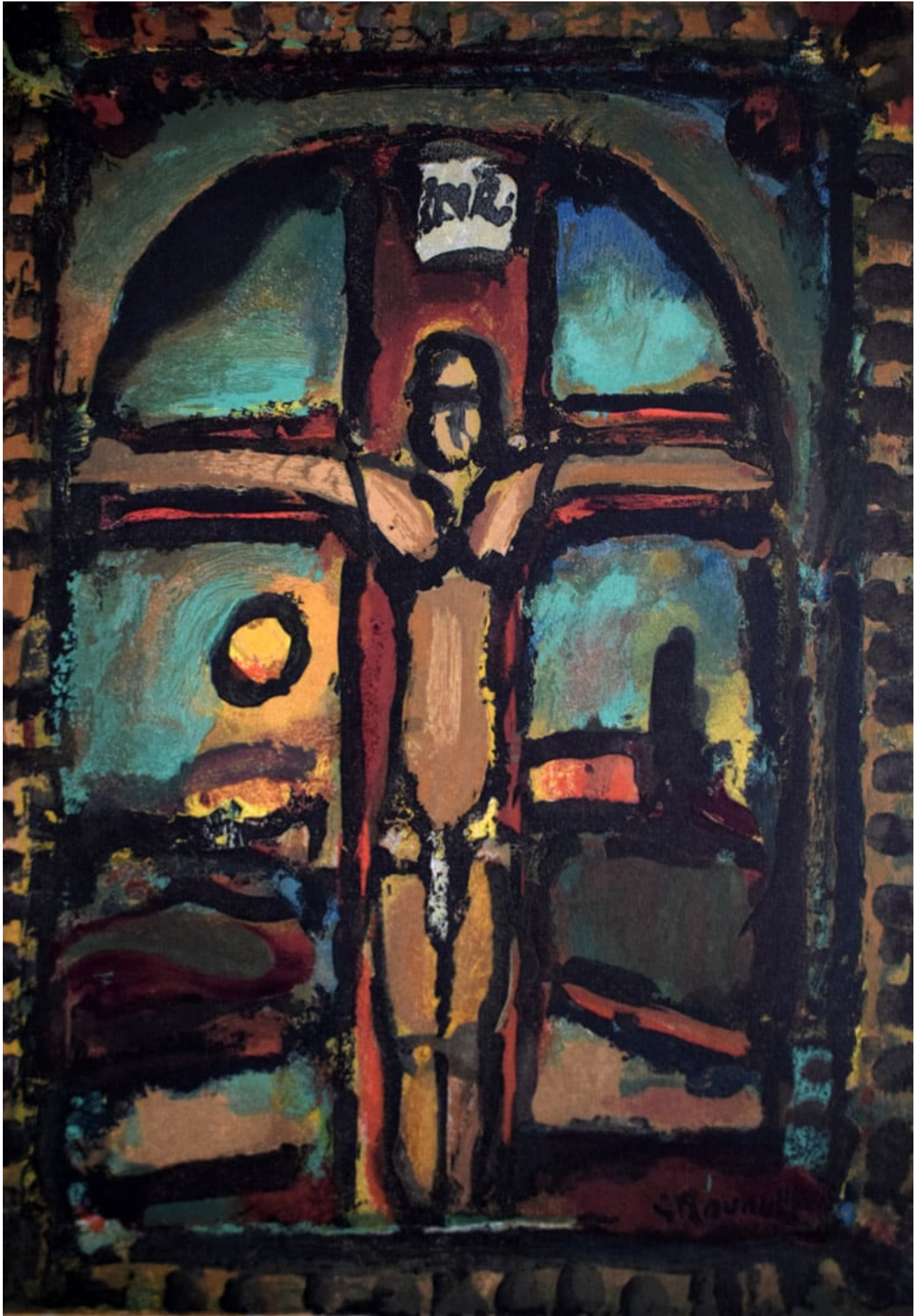


He Gets Us, but the Super Bowl's Jesus Commercials Don't Get Him

by [Jeff Plude](#) (March 2023)



Christus, George Raoult

For decades television commercials have played an integral part in the annual secular rite of the Super Bowl, which this year was viewed by more than a hundred million people, earning for the network hosting it the equivalent of a small country's gross domestic product. It's an advertiser's dream (or nightmare, if the spot flops), and not only that, but many football fans apparently look forward to the ads, which I've never understood. To me they're a perfect time to hit the bathroom or get a drink.

But this year was different. Two commercials in particular caught my attention. Both featured a cameo by the greatest social influencer in history, let alone the digital era: Jesus of Nazareth. My wife and I weren't surprised because similar ones had run during the previous month of playoffs (though we'd only seen a few of them, since we don't have a [television](#) and we watch select games at a brewpub).

The [first](#) was a thirty-second spot in the second quarter with the Eagles in the lead. It featured a montage of black-and-white photos (there was one color video sequence) of kids showing innocent, unconditional love for each other and in other heartwarming poses, the stuff that memes are made of. Over it rings out Patsy Cline's velvety downhome voice singing "If I Could See the World (Through the Eyes of a Child)."

The tagline at the end, which flashes in small white letters on a black screen, gently scolds us: "Jesus doesn't want us to act like adults." Then replacing it: "He gets us." And a moment or two later is added next to it: "All of us." And finally replacing that: "HeGetsUs.com/BeChildlike." The letters "us" are highlighted in a warm fuzzy yellow, including the one in "Jesus."

What's not to like? Plenty, in my view, even for a Christian.

The [second](#) and final He Gets Us commercial came in the fourth

quarter when the Chiefs were mounting their dramatic comeback. A full minute long, this spot was dominated by a bass-and-drum tune called "Human," which is punctuated by handclaps and the eerie defiant vocals of Rag'n'Bone Man (aka Rory Charles Graham from England). And instead of adorable kids in the montage of black-and-white photos these were not-so-lovable grownups—Americans at one another's throats during the riots and protests and such that have now become the new abnormal. These were the "adults" from the first ad whom we're not supposed to act like. The chorus drones (with slight variations):

*But I'm only human after all
I'm only human after all
Don't put the blame on me
Don't put the blame on me*

The tagline for this pitch: "Jesus loved the people we hate." And the same "He gets us ... All of us" and finally "HeGetsUs.com/LoveYourEnemies."

But it was far from paydirt for Jesus, or I should say the people who created this perversion of the gospel, which in its essence isn't complicated but is uncompromising. The real Jesus—that is, as he appears in the New Testament—apparently doesn't sell very well to the algorithm-engineered masses that the He Gets Us campaign seeks to engage. Jesus certainly gets us, since he's the Son of God, but the makers of these misleading messages don't seem to get him.

To me the campaign isn't just counterproductive but potentially disastrous. For the unbelievers who may respond to these glib calls to action, it could lead to spiritual suicide. When an initial convert to the He Gets Us commercials later discovers, as he or she inevitably will, that Jesus and

the gospel are much different than the slick, pandering ads led them to believe, they may reject him once and for all and suffer the devastating eternal consequences.

Not only that, the hardened hearts taken in by the simplistic He Gets Us campaign will brand the true followers of Jesus, i.e., bona fide Christians, as the true haters.

The backlash was predictable, but not without comic relief.

New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who can often be counted on to say something outlandish, [tweeted](#) that the Love Your Enemies commercial “makes fascism look benign.” One thread on YouTube summed it up nicely for me, between “MrRapmaster19,” who saw the ad as calling out “right wing bigotry and hatred” in Christianity as proclaimed by those who say [homosexuality](#) and [abortion](#) are sins (which the Bible indeed asserts), and another commenter who tries to set him straight. Others on the net singled out David Green, the billionaire who founded and owns Hobby Lobby, the arts-and-crafts store chain, and financed the lion’s share of the Super Bowl commercials, which cost upward of \$7 million per thirty seconds. His crime, in liberals’ minds, was to win a Supreme Court case in 2014 against the Obamacare requirement that employers pay for a morning-after abortion drug.

All of which puts me in an awkward position. I believe both sides are wrong, as any evangelical Christian who hasn’t lost his or her savor would also maintain.

First, I can’t help but think of the father of advertising, the original “Mad Man” of Madison Avenue, David Ogilvy. I was watching a 1982 [interview](#) with him on PBS in which he was discussing the use of political ads on TV. Ogilvy scoffed at such a ploy: “It’s impossible, I suppose, to boil down issues to thirty-second television commercials. The political advertising is the most dishonest advertising there is.”

I believe the same holds true for religion and spiritual

matters. But some business people who are Christians, like Green, seem to believe that since they use marketing to fill their coffers they can do the same to win souls for Christ. But the gospel isn't software or soap. Nobody knew this better than the apostle Paul:

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified ... And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

Certainly Paul himself was eloquent. But he never sugarcoated the gospel when presenting it, trying to warm up prospects for the salvation sale. And the abuse he took as a result and his endurance of it were superhuman.

Now I think I know what the ad agency that created these commercials and those who paid for it would say in defense. The immediate goal of each ad's call to action is to get the prospect to go to the landing page in the tagline and check out the website. Each commercial was created with a customer profile in mind, focusing on the "pain points" of each demographic. That's why the older embattled folks were serenaded by Patsy Cline and told to play nice with each other like mindless children. And that's why the younger social justice warriors were given a heart-thumping beat and told that Jesus is about love and tolerance.

The only problem is that the copy on the website isn't much, if any, better than the commercials. We also learn that not all of the campaign's sponsors are believers but merely think

Jesus is an inspiring teacher and figure (a masterful lie by the one Jesus calls the "father of lies"). Unsurprisingly sin isn't mentioned, and certainly not hell.

And sin is the key to Christian salvation—Jesus says he will not forgive anyone who doesn't repent of their sins and believe in him. Repentance happens when a person hears or reads the gospel (in God's Word, i.e., the Bible) and is "convicted" of sin. Repent means to not only be sorry for your sins, but to turn away from them and stop doing them. This doesn't mean the absence of sin, however, which will be present in everyone, even in believers, as long as they live. But the moment a person repents and believes in Jesus, the Holy Spirit enters them and empowers them to follow Jesus's precepts and commands. As a result that person is "saved" from eternal punishment and suffering.

In other words, without the Holy Spirit, without repentance and belief, Jesus says a person will die in their sins and spend eternity suffering in hell.

The belief part is also not just a superficial agreement with what Jesus taught. It means believing that he is the Son of God; that he was the only person who ever lived a sinless life; that he was crucified as a sacrifice and atonement for humanity's sins, which are inherited by each person from the original parents, Adam and Eve, who committed the first sin that set the whole horror machine in motion; and that Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and will one day return to earth to judge all humanity. Whoever repents and believes will live with him forever in paradise, and whoever doesn't is damned.

Not exactly what the NFL and most of its disciples want to hear on Super Sunday, I'm pretty sure. But that's what Jesus said and taught. That's why he declares: "Many are called, but few are chosen." Many respond to what he teaches, but when viewed in its fullness of meaning, i.e., in accordance with

the other things he taught and said, most will reject him.

Each commercial takes its liberty with what Jesus actually says, and especially the context in which he said it. The first and most basic principle of biblical interpretation—or any literary interpretation, for that matter—is context.

The first ad, “Be Childlike,” stems from Matthew 18. The apostles come to Jesus and ask him bluntly who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. As he often did, Jesus answers with a striking simile: “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

So this has to do with humility in the context of faith. It has nothing to do with how to behave toward other adults. For instance, earlier in his ministry, in Matthew 10, Jesus sends his apostles and disciples to preach the gospel throughout Palestine and warns them: “Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.” While the evangelists are supposed to refrain from using force, neither are they to be all huggy-kissy with everybody like the commercial suggests, but wary and prudent. Unchildlike, in other words.

In fact the ambiguity in the first commercial’s tagline (“Jesus doesn’t want us to act like adults”) also could be taken to mean that Jesus wants us to act immaturely. Which the so-called culture as a whole already seems to be succeeding at incredibly well. I think David Ogilvy would be amused and annoyed.

The second commercial, “Love Your Enemies,” which is twice as long as the first, ups the social ante considerably: “Jesus loved the people we hate.” This tagline stems from Matthew 5, of course, the first part of the Sermon on the Mount:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.

This is impossible, however, without the power of the Holy Spirit, and often not easy even then. Without being a believer, no person can sustain this for very long, if at all, because of humanity's sin nature acquired from the Fall in the Garden of Eden.

The implication is that if everyone will just follow Jesus's precepts—whether you believe he's the Son of God, the savior, the only way to heaven, as he declares—whether you've admitted you're a sinner and repented of your sins and believe in him or not—we could have a global utopia. But we will never have a global utopia on earth until Christ returns to establish his millennial kingdom.

In fact becoming a Christian will almost certainly bring conflict, not peace for the new convert. "Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus says at the beginning of his sermon, but I'd like to see the reaction of the He Gets Us admirers if they heard him a few chapters later do an about-face:

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

In the same way that Jesus said the poor will always be with us, so will strife and violence.

Two millennia ago Matthew himself was one of the hated ones in Israel. As a tax collector for the Romans, he would've been shunned by his fellow Jews. In Luke 5, Matthew answers Jesus's call to follow him and immediately throws a bash to which he invites his old and new colleagues, including Jesus himself. When the Pharisees upbraid Jesus for slumming it, he sets them straight: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

What a tagline that would make! But alas many prospects would not turn into leads and conversions.

Marketing prowess can't hold a candle to the power of the Holy Spirit and the gospel. A guy who was sitting at the bar in the brewpub where my wife and I watched the Super Bowl from a table behind him looked to be in his late twenties, maybe thirty, and after one of the He Gets Us spots he murmured: "Jesus." I braced, expecting him to say something more. But he didn't, perhaps remembering his Hispanic grandmother.

After the Sunday service before the big game, I and one of the other attendees of our church, a salesman and former municipal judge, got talking about our conversions. After relating the fits and starts he went through, he said somebody finally told him about Jesus, and he wondered: "Who is this Jesus?"

He found out, as did I. And one thing is clear: he isn't the plastic Jesus of the He Gets Us campaign.

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