymond but throughout the entire country. (*In His Steps*, 72)

So the “event” need not be delivered by a thunderbolt. It gradually, quietly overtakes us, grows on us, until at a certain point we realize that everything has been transformed. In a deconstruction, our lives, our beliefs, and our practices are not destroyed but forced to reform and reconfigure—which is risky business. In the New Testament this is called *metanoia*, or undergoing a fundamental change of heart. Our hearts are turned inside out not by a vandal but by an angel or evangel of the *truth*, the truth that we say we embrace but that now, up close, looks ominous, frightening, ugly, and even smells bad. What if the truth smells bad? What if the poor, who are blessed in the kingdom, do not have the opportunity to bathe regularly? We sing songs to the truth as if it were a source of comfort, warmth, and good hygiene. But in deconstruction the truth is dangerous, and it will drive you out into the cold. Nietzsche had it right when he said we lack the courage for the truth, that the truth will make us stronger just so long as it doesn’t kill us first.

We want the truth attenuated, softened, bathed, and powdered, like the smarmy depictions of Jesus looking up to heaven found on the covers of some editions of *In His Steps*.

These editors would do better to put the ghettos of the “Rectangle” on the cover, because Sheldon’s point was that Jesus is most likely to be found in the worst slums, among the most dispossessed people, on the most dangerous streets in a modern city. My own proposal for the cover of my postmodern edition of *In His Steps* is to use a scene from the HBO series *The Wire*. The best contemporary counterpart to the “Rectangle”—Sheldon’s idea of the people Jesus had in mind when he announced his mission, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18)—is the drug scene in the inner-city ghettos like those in Baltimore, whose grim violence is unforgettably etched in our mind by the stunning cinematography of *The Wire*. In the midst of the mindlessness of much commercial television, there are artists willing to speak the truth, in this case to honestly portray what I consider the very world that Jesus said constituted his mission. *The Wire* is as complicated to follow as a Russian novel—which reflects the complexity of moral life itself—and, like Dostoyevsky, is as high minded and as tragic about the drama of good and evil. If you want to see what Sheldon’s Jesus would do, to see someone Christlike translated into the terms of the twenty-first century, someone walking in the steps of Jesus, then study the people who are trying to intervene in that world. Someone like “Prez,” the teacher, gentle as a lamb in the midst of wolves, who spends himself on behalf of the children in his class. Prez’s work is blocked not only by the merciless poverty and violence of the world in which his students live but also by academic programs devised by demagogues, which compel teachers to stop teaching and “teach the test,” to stop addressing the singular needs of children in singular situations and teach a standardized test. Or “McNulty” and “Bunny Colvin,” policemen as self-conflicted as St. Paul, who understand perfectly that the powers that be, the “(City) Hall,” are people who are interested not in alleviating misery and reducing crime on the street but in accumulating favorable but meaningless statistics that will ensure their reelection. Or the children on the street, like “Dee” or “Randy,” who tried in vain to lift themselves out of a world saturated with crime. *The Wire* is a postmodern parable set not in the olive groves of ancient Galilee

but in the streets of the contemporary inner city. There everything Jesus meant by the kingdom, and everything Paul meant by grace and the new being, fights a losing battle with the powers of this world and with the whitened sepulchers whose fathers killed the prophets.⁸

The Wire gives us an idea of how a deconstruction works. It simply tells the truth, meticulously, uncompromisingly, without disguise, amelioration, or artificial sweeteners. In a deconstruction, things are made to tremble by their own inner impulse, by a force that will give them no rest, that keeps forcing itself to the surface, forcing itself out, making the thing restless. Deconstruction is organized around the idea that things contain a kind of uncontainable truth, that they contain what they cannot contain. Nobody has to come along and “deconstruct” things. Things are auto-deconstructed by the tendencies of their own inner truth. In a deconstruction, the “other” is the one who tells the truth on the “same”; the other is the truth of the same, the truth that has been repressed and suppressed, omitted and marginalized, or sometimes just plain murdered, like Jesus himself, which is why Johannes Baptist Metz speaks of the “dangerous memory” of the suffering of Jesus⁹ and why I describe deconstruction as a hermeneutics of the kingdom of God.¹⁰

The “danger” Metz describes is the deconstructive force. As soon as the “other” tells the truth, as soon as the truth is out, then the beliefs or the practices, the texts or institutions, that have been entrusted with that truth begin to tremble! Then they have to reconfigure, reorganize, regroup, reassemble in order to come to grips with their inner tendencies—or repress them all the more mightily. So Sheldon is effectively proposing a “deconstruction of the church,” a deconstruction of what calls itself Christianity, “a challenge to Christianity as it is practiced in our churches” (*In His Steps*, 14). The assembly (*ecclesia*) of the First Church of Raymond, Kansas, is called to *re*-assemble, to regroup, called to a new order, by a shocking Christlike street person who comes bearing the truth. If the truth can make us free, as we all so readily agree, it cannot do so without a deconstruction, which is a way of making, or letting, the truth happen. The truth is not the stuff of edifying hymns, rather it is dangerous, dirty, and smelly business. To seek the truth is to play with fire and a way to get burned. Not everyone has a stomach for it, above all those who say “Lord, Lord”

and then head for cover the minute the Lord shows up dressed in rags and smelling like a street person. Be careful what you pray for. Lord, give me the truth—but not yet! The next time we look up to heaven and piously pray “Come, Lord Jesus,” we may find that he is already here, trying to get warm over an urban steam grate or trying to cross our borders.

On my reading, which will sound a little too pious to impious deconstructors and downright impious to good and pious Christians, deconstruction is a theory of *truth*, in which truth spells *trouble*. As does Jesus. That is what they have in common. The truth will make you free, but it does so by turning your life upside down. Up to now, deconstruction has gotten a lot of mileage out of taking sides with the “*un-truth*.” That is a methodological irony, a strategy of “reversal,” meant to expose the contingency of what we like to call the “*Truth*,” with a capital T—deconstruction being a critique of long-robed totalizers of a capitalized Truth, of T-totallers of all kinds. I have no intention of sending that strategy into early retirement or claiming that it has outlived its usefulness. We will need that strategy as long as there is hypocrisy, as long as there are demagogues pounding on the table that they have the Truth, which means forever. Indeed, I will not hesitate to make use of that strategy here. But I do want to supplement it with a complementary theory of truth. For while deconstructors have made important gains exposing the hypocrisy of temporal and contingent claims that portray themselves in the long robes of Eternal Verity, it is also necessary to point out that deconstruction is at the same time a hermeneutics of truth, of the truth of the event, which is not deconstructible. This is the truth that disturbs and that we tend to repress. When a deconstruction is done well, the truth or—what seems like the same thing—all hell will break out. What the truth does, what this Christlike figure in Sheldon’s novel does, or their contemporary counterparts in *The Wire* do, what Jesus does, is deconstruct. Sheldon’s famous novel, this classic of popular Christian piety, the one with the smarmy picture of Jesus on the cover, turns on a—hold your ears—*deconstruction*. Jesus Christ, Deconstructor!¹¹

Imagine the scene: a miraculous reappearance of another Christlike tramp, of Jesus himself incognito, at Sunday morning services in the churches of America. Jesus as an illegal migrant worker, a “wetback” who can barely speak English, or a street person with

dirty hands and grubby clothes intruding on the well-scrubbed, smartly garbed congregations of suburban Christendom, which is doing everything to keep him out.

So there is a kick in this bumper-sticker question that the Christian Right did not anticipate. It was posed by a man who looked kindly on the idea of a Christian socialism and pointed with admiration to the communal lives of the early Christians. It contains a truth that will take by surprise those who wear it proudly on their T-shirts, those who repeat this question without quite knowing its history, who may just find themselves auto-deconstructed. What would Jesus do? He would deconstruct a very great deal of what people do in the name of Jesus, starting with the people who wield this question like a hammer to beat their enemies. My hypothesis is that the first thing that Jesus would deconstruct is WWJD itself, the whole “industry,” the whole commercial operation of spiritual and very real money-making Christian capitalists.

The Church Is Plan B

Sheldon is evoking an old and venerable scene, one that—rightly—haunts the Christian imagination. We are always, constantly, structurally haunted by the memory of Jesus, by the unnerving prospect that one day Jesus will drop by, unannounced. I do not mean in the decisive day of the second coming but on an ordinary day, some Sunday morning say, as in Sheldon’s scenario, simply to pay us an interim visit, to look in on what is going on in his name. Sheldon restages in 1896 Topeka the scene that Dostoyevsky staged in the famous “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” in sixteenth-century Seville. Jesus appears one day among the common people outside the cathedral in Seville, once again making the blind see and the dead rise. The ancient cardinal, who recognizes that this mysterious figure is indeed Jesus, has him summarily arrested—with but the least movement of his little finger, “such is his power.” Paying Jesus a visit in his cell that night, the cardinal asks him why he came back to earth. The work of Jesus is over and now the power has been passed to the pope. His return can represent only an interference. For this reason, the cardinal sentences Jesus to be burned at the stake the next morning, just as he has burned

hundreds of heretics the day before—a “heretic” meaning anyone who interferes with the work of the church, including Jesus.

While I do not think this is a perfect story as to its details, its larger point stands.¹² The church tends by the inner momentum of its institutional structure to assert its own authority, to authorize itself. The church behaves exactly as if it itself has fed the Jesus of the New Testament the line, “Thou art Peter and on this Rock I will build my church,” which, by the way, is actually what the historical-critical New Testament scholars argue. The church authorizes or founds itself by invoking the authority of a Founder who did not intend to found anything but to announce the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand and the end time was in sight. The church acts exactly as if it is self-authorizing, so that its work can only be interrupted and endangered were anyone to interfere, including Jesus himself, if he returned to see what is going on in his name. The church is not about to have its power questioned and its dogmas thrown into confusion by letting anything of that sort transpire. Having gotten used to the idea that the church defines and determines what Jesus stands for, and what Jesus would do, the church is not going to see its authority threatened by anyone, not even by Jesus himself. Whoever defies the teachings of the church by definition stands accused of heresy—and that goes for Jesus. In short, were Jesus to return in the flesh, he would be executed again, not by the world but by the church. Or left by the church to die in the cold, like Sheldon’s character, or to be shot down in the nightmare violence of America’s urban warfare because Christians support right-wing extremists opposed to gun control, or excluded as an illegal immigrant.

The fundamental fact about the church is the structural gap, the irreducible distance, that exists between itself and Jesus, a gap expressed by the fateful subjunctive, the “would” in “What would Jesus do?” of which it needs to remind itself first, last, and always, and the concomitant shock that would be delivered to itself—not to mention the shock that would be delivered to Jesus—were Jesus himself ever to set foot in one of its churches. In that gap there lies embedded the principle of a deconstruction of Christianity, in which a deconstruction would effect not a destruction but a reconfiguration aroused by reviving the memory of Jesus. Deconstruction is memory. What would Jesus do—if he ever saw what you and I are doing in his name? Weep, as he wept

over Jerusalem. What would Christians do? Head for the doors. The opening scene of Sheldon's novel gets it exactly right. Jesus would be just the sort of unnerving, scary, smelly, and marginal character who would clear the room, the sort that would cause a lot of Christians to cross to the other side of the street if they saw him approaching, the kind of fellow who sends "For Sale" signs springing up all over suburban Christendom for fear the neighborhood is going and property values will decline. For his part, Jesus would be mystified by what is going on, which would seem to him the very thing he targeted in his preaching and parables.

By asking what Jesus would *deconstruct* I am trying to be provocative, but I am also, as always, in earnest about this word "deconstruction." I value it on several levels. It is an exemplary case of avant-garde French "theory" that throws a scare into the elect, and on this point the title of James K. A. Smith's *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* strikes the right note.¹³ Furthermore, and this is a line I have been peddling for a while, in virtue of its deeply biblical resonances, deconstruction provides a felicitous hermeneutic of the kingdom of God, or so I hope to show.¹⁴ It announces the good news about alterity, which it bears to the church. It has prophetic resonances that call for justice to flow like water over the land. So I am employing the word in a rigorous sense here, not trying to stretch it just to produce a shock or pander to a biblical audience. I am proposing that what happens in deconstruction has an inner sympathy with the very "kingdom of God" that Jesus calls for—which suggests the need for a companion book by a French theorist addressed to secular deconstructors titled *Who's Afraid of the New Testament?* (That is the sort of thing Slavoj Žižek has been doing in his own way.)

Posed in the subjunctive, what *would* Jesus do or deconstruct, the question turns on the structure of the archive, of memory and repetition. How does the New Testament preserve the memory of Jesus? I prescind from all historical-critical questions here, which open up another abyss (about the *arche* itself). One abyss at a time! I treat the New Testament as an "archive," a depository of memories, which presents a certain way to be, a certain "poetics"—not a politics or an ethics or a church dogmatics—that I like to call a "poetics of the kingdom," which lays claim to us and which calls for a "transformation into existence."¹⁵ How are we to translate this soaring poetics into reality? Were this figure of Jesus, who is the

centerpiece of this poetics or theo-poetics, to return today, what would he look like? An illegal immigrant? A child dying of AIDS? A Vatican bureaucrat? And what do we imagine he would expect of us here and now? The question calls for a work of application, interpretation, interpolation, imagination, and self-interrogation, and all that is risky business. To interpret is always a high-wire act, balancing oneself on a line stretched across an abyss and in constant danger of constructing idols of its own imagining. The name of “Jesus” is too often a mirror in which we behold our own image, and it has always been easy to spot the sliver in the eye of the other and miss the two-by-four in our own. The question presupposes the inescapable reality of history and of historical distance, and it asks how that distance can be crossed. Or better, conceding that this distance cannot be crossed, the question resorts to the subjunctive and asks how that irreducible distance could be made creative. How does our distance from Jesus illuminate what he said and did in a different time and place and under different historical circumstances? And how does Jesus’s distance from us illuminate what we must say and do in the importantly different situation in which we find ourselves today? The task of the church is to submit *itself* to this question, rather than using it like a club to punish others. The church, the archive of Jesus, in a very real sense *is* this question. It has no other duty and no other privilege than to bear this memory of Jesus and ask itself this question. The church is not the answer. The church is the question, this question, the gathering of people who are called together by the memory of Jesus and who ask this question, who are called together and are put into question by this question, who stand accused, under the call, interrogated and unable to recuse themselves from this question, and who come to understand that there are no easy, ready-made, prepackaged answers.

The apostles “had hoped that the Kingdom of God would come,” Alfred Loisy once famously remarked, but “what came was the Church.”¹⁶ Let us call that statement Loisy’s law. The arrival of the church is a surprise—or what Derrida would call an event, meaning something we do not see coming. The first followers of the Way were expecting one event, an event to end all events, but they got another, which really was a disappointment, a retrenchment, a make do until the arrival of the kingdom, whose arrival has been unexpectedly delayed. “Abbé” Loisy, who was an ex-priest, was

being cynical, but he makes a good point. The church is Plan B.¹⁷ (In deconstruction, *everything* is Plan B.) The early church is a lot like the characters in the hit TV series *Lost*—the title is appropriate!—waiting to be “saved,” which is the soteriological significance of that mysterious TV series where everyone is given a new being, a fresh start. At first, the survivors hang around on the beach waiting to get “picked up” (in a cloud, St. Paul said). After a while, they conclude that the rescue is not going to happen anytime soon and so they reluctantly decide to dig in and prepare for the long haul. Hence the existence of the church is provisional—like a long-term substitute teacher—praying for the kingdom, whose coming Jesus announced and which everyone was expecting would come sometime soon. But this coming was deferred, and the church occupies the space of the “deferral,” of the distance or “difference,” between two comings. (I just said, in case you missed it, the church is a function of *différance*!) In the meantime, and it is always the meantime for the church, the church is supposed to do the best it can to bring that kingdom about in itself, here on earth, in a process of incessant self-renewal or auto-deconstruction, while not setting itself up as a bunch of kings or princes. The church is by definition a call (*kletos*) for renewal.

That is why the church is “deconstructible,” but the kingdom of God, if there is such a thing, is not. The church is a provisional construction, and whatever is constructed is deconstructible, while the kingdom of God is that in virtue of which the church is deconstructible. So, if we ask, “What would Jesus deconstruct?” the answer is first and foremost the church! For the idea behind the church is to give way to the kingdom, to proclaim and enact and finally disappear into the kingdom that Jesus called for, all the while resisting the temptation of confusing itself with the kingdom. That requires us to clear away the rhetoric and get a clear picture of what “deconstruction” means, of just who “Jesus” is, and of the hermeneutic force of this “would,” and to do so with this aim: to sketch a portrait of an alternative Christianity, one that is as ancient as it is new, one in which the “dangerous memory of Jesus” is still alive—deconstruction being, as I conceive it, a work of memory and imagination, of dangerous memories as well as daring ways to imagine the future, and as such good news for the church.