

MARK DRISCOLL

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CRAZY**

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7 OBJECTIONS TO
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Christians Might Be Crazy
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PREFACE

A PROJECT FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

I was hoping to release the findings of the massive project this book is based upon some years ago, but a complicated season kept that from happening. As I've thought and prayed about it, though, I've come to believe that God intervened specifically to keep this book for a more urgent time—the painful culture war that we're now living through—so that these findings would find an eager audience among believers struggling to genuinely and effectively live out their faith in a culture turning against it.

This research was conducted in 2013, before the 2016 presidential election that ushered in the current culture war. Perhaps the findings of this research were a bit prophetic, revealing what was on the horizon and what has now become our current political, moral, and spiritual crisis. If the research is in fact accurate, then a deep and profound tectonic spiritual shift was well under way in Western culture and has since erupted onto the surface.

Another recent shift that has precipitated the release of this book was the passing of Billy Graham, the beloved Christian leader who helped define evangelicalism to generations of Americans. His passing leaves in question what will become of that movement. Widely associated with the political Right, evangelicalism now lacks a singular primary leader, and it seems impossible in the current contentious climate that anyone will be able to assume the mantle Billy Graham gracefully carried for so many years.

But it's precisely because of these massive changes and the uncertainty of what lies ahead that I believe the time is right to provide a thorough, researched, and charitable analysis of spirituality, morality, and politics in America—to help Christians reengage our culture with the authentic, life-giving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

THE DIVIDED STATES OF AMERICA

“You don’t want to know.”

That was my British friend’s answer to my question, “What do Brits think about politics and culture in America right now?” He shared his thoughts as we sat munching on nachos in Dallas, Texas. Born in Africa, living in London, and often traveling the world, he said that most people outside of the States are utterly shocked and ultimately confused by the acrimony in America.

I explained to him that America is currently one big dysfunctional divorced family. As one social commentator rightly said, the Republicans on the Right are the Daddy party and the Democrats on the Left are the Mommy party. Those who feel unsafe vote for Daddy to increase military spending, crack down on crime, and protect the family. Those who feel uncared for vote for Mommy to increase social spending to improve health care, housing, and education.

So in our last election, some would say, the family of America was forced to choose between a mommy and a daddy. Many would say the choice was between a bad mommy and a bad daddy.

The election was a bitter custody dispute to decide who would keep the house (in this case the White House) and get custody of the kids now that Mommy and Daddy were officially divorced and not going to reconcile.

Today, we’re living in the aftermath of that bitter divorce. Mom and Dad really don’t like each other, and all the kids know it. Some of the kids sided with Dad and think crooked and conniving Mom is to blame for all the pains and problems we’re suffering. Some of the kids sided with Mom and think Dad is a domineering and dangerous bully. Some of the kids are caught in the middle, overwhelmed with stress and anxiety because they can’t bear to see the family always fighting. While still other kids ran away from home and are trying to ignore everyone and everything because they’re just sick of being drawn into all the family drama.

How about you? Did you side with Dad or Mom? Are you trying to bring the family together, or have you checked out and decided to run away?

Wherever you fall, if you’re a Christian, you likely feel the precariousness of how this defective situation affects your faith—particularly what it means for how you live it out in public. Most believers aren’t able to wholeheartedly endorse the dysfunction on the Left with Mom or on the Right with Dad. We live in a very polarized culture, which seems more divided than ever. And I

even sense that spirit and attitude seeping into the evangelical church. Many people are afraid to identify with any group—be it political, religious, or ideological—as they could be attacked for it.

Add to this climate the overwhelming and often negative effect of the 24-hour news cycle and constant social media bombardment, and you begin to see a society at its breaking point.

But the heart of the matter is still the same, and that means our heart as Christians cannot change. Despite all the apocalyptic rhetoric, I've discovered as a pastor that most individuals are still concerned with the issues that affect them personally: family, finances, work, and finding fulfillment and meaning in life. People have their own problems and need help. They're looking for strong teaching that can encourage and equip them to keep going. They long to become overcomers, instead of merely being overcome. This provides the church an opportunity to do something especially unique in our day: to be a healthy loving family where disagreements result in discussion but don't require divorce. In an age where seemingly everything is political—including entertainment, sports, and even funerals—you and I can be a third family, the family of God. Made up of members of the Left and the Right who love one another and seek to honor the same Father who is over the entire family, we can speak life and hope into our broken culture.

Sadly, as you'll see in our project findings, many people think that Christianity is old, outdated, and irrelevant. But in fact, Christianity is timeless and its biblical message is always timely. Writing to a church in a culture just as fractured, frustrated, and faulty as ours, an early Christian leader who was familiar with riots and prison said that there are only two ways to live your life: You can plug your soul into the world of godlessness, or you can plug your soul into the Spirit of God.

If you plug your soul into the godless world, Paul promises that you will experience the following: “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these” (Gal. 5:19–21). Sound familiar? This is a natural life. This is Western culture, especially in America.

If you plug your soul into the Spirit of God, Paul promises that you will experience the following: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). Sound fanciful? This is a supernatural life. This is Kingdom culture where Christians choose to live by the power of God's Spirit.

That's the life you and I are called to lead today.

So what does a supernatural, spiritual life look like? It looks like Jesus. Jesus lived under the godless rule of Rome, was constantly harassed by mobs, suffered smear campaigns against Himself and His mother, was falsely accused, wrongly tried, declared guilty though He was perfect, and murdered amidst a cheering riot.

As a Bible-teaching pastor, I have great news for you. You may not change the world from being an ugly place, but you can keep the world from changing you into an ugly person. The key is to live by the same power that Jesus did. You can experience God's power, have emotional health, and live a fruitful life that feeds others hope and joy in a starving world filled with grief and fear—and you can do that in today's culture. Helping you embrace and pursue that mission is the aim of this project.

CHRISTIANS MIGHT BE CRAZY

“Yeah, Christians might be crazy.”

That was my honest answer to the guy who asked if I had considered I might be nuttier than a Planters factory. I had just finished preaching that God had become a man, was born of a virgin, lived without sin, cast out demons, healed the sick, waterskied without a boat, died on a cross for the world's sins, rose three days later, ate breakfast, hung out for 40 days, and ascended to heaven to take His throne and rule over creation until He returns to judge the living and the dead.

The guy was new to church. I had spent an hour highlighting the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But this non-Christian felt like he had wandered into a lecture at the Flat Earth Society.

I've preached almost every week for over two decades, starting when I was a new Christian in my early twenties. Most of my adult life has been spent studying the Bible. Along the way, I got a graduate degree in how to accurately read, understand, and apply its text. Like most Christians, I sometimes get so familiar with the Good Book that I forget how downright crazy it can sound to outsiders.

This guy and I did not agree on whether or not the Bible was true, but we did agree it sounds odd if you stop to think about it. As he processed the sermon, he doubled back to make sure he heard me right:

“If there is a God living in heaven, why would He come down here to work some dead-end job?”

“Virgins don’t have babies.”

“Nobody is perfect. How could anyone conclude that about Jesus?”

“How in the world can some guy just do miracles?”

“So all our sin got hung on Jesus?”

“Dead people don’t come back unless it’s in some crazy zombie horror film.”

“You think I’m going to hell to burn forever?”

After he unloaded those thoughts, there was a silence like an awkward elevator ride. The look on his face was exactly what you would expect if I had told him I was a taco.

My first instinct was to spin my message to make the Bible more reasonable to a secular worldview. I could soften some claims and smooth out some of the rougher edges. But I had preached what I actually think—what God’s Word actually says—so I owned it.

“That’s what I believe,” I said.

“Did you ever consider that you might be crazy?” he politely replied.

I couldn’t help but laugh as I responded, “Yeah, Christians might be crazy.”

I appreciated his honesty, and I told him so. I respected his effort to understand what Christians believe even if he didn’t accept it. He was a likable guy with a quick sense of humor who seemed open to hearing more. We met once a week to discuss what crazy Christians believe. That lasted a few months until he moved away. I sent him off with a gift of a nice Bible. We emailed for a while, but eventually that fell off. I don’t know where he is now or if he ever became a Christian, but I still pray for him.

Our conversations were incredibly helpful to me as a pastor. He had provocative questions. He was open about his disagreements. And the more we talked, the more we understood each other, even though our views remained at odds. Honestly, I would benefit from more these kinds of ongoing conversations. And I believe the same can be said for most Christians, including you.

HONEST CONVERSATIONS

What do people *really* think about Christians? What do they say about us when we’re not in the room? That’s what this book will help you understand. And that’s critical because Jesus Christ instructs us to love our neighbors,

and one of His most outlandish commands is that we show kindness even to people we consider enemies. We are compelled to value them as people made in God's image, to understand what they believe, and to wrestle with what they feel. It is infinitely important that we uncover their real attitudes toward God so we can respond to the points where they think followers of Christ are crazy.

I have spent my entire adult life as a senior pastor in large cities where the majority of people is as close to believing the Bible as I am to birthing a baby. I'm used to the questions of skeptics, and maybe you are too. But the questions that people are asking have changed, and our approach to engaging the previous generations for Christ is no longer relevant. At one time, our main task was to convince people that a supernatural world *could* exist. Now they already believe that. They think that God permeates and animates every part of the natural world. But *that* God bears little resemblance to the personal God of the Bible.

To offer people real answers, we need to get at their real questions. Then we can address them as they are, not as caricatures of who we perceive them to be. So, I started brainstorming ways to get truthful information from a range of people who do not embrace the historic beliefs of the Christian faith. This led to two extensive research projects: a phone survey and face-to-face focus groups.

PHONE SURVEY

To get at people's real questions, I commissioned a rigorous study examining the attitudes and perceptions of Christianity among the *Unchurched Nones* and *Dechurched Dones*.

- The *Unchurched Nones* attend worship services every few months—or less—and did not regularly attend worship services at any point of their life, including as a child.
- The *Dechurched Dones* attend worship services every few months—or less—but at some point in their life regularly attended worship services, including as a child.

For reliability and credibility, we secured one of the world's leading market research firms to conduct the survey. GfK Public Affairs & Corporate

Communications randomly dialed 913,425 telephone numbers to obtain a reliable and nationally representative sample of a thousand Unchurched Nones and Dechurched Dones. Three-quarters of the survey participants were Dechurched Dones. One quarter was Unchurched Nones. The people who took the call and engaged in conversations that lasted an average of 12 minutes were all between ages 18 and 44, with a median age of 31. Here is an overview of what we discovered:

Religious Affiliation (“Which of the following best describes your religious affiliation?”)

Christianity: 51%
Islam: 2%
Buddhism: 2%
Judaism: 1%
Hinduism: 1%
Other religion: 13%
No religion: 30%
Refused: 1%

Christian History (“Have you ever, at any time in your life, affiliated with the Christian religion, or not?”)

Yes, a Christian: 60%
No, not a Christian: 39%
Refused: 1%

Religious Participation (“How often do you attend worship services, not including special events such as weddings, funerals, or major religious holidays such as Easter, Yom Kippur, or Ramadan?”)

Every few months: 13%
Once in a while: 50%
Never: 37%

Childhood Religious Participation (“As a child, did you *ever* attend worship services regularly—by regularly we mean at least once a month or not?”)

Yes: 75% (Dechurched)

CHRISTIANS MIGHT BE CRAZY

No: 25% (Unchurched)

People who identified as Christians: 77%

People who identified as non-Christians: 22%

When we undertook this survey, my main objective was to discover the primary objections to Christianity from the Unchurched Nones and Dechurched Dones. The following list of their objections comes from a subset of the survey, those people interviewed who claim to be Christians. This research reveals that, in addition to non-Christians, even those who say they are Christians are opposed to beliefs that are historically held by mainstream, Bible-based Christians from a wide variety of denominations and traditions. Participants named numerous objections, but seven rose to the top.

TOP SEVEN OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIANITY

1. Some Christian groups are too intolerant.	55%
2. The Christian faith and I have different views on social issues like abortion or gay marriage.	50%
3. I don't like how some Christian groups meddle in politics.	49%
4. Many Christians are hypocrites.	45%
5. There are lots of religions, and I'm not sure only one has to be the right way.	42%
6. Christians believe that all people are not created equal.	29%
7. I don't share the beliefs that the Christian faith tells me I should.	28%

There were interesting insights in all the data we gathered. I was a little surprised that the Dechurched Dones and Unchurched Nones listed the same top five objections to Christianity in the exact same order. The survey showed that older participants objected to Christianity less because their views differed with Christianity and more because of the intolerance they perceive in Christians. The survey showed that men and women posed similar objections to Christianity, yet women objected more often to

perceived intolerance while men disliked Christians meddling in politics. We will explore these points in greater detail later.

The survey uncovered other objections as well that didn't fit within the seven main arguments but are definitely worth discussing. Some revolved around specific doubts about God's existence or goodness. Some participants expressed that they simply did not feel "a fit" with Christians or their beliefs. Others cited bad experiences with churches or Christianity as a whole when they were children or youth. None of these can be ignored, because people matter.

16 ADDITIONAL OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIANITY

Some of the additional issues people raised are concerns of classic Christian apologetics—the reasonable defense of Christianity against all objections—but they don't drive the conversation like the top seven reasons listed above. Even so, if you and I are to re-engage today's culture in honest conversations about the Gospel, it's important to take note of these common objections:

1. Christianity is about making money, not religion.	26%
2. The Christian faith is not relevant to modern times.	21%
3. The key concepts (virgin birth, miracles, the resurrection, etc.) are not plausible.	19%
4. If God exists, why does He let cruel things happen in the world?	19%
5. I can't be who I am in the Christian faith.	19%
6. My parents pushed religion on me too forcefully growing up.	19%
7. The Christian faith looks down on me because of what I believe in.	18%
8. I believe in another religion.	17%
9. I don't fit in.	15%
10. I have too many doubts to consider myself a Christian.	14%

11. There is not enough evidence to support the ideas of Christianity.	13%
12. Christianity is too extreme for me.	13%
13. There is no proof that anything Christians believe in actually exists.	13%
14. If God exists, why doesn't He show Himself?	12%
15. I don't need Christianity.	12%
16. I don't believe God exists.	12%

NON-CHRISTIAN CHRISTIANS

A growing number of people who profess to be Christians have beliefs that are often at odds with historical biblical Christianity. This is particularly true of younger generations. What began as the Emergent Church many years ago has expanded to include so-called Red Letter Christians, Progressive Christians, Inclusive or Accepting Evangelicals, and the Spiritual but not Religious folks, to name a few.

The sentiments driving these groups seem to be an underlying current of deep dissatisfaction with Christianity combined with an unwillingness to abandon it in total. In the meantime, expect their efforts to be trumpeted as prophetic acuity by the Left and pathetic apostasy by the Right. Time will tell, but maybe an entirely new religion will emerge from these Christian movements, much like Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons in the past, claiming to still be Christian but rejected by mainstream Christianity.

Regardless what the future holds for such movements, I think it's clear that the research in this book captured a sentiment and mood regarding historical biblical Christianity that has existed for some time and is just now welding into a moral, political, and spiritual coalition because of the current political and social pressure.

But why now? What has changed that seems to be unifying people's underlying objections to Christianity into an increasingly unified and combative voice? In part, I think the right atmosphere has been made possible by such things as blogging, social media, and other platforms which allow people to gather into hives online with their own version of the

Queen Bee—that is, their own version of whose view is right or perhaps more importantly, whose is wrong. At times, multiple hives can then swarm together like bees to attack a common enemy. For most people, a bee sting or two is not deadly. Hundreds of stings, however, is an entirely different matter. So it is in our digital day where hate, intolerance, and fear are on the rise.

Telling everyday people that I am a Christian—much less a pastor—ranks as one of the top 10 worst things to say at a party. It is a conversation stopper. I might as well say I do animal testing for a cosmetic company.

I understand why the conversation shuts down. I was briefly a Catholic altar boy who did not meet Jesus until I was a 19-year-old college student. I once had a long list of my own problems with Christianity, and I would have felt uncomfortable discussing them with a pastor. So, I'm not surprised that non-Christians who do speak up often pull their punches in an effort to be polite in person. While I appreciate that consideration, I would prefer to get their thoughts about Christianity unedited. This is not so I can crush their argument, but so I can respond with truth, grace, and, above all, love.

Loving our neighbors includes sticking around to hear their honest impressions and questions. As soon as you are *outed* as a Christian in some social setting, people tend to hide what they really think about your faith. Sure, rare people start a discussion. A few want to let us have it on the spot. But the average person wants to sit down and talk about Christianity about as badly as they want to sit next to someone on a flight who has a nagging cough caused by the flu. That's why we need to find a safe way for real folks to have real conversations about what they really feel about Christianity.

FOCUS GROUPS

While the phone survey revealed people's most common objections to Christianity, it didn't reveal why they held those objections. For that insight, I wanted faces instead of numbers. We needed free-flowing conversations rather than one-sided responses. As an objective means to that end, I commissioned focus groups of men and women in four major U.S. cities: San Francisco, Phoenix, Austin, and Boston. These eight focus groups met for roughly two hours each. Most had eight or nine participants, ages 18–44, with an emphasis on 25- to 34-year-olds. Each group was moderated by Susan Saurage-Altenloh, who has personally facilitated more than 1,700 focus groups on a wide variety of subjects in her nearly three decades of work leading Saurage Research, Inc.

Focus group participants all had at least a high school diploma. Roughly two-thirds held a college degree. The majority was Unchurched—that is, these people do not attend either a Protestant or Catholic church, nor have they ever. Some were Dechurched, maybe attending as a kid or at some other time in life, but not anymore. A few Dechurched folks reported going to church for holidays or other occasional visits. The groups included adherents of other religions as well, along with a good mix of Nones who classify themselves as spiritual but not religious.

Notably, participants also included some folks who seemed like they'd be fun to spend a few hours with eating chicken wings and throwing darts. Melissa in Phoenix introduced herself saying, "I'm a mom of three. I have a 17-, 15-, and 12-year-old. I am married to my partner. Been married for a little over 15 years to my wife.... I'm probably an extreme individual. I wouldn't choose life any other way. Born into a Jehovah's Witness family with a Baptist father. A good mix. I choose not to go to church today. Swear to God." Melissa seemed like she'd have fun campfire stories to share.

Lee in Boston jumped in to the conversation saying, "I've had a lot of great conversations, for instance, with what I would frankly call 'more cool,' laid back Christians, who identify themselves as being very religious, but for example, they have no issue talking openly and plainly with me and my husband. They don't recoil, like 'Oh my god, I'm talking to a gay, I might catch the gay.' That kind of thing. Then there's the other end of the extreme, like the people who instantly yell out at my husband and me, 'Repent, ye sinners!'... Things like that are a very big turnoff to me." Lee was honest, even gracious, and consistently revealed a great sense of humor and wit.

CHRISTIANITY IS VERY OPPRESSIVE

The aim of each focus group was to generate honest conversations about Christianity. Participants were asked about four key concepts used by a number of evangelical Christian groups to define Christianity—the Bible, the cross, activism, and conversion.

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| Bible | The Old and New Testaments are the authoritative source for all matters of faith. |
| Cross | God died as a man to save sinners. |

Activism Belief in Jesus Christ should lead to practical change in how a person lives and treats others.

Conversion People must be converted to faith in Jesus to escape eternal punishment.

In each group, the moderator explained the goals and ground rules before asking the first question: “What are your thoughts when I say ‘Christians’ and ‘Christianity’ and ‘the Church’ and ‘Jesus?’” What we heard in response was nearly all negative. Many of the women in Austin, for example, said things like:

“I have a negative connotation with all of those words. I feel like they might try to recruit me or the place might go up in flames when I walk through the door. I feel judgment.”

“Part of me goes on the defensive. I feel like I have to defend myself.”

“When you say you’re Jewish, people try to convert you, and it’s like, ‘Okay, met the guy. Not interested. Thank you.’”

“Pushy and unrespectful [sic], because growing up I just felt like I was pushed into going to church.”

“The evil Southern Baptists. There are great Southern Baptists that you drink beer with, and then there are the evil ones that you just want to get away from.”

“I often associate those words with extremists. Though I know that that’s not the case—I have lots of friends who are Christian and go to church every Sunday—but those words generally tell me the extremist view. Extremists of all religions terrify me. It almost invokes fear in me.”

“The concept of Christianity is very oppressive, and it pisses me off most days.”

CHRISTIANITY ALMOST SEEMS LIKE THIS DARK CLOUD

Admittedly, sprinkled among these negative comments were occasional positive remarks about a specific aspect of Christianity or acts done by Christians. But these comments were few and often subdued. One participant noted that she held mixed feelings despite having a relatively positive experience with Christianity in the past:

“I think of a lot of my former friends because I used to be involved in the church. A lot of my former friends are more like, I don’t know, medium-tempered Christians. That was my experience with it, so I think of them. My first reaction is like, ‘Oh, my old friends. I wonder how they’re doing.’ It was a part of my past so it’s almost close to me—but part of me is also—because of my history with it—it’s like half ick.”

Then there were decidedly negative thoughts about Christianity, like this comment from a woman in Austin:

“I feel it’s very stifling and it’s not very open, and it was almost designed to be a group of people to go against a lot of other types of faiths. I think a lot of times Christianity is just this overarching thing that is almost like something to be scared of because of what the Christian church has done.... It breeds hate and intolerance and fear. You’re teaching children that if you mess up you go to hell. You’re teaching people to help other people so that you don’t go to hell and to ostracize people.”

She continued,

“I think when you go into a place that Christianity is the major influence, it’s not that everyone is super nice and sweet and friendly and living the way that Jesus taught you. I don’t think that Jesus really even has that much to do with Christianity now. I think that a lot of times, it’s judgment, and that people who have nowhere else to go to answer these questions. Instead of looking inside themselves, they look for authority in the church. I think that it gives people an excuse to be hateful to other people and to feel like they’re better

than them.... And the rules of how they treat women too—it's very overwhelming and I think that's why Christianity almost seems like this dark cloud to me when I hear it.”

The responses from the other focus groups for men and women in other places were similar. Christianity was “a turn off” and “a bunch of rules.” Others said, “Conversion, coercion, it's the same.” One added, “It's like radical Muslims in that there's no talking to them. Nothing is up for discussion.”

CHRISTIANS ARE BRAINWASHED IDIOTS

Another common assumption that emerged in every group is that Christianity is intellectually inferior to other beliefs. As Daniel in San Francisco said:

“Where are these people coming from? Where are we drawing these Christians from? Is it from here? Is it from Missouri? I guess what I'm saying is that the label itself is almost meaningless. Unless we were talking about the average American Christian, which I see as... they're white people. They're from the middle of the country. They have not very progressive views. They have probably very regressive views about social and cultural issues. I'd say they're probably less intellectual, less curious, less affluent. Those are all the things that I think about when I think about the average American Christian.”

Others had similar thoughts:

A woman in Boston said that the Christians she encountered “don't have any education. They've gone to high school. They haven't done any college, so conversion for me is very negative. It means uneducated. It means somebody who is not a deep thinker... just a sheep.”

A man in Phoenix noted that Christians were “uninformed, uneducated... and not thinking for themselves. They're just following organized religion instead of thinking for themselves.”

A woman in Austin stated that she thinks Christians are “very brainwashed by [Christianity] and hypnotized by it, and they don't necessarily mean to be hateful or intolerant.... They're not as smart as

me. I think a lot of it is just how they were raised, and it is a cult thing.”

When it came to making decisions, participants argued that Christians are unable to think for themselves:

One man in San Francisco said, “I don’t care what [the Bible] is telling you to do. What do you feel internally? What do you actually believe, and then go with that. Be true to yourself. Screw this whole other higher power that you think is telling you to do something. I want you to do what you feel is right.”

In Phoenix a woman said: “They’re [Christians] saying that this is the authority, this is the one in charge. How can that be when ultimately it’s my decision and I’m in charge of my own self, my own choices?”

A man in Phoenix said: “A lot of people lean on religion, or Christianity to say, ‘Christianity told me that I can’t commit sins, I shouldn’t adulterize [sic], I shouldn’t murder, and I shouldn’t steal,’ and that kind of thing. I don’t feel, for me personally, that I need that to tell me, the religion or Christianity to tell me, that I shouldn’t be doing these things.”

And getting right to the point, another woman in Austin said: “In Christianity you’re essentially closing off your common sense and closing down your ability to think and you’re worshiping an idea or a book or a thought. Christianity itself is based on the idea that you can’t trust yourself because you are bad. Common sense, your primal feelings, your primal actions, your primal desires can’t be trusted.”

The conversations occasionally dripped with academic snobbery, including a man in Boston who said of most Americans who identify as Christians:

“I bet we’re all college educated. I don’t want to say all of us, but some of us have beyond college educations. The average American is not college educated. College education equates to 25 percent of the population. Seventy-five percent have not gone to college. The vast majority are idiots.”

CHRISTIANS ARE A PROBLEM

The problems we heard from the Unchurched Nones and Dechurched Dones were consistent in tone and content across all eight focus groups, men and women, from around the country. And remember, these were free-flowing conversations among total strangers. They hadn't met until they introduced themselves at the start of their group. They had never met the professional facilitator who convened their gathering. They knew they were being recorded in audio and video. They knew their conversations were part of a research project, although they did not know which project in particular. The facilitator asked open-ended questions, not leading questions that would drive the conversation in any particular direction.

In the end, every focus group invariably spent substantial time discussing the seven top issues uncovered in the phone surveys, even though the participants were not prompted in that direction. What we learned in the face-to-face focus groups confirmed the findings of the phone surveys: People take issue in very specific ways with what Christians believe and how we act out our faith. They have a major problem with Christianity. The question is how will you and I respond.

Understandably, Christians reading this will likely feel emotional and defensive. But I encourage you not to throw a pity party. We both know that Christians often talk about outsiders in ways that are no more tolerant, loving, or kind than what you've just read from the Unchurched and Dechurched. But that doesn't make their statements any less difficult to digest. We wonder what to do. Or what to say. Or what *not* to do or say. If you've ever found yourself confronted with such opinions, you might find it awkward to stick around, strike up a conversation, and attempt to explain your faith. Instead, Christians today tend to duck and cover.

After all, it's now perilous to pray in public.

A while back my oldest son was playing Little League baseball. He threw a hard pitch and felt something pop in his arm. He had a shot of instant terror that something had gone very wrong. I ran out on the field, concerned for my son. With the players and parents crowded around, my first instinct as a Christian dad was to pray for my son. But trust me, you could watch 20 seasons of Little League and never see a dad rush the mound and pray for his kid. I hesitated. If my son wants to go public with *his* faith, that's different than *me* putting his faith out there.

I am a preacher. I am already out and public with my faith. The game

was on a Sunday, so I showed up after I preached. But out on the mound I was doing a raging internal monologue. I was running scenarios in my mind. With all those other families there, I was second-guessing myself. *Do I do what I would normally do as a parent—hug my son, tell him I love him, pray over him? Or is that not appropriate—because nobody here agrees with that? By loving my son will I make him feel like a Christian freak in front of his friends?*

In those moments, you wonder whether the person you are privately should go public. There are lots of occasions just like this that you and I face every day. For example, maybe you're at work or school or hanging out in the neighborhood, and someone says, "Man, I got diagnosed with cancer," or "My spouse and I are splitting," or "My kid is off the deep end," and your first instinct is "Can I pray for you?" But then you wonder, "Should I say that?" Maybe a solid spiritual thought comes to mind that you know would encourage someone, but then you question, "Should I share that?" Plenty of Christians are in that place right now. We are not the dominant culture. Fewer and fewer people are interested in your views and many flat-out reject them. Your beliefs are considered intolerant, pushy, and offensive. And so, as Christians, we second-guess our instincts on how we should interact with the culture we're called to love.

LEAVING JESUS AT CHURCH

Frankly, we are at a cultural impasse with guns drawn. You can sense it in your social networks, the workplace, classrooms, and even your extended family. And amidst this tension, a lot of Christians have resigned themselves to simply stay quiet. Maybe that's where you are today. Like so many other believers you've said to yourself: *I think we're losing. Jesus and Christianity aren't very popular. So it's probably best if I just keep my faith quiet. I'm not going to engage the people around me because their objections are pretty strong. I don't know how to respond to them. I don't want to put my faith on social media because I don't want to pay the social and vocational cost. My religion is just going to be a very private, personal thing for me or my family.*

In the eyes of popular culture, Christians have become bigots who stand *against* equality and stand *for* little else. We are hypocrites who fail to practice what we preach. We are exclusivists who threaten anyone who does not accept our truth. As we assess our position, we have to admit we've lost many battles of the culture wars. The reign of Christendom has officially run its course. If culture is a game of musical chairs, then the music stopped playing,

and for what seems like the first time in the history of Western culture, we lost our seat.

In this confusing new context, our new default is silence. And many Christians are even second-guessing whether or not we are in fact correct in our biblical stance on foundational theological issues. Our culture is deeply divided into two warring entrenched teams—the Left and the Right—and they despise one another. As a result, seemingly every issue that arises explodes into an online prison riot complete with mattresses on fire and the guards who try to calm things down without getting shanked.

And a growing group of Christians is thinking, *People hate us. We're lobbing grenades at each other. Can't we make some concessions so nobody gets blown up? Can't we negotiate this? Can't we edit the Bible a bit and hope that God is okay with us waving the white flag on a few issues like gender, sex, and marriage?*

And there the discussion ends. Communication is cut off. Because our default is to talk *about* each other but never *to* each other.

Again, that's why I wrote this book. I want to have a genuine conversation about people's problems with Christianity so that you and I can have similar conversations with others—and learn how to love our neighbors even when they don't love us back.

And, yes, I'm talking about people who might think you're crazy.

EXPERT INTERVIEWS

In this book project, I draw on the experience and expertise of top Christian thinkers and leaders who have carefully considered the objections raised by the Unchurched and the Dechurched. Once I reviewed every bit of data from the phone surveys and every word transcribed from the focus groups, I undertook the third part of my research, tapping some of the brightest minds on the planet to get their insights about the issues. I conducted one-on-one interviews (largely over the phone but some in person) with many of these experts, which were then transcribed. A few chose to instead send emails, which were equally enlightening. Much of their insight encouraged and convicted me about how I live out my own faith and engage others for Christ, and I'm excited to share their wisdom with you to help you explain, in a loving and compelling way, why biblical Christianity is both true and good.

Those interviewed for this project include John Frame, Norman Geisler, John Piper, James Robison, Eric Metaxas, Wayne Grudem, Al Mohler, Greg Koukl, Ravi Zacharias, Darrell Bock, and John Townsend.

PEOPLE IN PAIN

As I've said, my goal in this book project is to help you lovingly communicate why Christianity is both true and good, offering help in responding to objections raised by people who are made and loved by God. But I don't want us to lose sight of the real people from our study who inform our conversation—because they reflect the thoughts and feelings of the world you and I must engage: your co-workers, your neighbors, your in-laws, and your community.

Several focus group participants expressed great negative emotion toward Christianity, like the Phoenix man who said, "I had a friend that actually got born again and evangelical, and it broke my heart." But it is perhaps the story of a lesbian woman from Austin that best displays the deep pain behind some of the objections we hear to the Christian faith. She explained that her problems were not theoretical or historical. "It's very emotional for me," she said. "I lump all religious people of any kind together.... I probably do stay away from them because of my experiences.... I have a negative association with even the word *God*. I don't even care for that.... I've had many negative experiences with religious people, but one person in particular, and it's very vivid in my mind." And then this woman told her story:

"When I was about 14, I was walking down the street with my girlfriend, holding hands. We stopped and sat down on a curb. We were having a discussion.... I had a really tough upbringing. Some lady came around the corner in a Suburban and was screaming out of her window, 'You're going to hell,' and cursing at us every profanity and got about two inches from us in her Suburban and tried to run me over. 'F-you' and 'You're disgusting,' and all these things. 'You're going to hell.'"

She continued sharing with a mixture of fear and graciousness:

"I realize it's a very dramatic example. I feel like even on a much smaller level that most religious people have those thoughts even if they don't act on them to that extreme. That's just one example.... My family is all very religious. They think I'm the one who has gone astray, and they keep telling me I'm going to be saved one day. The clouds are going to open up, and I'm going to find my true self. Honestly I will. I appreciate whenever they tell me, 'I'm praying for

you.’ I say, ‘Thank you very much. I need all the prayers I can get.’ I don’t know that I believe in all of that, but it couldn’t hurt.”

Most people would agree that her encounter with a hateful SUV-driving Christian was extreme. But her painful story lets us see beyond our own assumptions into a world where religious people are considered anything but safe.

BAD CHRISTIAN PARENTS

After the focus groups were complete, I spoke with the facilitator, Susan Saurage-Altenloh. I wanted to hear her personal insights on the project. When I asked if anything surprised her, she replied that she was taken aback by the impact of parents on participants’ religious views and feelings. The habits they set in the home deeply and often negatively impacted their children as they grew into adulthood and started having kids of their own. “I wanted to go back and talk to an awful lot of mothers and fathers,” she said. The men and women she talked with “were individuals who were formerly engaged in a relationship with their church or their faith and who had turned away. They might still maintain a spiritual component in their worldview—even appreciating or respecting spiritual considerations—but they have turned away or never been involved with the church because they’re fighting a lot of bad experiences.”

If you’re a Christian reading this, these realizations should make you more compassionate and understanding toward people who display strong and even emotional opposition to Christianity. For some, past experiences have so hurt them that they see the Christian faith as something unhealthy, unwanted, and even evil. As you read this book and begin to understand the passion with which some people hold negative views about Christians and Christianity, I invite you to see them through God’s eyes and consider some of the hurt behind their remarks so you can learn to listen differently.

People who have had painful experiences with religion tend to engage on an emotional level, and their pain makes their beliefs highly compelling. Christians who lack firsthand experience of those hurts tend to engage on a philosophical and theoretical level. That doesn’t make their responses untrue, but it often makes them unhelpful because they’re received as devoid of compassion, grace, and love. Worse yet is for a Christian to respond to someone’s objections with anger or offense. That only reinforces a person’s fear and pain. I can tell you that I have been guilty of that, and God has used

Susan's insight to convict me of that in my own Christian witness. Our goal should be to serve, engage, and endure with the valuable people God has created, meeting their intensity with love. Because you and I both know that God does that with us.

One final remark about this project from a personal perspective: It has been a labor of love amid the demands of being a husband, father, and pastor. But, I believe it was critical, because I have a lot to learn on how to better speak to the real issues of people's lives and how to help other believers do the same. The questions that drove apologetics in the last century occupy fewer and fewer minds and hearts. If we are answering questions that people are no longer asking, we are wasting time. We are off mission. We need to come to grips with the fact that we have lost many of the battles of the culture wars. But that's not a reflection of the power of the Gospel. It's a call to go back to the heart of Christ and reengage our culture with our feet firmly planted in His grace and truth. Learning how we can better be loving messengers of biblical Christianity is the task before us—and it has eternal implications. The answer isn't thinking that we have to edit God's Word in order to truly love people. God commissioned Christians to be His messengers, not His editors. And it's time for us to start spreading the true and life-giving message of His Word and leave the results in His hands.

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

So, what are you going to do now? Our research and my own experience show that the Unchurched and Dechurched have serious and personal problems with Christianity. They certainly take issue with Christians. But they do often have the same hang-ups about Christ. We can get dragged into all kinds of arguments that do not help them interact with Jesus. We can expend all kinds of off-topic energy and still not compel them to consider Jesus. So it is crucial that we distinguish between Christianity and Christians on one hand and Christ on the other. They are not the same thing, and we cannot expect the people we meet to have a firm grasp on any of them. Finally, I've written this book with the expectation that many readers will be Christians trying to navigate how to live out their faith in a culture that mistrusts and even maligns biblical Christianity. But that doesn't exclude other readers who might be coming to this book from a different place. As you read this you might be:

PREFACE: A PROJECT FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

- a person who is Unchurched or Dechurched
- a Christian with a foot (maybe even two feet) out the door
- a Christian who feels overwhelmed by the objections to your faith and unsure how to respond
- a ministry leader trying to provide helpful answers to real people
- a parent or friend concerned for loved ones and wanting to get a resource like this book into their hands

If you fall into one of those groups that take issue with Christians and Christianity, don't put this book down. I hope you've seen by now that my heart is not to attack you or bully you into belief. My hope for you is that you'll see through the caricature of Christianity through some honest conversations and encounter Jesus Himself. In the next chapter, we will explore why many people think that Jesus freaks are intolerant bigots.

OBJECTION #1:

INTOLERANCE

“Jesus freaks are intolerant bigots.”

The school counselor asked the Christian mother, “You don’t want your child to be an intolerant bigot, do you?”

Our stunned friend was unsure how to respond. It was spirit week at the public school. The students were encouraged to dress according to various themes each day of the week. The themes included things like ’70s day where you dress up in disco clothes and transgender day where you wear rainbow colors or dress up as something other than your usual gender preference. As a minority in her school, the Christian middle-school student didn’t feel comfortable dressing up for transgender day, so her mother called the school to see what options their family had. She was shocked to be told that her child could conform or be considered an intolerant bigot.

If there was one objection to Christianity that took center stage in our research, it was intolerance. More than half of the participants in our phone survey (55%) ranked it their number one issue, and the belief that “some Christian groups are too intolerant” reverberated through every focus group. Intolerance led the list for every demographic—women, men, people with no church background, and people who once attended church but have left.

JERKS FOR JESUS

When people cite intolerance as their top concern, I get where they are coming from. I flash back to an outing with my family to a state fair, a two-week September blowout billed as the biggest party in the state and one of the largest fairs in the world. All seven of us were there for a day packed with “delicious food, wild rides, dazzling entertainment, and fun for the whole family,” as advertised. On this occasion, some hell-fire and brimstone street

preachers were pestering fairgoers outside the gate when they happened to recognize me. These sign-waving, sidewalk-blocking, King-James-yelling zealots surrounded my family. We were trapped by a wall of signs and bodies. They bullied us all the way to our car, screaming through bullhorns at my terrified young children. Why were they angry with me? Because they recognized me as a preacher and felt I was a coward for not using their method and joining in their mayhem. They wanted to convert everyone to their brand of our faith, including me. At that moment, I found myself on the team with the non-Christians, and it was not fun.

Most Christians I know are honestly great folks that you'd enjoy having over for dinner. Others are so intolerant that they don't even tolerate other Christians! Among the most awful people I have ever encountered are self-righteous, holier-than-thou religious types who claim to be Christians. Maybe you've encountered them? Some Christians are simply jerks for Jesus. I've been guilty of this myself.

As an outspoken Christian leader, I have often been accused of being intolerant. I regrettably agree with some of those charges. I have never hesitated to speak my mind, and I don't always think before I speak. Fortunately, in my case, a little gray hair, taking a fair bit of pounding, and a little more wisdom seem to go together. I have also noticed that Christians are not the only intolerant people in the world. Try smoking on an airplane. Or go to a vegan restaurant and order a steak. I bet you find tolerance neither alive nor well. Moreover, sometimes people who brag the loudest about their own tolerance are in reality the most intolerant people you could ever meet. But let me start by reporting some key points people in our focus groups said about us Christians.

PUSHBACK

Without fail, every group in every city we surveyed railed against Christian hostility toward homosexuals. There was also widespread pushback against other moral restrictions, such as our stance against abortion or sex outside of marriage or unmarried people making babies. We heard sweeping statements about the narrow-mindedness and negative impact of Christianity. A woman in Austin said, "The intolerance of it has led to just a lot of destruction of culture." A guy in Phoenix said, "It's almost like tunnel vision. They see what they want to see." It probably doesn't surprise you that many people beyond the walls of churches consider those within intolerant, bigoted,

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discriminatory, and unloving.

Many individuals who spoke up in our focus groups felt judged by Christians. Some even felt condemned for their mere external appearance.

A woman in Phoenix said, “I used to dress very dark in high school. I wore all black; I had eyeliner. I didn’t really do the hair.... I wouldn’t classify myself as Goth by any means, but my color choice was always black. I figured everything looked good in black. Wearing black and wanting to pierce my ears a bunch of times, half of the Christians that I talked to thought that I was Satanic.... It’s so ridiculous to look at somebody and immediately peg who they are just by how they appear. When I would go to church with my friends there would be women that would be pointing me out going, ‘I think that girl’s having sex.’ I maintained my V card until after I graduated high school. It’s ridiculous to say you have to look a certain way.”

Others felt judged for their outlooks and attitudes, especially if they questioned or rejected Christianity.

As one woman in Austin stated: “One thing that I don’t like is the idea that Christian groups think that they are basically the most blessed, the best, and that everyone else is broken. Everyone else needs to be fixed.”

Another woman said, “You can’t even have a conversation hardly with a religious person. They automatically take you as being combative even though you might be honestly asking a question.... You can see their blood pressure going through the roof and then they’re upset. Then they start, I feel, becoming insulting or criticizing your character for the fact that you don’t just believe or that you’re asking questions.”

Patrick in Phoenix shared a story that drives this point home: “[At] 10:30 on a Saturday night, my friend’s 12th wedding anniversary. His mother-in-law looks me square in the eye. She says, ‘You believe in God, right?’ We proceeded to have an hour-long discussion as to why I don’t. She proceeded to call me the Devil and then said, ‘I pray you get a DUI on the way home.’ She couldn’t accept that someone

had a different thought as to God.... Her little world didn't have any alternatives. It was either that or you were just... I think she saw horns coming out of my head.”

INTOLERANCE IS THE ISSUE UNDER EVERY OTHER ISSUE

Perceived intolerance among Christians ran through virtually every comment we heard. In fact, our findings both in the phone survey and face-to-face focus groups reflect not a list of random objections to Christianity but rather a single problem playing out in multiple arenas that frame the chapters for this book. This point is critical and cannot be overstated. There is one cultural war, and that war is intolerance. The intolerance war is fought in various arenas regarding different topics, but every time the battle wages over the fundamental issue of tolerance. People cannot agree about anything unless they first agree about one thing—intolerance. Non-Christians see intolerance in our approach to:

Sexuality: Christians disapprove of fornication, abortion, and same-sex marriage.

Politics: Christians use politics to inflict bigotry on others.

Morality: Christians are critical of others yet overlook their own hypocrisy.

Religion: Christians are intolerant of other beliefs when they say that Jesus is the only way to salvation.

Equality: Christians suppress the rights of women when they argue from the Bible that a husband should lead the family and that only men should be pastors.

Authority: Christians who regard Scripture as true and other teachings as false are xenophobic.

If this list uncovered by our research looks familiar, it's because these are the issues that explode in the news over and over and over.

BLACK AND WHITE AND GRAY

Nones and Dones feel that Christian intolerance is like a death grip on black-and-white ideas in a world gone gray. Take a look at how Tony from Boston sees the problem:

“To me, it’s a religion that is absolute. There’s [sic] not gray areas with evangelical Christians. It’s black or white. It’s correct or wrong. It’s interesting listening to all of us say what the middle ground is, even in our wording of things. We weren’t thinking middle grounds of things. We were judgmental of them. You can describe a group and not be judgmental with them. Maybe I’m doing it myself by saying black and white, but that’s, to me, just a statement of fact that’s neutral. Some people may be fine with being black and white, some people prefer shades of gray. It doesn’t make one thing more correct than the other.”

What you hear there is an assertion that Christians should abandon black-and-white thinking in favor of more tolerant gray—which is inevitably presented as a more nuanced, intelligent, and loving way of seeing the world. You should stop thinking in terms of right and wrong in favor of blending all possible choices and actions into a vast pool of acceptable options.

But pay careful attention to how Tony argues that people with gray minds are right and people with black-and-white minds are wrong. How does he do it? He falls back on black-and-white thinking to assert that black-and-white thinking is wrong, and that gray thinking is right. He has to lay his black-and-white cards on the table. Tony goes on to say:

“Personally, in my life, I don’t have room for evangelical beliefs. I’d like to say it’s because I’m logical.... I have faith entirely in myself. I don’t have the same beliefs, but to give it to somebody else, just have an open mind. If something really feels wrong with it, then back out. When I said dump it, that’s my black-and-white response.”

People who claim to be gray thinkers are anything but consistent. They use black-and-white thinking when it is to their advantage, like Tony. As much as people claim to live in a world of gray, it is as if they shuttle between two homes. They move into a black-and-white home to judge the behavior of

others. They relocate to their gray home to justify their own behavior. They might like their gray home better, but they head to their black-and-white home when it benefits them.

MEET THE INTOLERISTA

As I read more than 400 pages of focus group transcripts over and over for insight into what people think and feel and why, I was struck by their constant efforts to sound gray even as they speak in black and white. It seems that the key to speaking out against intolerance is to find a way to do it without seeming intolerant.

Like poker players with a tell, the focus group participants signaled their true intent with language like “I think,” “I feel,” “for me,” “to me,” “I personally believe,” “not to judge,” “in my opinion,” “personally,” “from my perspective,” “in my experience,” “I believe,” “my belief system,” “not to be stereotypical,” “not to be judgmental,” “from my understanding,” “in my mind,” “in my life,” “in my case,” and “I try not to be judgmental, but...”

Those verbal qualifiers do nothing to alter the black-and-white statements that followed. To say “in my experience, Christians are bigots” is no less black and white than “Christians are bigots.” It does not change the basic assertion to say, “Not to be stereotypical, but Christians are greedy,” rather than, “Christians are greedy.” It seems like everyone, including you, is an intolerant hypocrite.

When I was in high school, our friend group would often pile into one of our cars to go find something to do together. Maybe you have some experience with this. If so, you know it never ends well, as one of our friends proved. He had a nasty habit. Thinking he was funny, he would wait for a strategic moment while someone else was driving and with all his might pull up the emergency brake that sat between the driver and passenger in the front seat. Immediately, the car would screech to a halt.

Today, the relational version of that emergency brake is calling someone intolerant. Once someone pulls that, the conversation—and typically the relationship—screeches to a halt.

OLD TOLERANCE VS. NEW TOLERANCE

The Western world has actually experienced a radical redefinition of tolerance. Dr. D. A. Carson explains the difference between the old tolerance and what he calls “the new tolerance.” In his book *The Intolerance of Tolerance*,

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he examines the progression of dictionary definitions of tolerance and points out a subtle but massive shift from “accepting the existence of different views” to “acceptance of different views.” Tolerance once meant “recognizing other people’s right to have different beliefs or practices,” but now means “accepting the differing views of other people.”¹

Do you see the profound implications of that subtle shift? Under the old definition, two people disagreed without abandoning their position. They naturally thought the other person was mistaken but tolerated their ideas nonetheless. Carson points out three assumptions underlying this scenario: First, objective truth exists. Second, the people who disagree believe their view is true. Third, by sorting through their disagreement in a reasonable manner, both sides have an opportunity to arrive at the actual truth. But as Carson notes, the new tolerance “refuses to adjudicate among competing truth claims and moral claims on the ground that to do so would be intolerant.” It “becomes a synonym for ethical or religious neutrality.” The old tolerance “actually *requires* you to take a stand among competing truth and ethical claims, for otherwise you are not in a position to put up with something with which you disagree” [emphasis in original].²

Tolerance by definition means disagreement, because you don’t tolerate people that agree with you. You probably enjoy them a lot! So tolerance necessarily means that people do not see eye-to-eye.

Tensions spike between Christians and non-Christians because we tend to think and speak in terms of the old tolerance while others more often than not fall in line with the new tolerance. Christians assume tolerance means figuring out how to get along with people you think are wrong, so that everyone survives to debate another day—and maybe even learn a little something. But much of our world is no longer on that quest for truth. No one is ever right or wrong. As you’ve seen already in the sentiments of our focus groups, one idea or behavior is as good as another. If that is the case, we should not only tolerate differences but approve of and even celebrate everyone and everything as equally right. To put it bluntly, unless you show up for every parade and wave every flag you are an intolerant bigot.

YOU DON’T NEED GOD TO BE GOOD

This shift toward a new tolerance started in the mid-60s but only now dominates public thinking to the point that it tops the list of objections to Christianity. Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl trace this change

back to the values-clarification curriculum introduced in many public and some private schools. Beckwith and Koukl quote the curriculum developers boasting that this approach imparts no specific set of values: “There is no sermonizing or moralizing. The goal is to involve the students in practical experiences, make them aware of *their own* feelings, *their own* ideas, *their own* beliefs, so that the choices and decisions they make are conscious and deliberate, based on *their own* value systems [emphasis in the original].”³

This approach says we should establish our own personal standard of morality based not on objective absolutes but on subjective values. It dethrones God and His universal standard of morality that is apart from us and to which we are accountable, and in His place enthrones our own personal standards of morality. It denies that we are fallen and sinful but instead trains us to trust our own “feelings,” “ideas,” “beliefs,” and “values.” The bottom line is that many people think that you do not need God to be good.

This is exactly how I thought before I became a Christian. I assumed I was a pretty good person with a decent idea of right and wrong who lived a good life by my own instincts, conscience, and perspective. My life worked. I was happy. As a college student, I enjoyed picking up bits and pieces from sociology, psychology, theology, anthropology, history, and philosophy that I relied on to make choices. When I started reading the Bible, every page pulled me into a fight. God was intolerant of some of my behaviors. He took exception to some of my beliefs. He stood in authority over me, judging me and telling me I needed to change. I resisted that. I could not agree with that. It was like I was a cat and the Bible was a hose. But I eventually had a change of heart and mind that caused me to stop straining against God and start surrendering to God.

FLUNKING THE TOLERANCE TEST

It is easy to deny the existence of moral absolutes until we somehow get trampled—and then we are quick to cry out for justice. When you suffer grave harm, no one has to convince you that some actions deserve not tolerance, but punishment. Sexual assault victims, for example, never complain that their values or feelings were violated. They understand that an old-fashioned word like *evil* better describes their pain.

The new tolerance seems like a wiser, kinder, and gentler way to do life in a world rife with extremism. It seems to value the underdog and give voice to the groups and individuals who have been silenced. But as an overarching

ideology, the new tolerance leads to anarchy and misery—the very things it seeks to halt. The new tolerance flunks the test of real life. And isn't that what we're after here? Honest conversations about real life that lead to real life-changing answers?

Everyone draws lines. We do not let drunk people drive. We do not let smokers light up in hospitals. We do not let sex offenders teach children at school. We do not let 30-year-old men marry 15-year-old girls. We do not let people lacking eyesight join the military and shoot guns. We do not let illiterate people graduate from Harvard. Why? Because we know these things are wrong. So wrong that we deem them intolerable.

Many focus group participants sensed this tension. The harder they tried to consistently apply the new tolerance the more they realized the dangerous road they were hurdling down. They hedged their statements with provisions like “if no one gets hurt,” which is subjective verbiage anyone could use to excuse their own bad behavior, or “if they are consenting adults,” a stipulation that forces us to ask why we tolerate things from 19-year-olds that we do not with 16-year-olds. Is that not arbitrary and intolerant?

Christians are correct to resist feeling pressured to approve or celebrate things that go against their core beliefs. And that's how the give-and-take of life works. No one expects vegetarians to root for butcher shops or environmentalists to lose their voice cheering at a monster truck rally. Sometimes our best response to charges of intolerance is to say with genuine love and concern for the truth, “Hey, wait a second, you say we're intolerant? You're intolerant too.”

TOLERANCE IS A THEORY, NOT A REALITY

When our facilitator asked the group in Austin if they thought they were being judgmental of the Christian faith, one responded, “That's all we're doing, right?” When she wondered aloud if being judgmental is part of human nature, another ventured that it was. Check out the conversation that ensued among the various participants:

“I don't think being judgmental is bad, personally. I think the way that most people think about it is bad. Yes, it's a constant. Like you said, it's human nature. We all look at somebody, we look at a situation, everything, you make judgments and you make your decisions based on those judgments. If we didn't have any judgments then you

would just be an idiot, you wouldn't do anything for any reason.”

“No sense.”

“Yes, you have to have some kind of understanding of what's going on, right.”

“You're making judgment calls, basically.”

“It's what you do with that judgment and taking other pieces of information through religion that can lead to very negative things. But it can also lead to very positive things. They're just completely dependent on how you take that information and put it into some kind of action....”

“Sometimes it is perfectly logical, and obviously, we have to make thousands and thousands of those calls every day probably, in some way or another. I would say, to me, a judgment has to be a leap some way.”

“But when I take that leap and then start condemning other people for it and telling them that they have to be as me, or else.”

“I'm not saying there are not judgments that are inappropriate.”

“Yes. You've got that sliding scale where judgment goes from how to live life to how to harm others.”

“I agree with that. I think that it's not necessarily wrong to think that someone should do something a certain way. Every philosopher, period, has done that. They've all thought that their way of thinking was the best way, or maybe not the best but what should people probably do. Anyone who is talking about morals is talking about how they think people should do things. The difference is when you start to go from, 'I judge people should do this' to 'I judge people do this and unless they do I think this is going to happen to them' or 'I'm going to do something to them....’”

“I've met some people before, in life, who approach things more from the standpoint of, 'This is what truth I feel like I've found for myself. I'm not going to tell you whether it's right or wrong because it works for me and that's as far as I'll go with it. If you like it and want to play around with it in your life, cool. Otherwise, don't worry about it.' Yes, that's just sharing their own personal experience and that's, yay, do that all day long.”

These guys had the guts to admit they were being intolerant. The problem? They shifted the argument to say their own intolerance was good but other people's intolerance was bad.

GOOD BIGOTS AND BAD BIGOTS

Not all the focus groups saw they were doing the same thing they scorned in others. So the facilitator served up a real-life scenario. She asked the San Francisco women: “You’re an 18-year-old going to college and your roommate is an evangelical Christian. Knowing that, do you switch roommates?” Here was the conversation that followed:

“That’s a factor.”

“That’s prejudiced. That’s like finding out somebody’s gay, or finding out somebody’s a different ethnicity. That’s full-on prejudiced, to just say, ‘I know one thing about this person, and I don’t want to room with them.’ That’s going against everything we say we have a problem with, with them. That seems totally wrong. If they’re a jerk, and they happen to be an evangelical Christian, that’s something different. Based on their faith, that’s pure prejudice.”

“I think it’d be more likely for them to be judging me, than me judging them....”

“I feel like all the judgments being made are more just the whole institution of it, but with individual people, you don’t know how they’re going to be....”

“I feel like we’re bashing them.”

“Yes. If I believe in that and I found out my roommate is an evangelical, I would probably want to switch.”

The issue of tolerance moved from the theoretical to the personal. They claimed to oppose intolerance. But at least some of the San Francisco women were unwilling to live by their own rules and room with a Christian. Their response was—in their own words—“prejudiced,” “judging,” and “bashing.”

I don’t know about you, but I’m not feeling the tolerance. Imagine if participants made these comments about African Americans. Women. Asians. Homeless people. Left-handed people. Democrats. Homosexuals. Pick a group. Do you think the conversation would have continued? Intolerance isn’t just a Christian issue but a human issue. It is not a case of the tolerant versus the intolerant but the intolerant versus the intolerant. So how do we find our way forward? By looking at tolerance biblically and practically from the Christian perspective that God is, in fact, intolerant.

IS GOD TOLERANT OR INTEROLANT?

In high school, I was not a Christian. Some Christians in our large public school, however, wanted to change that. Year after year, we would have debate after debate. They would try to convert me, and I would try to disprove them. At some point in nearly every debate, they would tell me that I was going to hell because I was a sinner. At that point in the conversation, I would pull out the only Bible verse I had committed to memory and say, “Thou shall not judge.” For me, this was my ace in the hole.

Many who make no claim to follow Jesus are especially critical of what they see as the failure of Christians to live up to their own principles of tolerance. As a guy in Phoenix put it, “The basic belief of Christianity is that you’re not supposed to judge your fellow man.” He continued,

“Saying somebody is going to go to hell because they don’t believe as strong as the other person, or because they did something, that’s a sin. The basic pretext of Christianity is supposed to be tolerant, compassionate, loving, forgiving, merciful. But there’s [sic] a lot of examples in the Bible where biblical figures, they pass judgment on their fellow man. They demonstrate hatred for their fellow man and most definitely not very compassionate.”

But as we saw in the earlier conversation between our facilitator and the focus group in Austin, a complete lack of judgment about what’s right, good, and true leads to chaos and is ultimately impossible to endure in reality. More than that, it leads to a real devaluing of someone else’s ability to think and their inherent dignity as a human—able to stand apart from the animals to think, and feel, and follow deeply held convictions.

So could it be that tolerance is dangerous and intolerance is actually a good thing? Let’s find out.

THOU SHALL NOT JUDGE?

I need to point out that asserting tolerance as the core of Christianity misses the point. The message of the Bible from start to finish is that Jesus came to save sinners and bring them to an eternity in heaven. But this guy makes an argument we heard repeatedly, and which I’m willing to bet you’ve heard

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yourself. Group participants continually quoted one particular Scripture in some form or other: “Do not judge others, and you will not be judged” (Matt. 7:1 NLT). Even people who knew little of the Bible were quick to quote this verse, putting it out there multiple times in multiple cities to argue for complete tolerance where no one is ever allowed to judge anyone else.

Read in isolation, that verse seems to prove their point. We might think we should imitate an imaginary Jesus who wanders the countryside speaking poetry and religious pleasantries. That interpretation, however, ignores the rest of the passage, which says:

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye. Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you. Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?” (Matt. 7:1–9 ESV)

Interpreting Scripture is like understanding a conversation. If you only catch a line or two in the middle you could easily misunderstand the whole of what was said. Likewise, the same easily happens if you grab a line of Scripture without checking the context. In Matthew 7, Jesus rebukes religious leaders who condemn others for sins they tolerate in their own life. Jesus Himself judges them when He calls them hypocrites who have logs protruding from their eyes. He even calls some people “pigs,” an extreme offense in a culture that considered pigs religious pollutants. A few verses later in Matthew 7:15, Jesus rails at “false prophets” who are “wolves,” yet another stinging judgment. What Jesus forbid was not all judging but rather rash and hypocritical *judging*. That warning hits home for me. It was religious leaders who attacked Jesus the most viciously.

All of this is why Jesus said in John 7:24, “Look beneath the surface so you can judge correctly” (NLT). How Christians can judge correctly challenges every generation. Throughout history there has been a nonstop stream of voices that try to steer the church away from black-and-white thinking and mix everything into gray. They attempt to combine the right teachings of the Bible (thesis) and the misguided opinions of culture (antithesis) into a new gray mess (synthesis). This is often done in response to cultural pressure to update, modify, and edit biblical teaching to make it more palatable to its detractors. This “liberal” or “progressive” Christianity marries the church to the changing culture instead of the unchanging Christ. Some Christians still seek a gray way in the name of progress, enlightenment, and love. They accept all sexualities, spiritualities, and ideologies under the banner of the new tolerance.

DUALISM VS. MONISM

Biblical Christianity requires black-and-white thinking because it’s dualistic, also known as *binary thinking*. From beginning to end, the Bible is thoroughly categorical. Satan and God. Demons and angels. Sin and holiness. Lies and truth. Wolves and shepherds. Non-Christians and Christians. Damnation and salvation. Hell and heaven. An exhaustive list could fill a book, but you get the point. The Bible makes clear distinctions and judgments between logically opposed categories.

But the mainstream culture you and I live in is monistic and rejects dualistic binary thinking. The culture does not see categories. The culture does not allow black-and-white thinking. The culture refuses to allow any categories because that would mean making distinctions, which ultimately ends in making value judgments. Instead of Satan and God, we have a Higher Power. Instead of demons and angels, we have spirits. Instead of sin and holiness, we have individual expression. Instead of lies and truth, we have your truth and my truth. Instead of wolves and shepherds, we have spiritual guides. Instead of non-Christians and Christians, we have everyone defined as God’s children. Instead of damnation and salvation, we have whatever works for you. Instead of hell and heaven, we have people who go to a better place simply because they died.

Monism is a religion. It may not be formal like Christianity, but it is a religious view of the world that rejects dualistic binary thinking. Ultimately, this is a battle between the God of the Bible who is intolerant and the gods of this world who are at war against Him, if you believe the Bible.

NEITHER TOLERANCE NOR UNICORNS ARE IN THE BIBLE

It might surprise you that even as the Bible speaks of God in terms of holiness, love, justice, and mercy, it never suggests tolerance as one of His attributes. A simple English word search of the entire Bible in the most popular English translations shows few if any appearances of the word *tolerance*. The handful of times it does appear in various translations, it is used pejoratively to describe an evil done by God's people as they "tolerate" things such as sexual sin (1 Cor. 5:1) and false teaching (Rev. 2:20).

The New Living Translation speaks of God not tolerating other religions (Exod. 20:5; Deut. 5:9), injustice (2 Chron. 19:7; Mic. 6:11), sinful behavior (Ps. 5:4, 101:5), or teaching based on the beliefs of other religions (Rev. 2:14). Reading the Bible does not exactly support the conclusion that the God of the Bible is tolerant or that His people should embrace the new tolerance (or the existence of unicorns, in case you're wondering).

For Christians, this is bedrock. Who God is, how God acts, and what God commands override all other commitments. While we do not want to appear unloving toward people—especially people we disagree with—we also do not want to be unfaithful to the God whom we believe deserves our love and loyalty. Asking a Christian to approve what God disapproves is akin to asking a daughter to wind up and slap her loving father in the face in the name of being loving toward the neighbor kids who hate Him.

GOD AIN'T TOLERANT, HE'S PATIENT

While the Bible says nothing about God being tolerant, it speaks often about God and His people being patient, loving, and forbearing. This strikes at the heart of how you and I engage the culture around us.

The verse quoted in the rest of the Bible more than any other is God telling us He is "the LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation" (Exod. 34:6–7 ESV).

Based on the conversations we've read so far, those first claims by God would astound many outside the church today—and even more so if you and I reflected those same qualities. God's attributes are compassion, mercy, patience, love, and justice. But it's those same incredible attributes that

necessitate black-and-white thinking. God sees some things as “iniquity, rebellion, and sin” and not just preference, taste, and perspective because He is truly loving. And God allows our bad behavior to continue—including my own faults and failings—not because He is tolerant but because He is patient.

If God were merely tolerant, Jesus would not have needed to die in our place for your sins and mine. He would not be holy, and we would not be unholy. There would be no failure on our part that needs fixing. But in compassion, mercy, and love, God came as Jesus Christ to live the life we have not lived and die the death we should have died. God shows patience not because we do not need to change but because we are stubborn and slow to change. The leader of Jesus’ disciples, Peter, says it this way, “The Lord isn’t really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent” (2 Pet. 3:9 NLT). God’s patience far exceeds the new tolerance. God tolerates us—as He seeks to change us—because He loves us.

LOVE CHANGES YOU IN A WAY THAT TOLERANCE NEVER CAN

On all matters, including tolerance and intolerance, Christians are to imitate God’s example. Speaking to a church in the ancient city of Ephesus, the apostle Paul commanded Christians to “always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love” (Eph. 4:2 NLT). And writing to a church in the ancient city of Colossae, Paul says, “Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:12–14 NLT).

In bringing up our faults and sins, the Bible demonstrates that there is in fact, black and white, right and wrong. But Jesus died that we might be forgiven and changed, so that we can in turn forgive others that they too might change. This is the old tolerance. It is a grander vision for society than the new tolerance, because it holds out hope of a change into something far better, a radical recreation the new tolerance does not hold as a virtue since it is unwilling to call someone out of wrong and into right. This is the vision of Jesus in calling you and me to love both our neighbor and our enemy. He

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knew we would not agree with everyone but needed to love everyone. This is made more difficult when we are mocked and maligned. But by God's grace, not impossible.

BIGOTRY AGAINST CHRISTIANITY

Being a Christian today is a lot like when someone calls you a name as a kid. You feel ashamed and put your head down and walk away. Getting called "bigoted," "intolerant," "unloving," or "discriminatory" is just the adult version of playground name-calling. They might as well say, "You're fat," "You're stupid," "You're ugly," and "You're dumb." Plenty of Christians are wrestling with that dynamic these days, saying, "Hey, I just got called some really bad names and all these other kids were watching. I quit."

Here are some of the "playground name-calling" words and phrases our focus groups used to describe Christians and what we believe:

- misguided
- crazy
- selective hearing
- psychologically manipulative
- dangerous
- hypocrites
- corruption
- dogma
- scamming
- indoctrinating kids too young to think for themselves
- oppression
- want to be told what to do
- conformity
- ignorance
- blind acceptance
- weak personality
- closed minded
- a little too happy
- overbearing
- militant recruiting
- reprogramming
- brainwashing extremists

almost a gang
obnoxious
creepy old white men
anti-science
organized religion
yuck
turning into a monster
whack job religion

As a Christian, this doesn't sound very tolerant to me. How about you? And I think we have enough real-world evidence to question if the same kind of name-calling would have occurred if a group other than Christians were under discussion. But that has nothing to do with how you and I respond.

It's all too easy for us to become defensive, but stop for a moment and think about Jesus. As soon as He shows up in Scripture, the name-calling begins. The town gossip is filled with awful, uncorroborated accusations like: *His mom has slept with such a parade of men that Jesus' paternity is a mystery. He's a liar. He's from a small, backwater town. He's uneducated, His dad's a blue-collar nobody who's clearly a dope because he believes his wife's crazy story about getting pregnant while still a virgin.* Then, Jesus grows up and the religious people accuse Him of being an alcoholic who performs miraculous works by the power of Satan. Everybody gets a crack. But Jesus didn't quit, and He never stopped loving.

FLEXIBILITY AND FREEDOM

As scholar Nancy Pearcey points out, the only way to counter the rampant negativity toward Christians is to craft a positive message. "How do we present Christianity in a way that shows that it has even higher ideals—that it is more inspiring, more humane, than any secular worldview?" she asks.⁴

I believe we need to demonstrate that Christianity is far more tolerant, flexible, and helpful than any other option. We should be confident that while the Bible is admittedly inflexible on some things, it leaves significant room for culture and conscience. It gives immense latitude for group and individual freedoms.

Consider this: Christianity exists across innumerable cultures and languages and has done so for a few thousand years. The Bible is far and away the most translated book in the history of the world, with at least the New Testament available in nearly 1,500 languages and translations under

way in more than 2,500 more.⁵

What makes this amazing cultural adaptability possible is that the Bible provides far more principles than details. The Bible tends to focus on a person's heart and motives, giving commands that provide freedom fitted to various cultures. This is necessary because actions can have wildly different meanings in different cultures. Extending your right hand to someone is a common greeting in America, for example, but in cultures where you use your right hand to clean yourself in the bathroom, that would be the height of disrespect.

Christian missionaries working in various cultures refer to this as *contextualization*. They are keenly aware how complex it is to faithfully carry out biblical commands in differing cultures. Many would argue that Christianity is the most tolerant and adaptable of all religions in world history because it has entered more diverse cultures than any other institution—religious, political, or otherwise.

What about personal conscience? The Bible allows each individual to make personal decisions on many things, though not all things. This includes whether or not one marries (1 Cor. 7:25–28), whether or not one eats foods such as meat (1 Cor. 10:28), and what day one chooses to take as a Sabbath day (Rom. 14:5–6). In reality, the Bible leaves thousands of everyday decisions up to individuals.

A LOVING FATHER PUTS A FENCE UP

An analogy about God's laws might help. I am a father. I love our five children. When our kids were small, we lived on a busy street. The first thing I did when we moved in was get a fence built. That fence provided boundaries for my children, and the reasoning behind the boundary was not restriction but affection. I was not trying to take anything good from my kids. I was attempting to keep bad things away.

As long as my children played within the boundaries of the fence they were free to play whatever games they wanted and do pretty much whatever they liked, as long as it was not dangerous or harmful.

In Christianity, God is also a Father. His principles for what we should do and not do are like pickets in a fence. God wants His kids to safely have fun in the enormous yard of life He has provided them to enjoy without hopping the fence and getting hurt. Admittedly, many Christians do a bad job talking about their Dad and their yard and their fun. They get obsessed

with the fence. To the neighbor kids on the other side of the fence, they seem intolerant and unloving and not fun at all. And no one ever wants to come over and play with kids like that. But what if the neighborhood kids saw us having a blast? Not just because we're safe, but because we're free to run without fear. That's what we're after.

PRACTICAL TOLERANCE

With degrees from Princeton, Yale, and Westminster Theological Seminary, Dr. John Frame has written some monumental works that help define orthodox Christianity in the modern world. I asked him via email what tolerance today should look like. In a gracious personal reply, he pointed out "every individual or group accepts some beliefs, practices, and people in various ways, and rejects others. So we are all tolerant and intolerant in different ways. It is unreasonable, therefore, either to favor or to disfavor tolerance in general." He adds, "So when someone says, 'Some Christian groups are too intolerant,' we need to find out more specifically the nature of the complaint. What groups? What are they 'intolerant' of? How do they express this intolerance? Is this kind of intolerance good or bad?"

When people start flinging mud at us, we should pick it up and get a good look at it. Maybe put it under a microscope and study it. We should under no circumstances throw it back. Frame suggests that we analyze tolerance through a three-part grid.

Should we tolerate *perspectives*? Of course. We cannot expect Christians and non-Christians to think the same. But like Dr. Norman Geisler said in an interview I conducted for this project, "We should respect those whose views differ from ours, even if we believe they are false. They have a right to be wrong. Freedom of thought demands that we respect views that differ from ours. But no valid principle demands that we accept contrary views as being true."

We cannot agree when facts are false. Geisler adds, "Opposite views cannot both be true. For example, if atheism is true then theism is false and vice versa. Likewise, if Muslims are right in claiming that Jesus did not die for our sins and rise from the dead three days later, then Christians who say He did are wrong. Both views can't be true."

Should we tolerate *practices*? When it comes to other religions and alternative sexualities and such, it depends on what we mean by *tolerance*. We will not sanction gay marriage ceremonies in our church. But say you

move next door to a gay couple. Of course you should love them and be the best neighbor you know how. You can still hope they would meet Jesus and walk in repentance.

Should we tolerate people? Absolutely. It's where the Bible talks about loving our neighbor. So somebody says, "Are you tolerant?" You say, "Well, I really love people, and I'm willing to live in relationship with people that I really disagree with as long as we can be open and honest. I can talk to them about what I believe, and even be open about some things I'd like to see change in their life for their own good. And maybe they would like to see some things change in me." I have friendships and loving relationships with all kinds of people that disagree with me on all kinds of things.

But as Frame pointed out in our interview, different situations might demand different *levels* of tolerance. "In the church, for example, we might welcome someone to our worship service, but refuse him as a member." We might have different standards of tolerance for people who attend compared to church leaders and pastors.

TAKING ONE FOR TEAM JESUS

I played in a baseball tournament when I was 13, and the kid was throwing so fast there was no way in the world we were ever going to get a hit off him. Somehow, he walked a kid and then threw a few wild pitches, so we had a runner on third base. My coach came up and said bluntly, "Mark, I need you to get hit by the pitch." I gave him a look that said, "You know he's going to kill me, right?" But my coach wouldn't let it go. He kept pressuring me to take one for the team. He said, "No, crowd the plate, lean over, and when the ball comes, just turn, and let it hit you. For our team to win, you have to get on base." And you know what? It worked. Sometimes you just have to take one for the team, and that includes Team Jesus.

The culture is watching Christians more intently than ever. They are thinking, "Whatever team quits first is the one that doesn't really believe." In their eyes our fortitude proves or disproves the truth of what we claim to believe. When the gay rights movement first started, it was a minority group that was viewed with disparagement and called horrible names. And what did they do? They hung in there. Or consider it this way: If a guy today is on his rug praying toward Mecca openly and publicly at the airport—post 9/11—he is probably pretty committed to Islam. It is not bandwagon time for Islam in America. So if I wanted to know more about Islam, I would pick

him, because I want to talk to the guy who *really* believes and practices what he preaches.

Why in the world would we think that Christians should have less fortitude than people who are committed to their sexual identity—or to another religion? We shouldn't. And we can't. The bravery and commitment Jesus calls us to stands out because it's supernatural. People are going to call you names when you live out your faith, but your recourse isn't anger or fear, it's love. You're called to speak the truth and live the truth in love. So hang in there. This is just the beginning, but you and I are not alone. In the next chapter we will explore the war over hot-topic social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

OBJECTION #2:

ABORTION AND GAY MARRIAGE

“I have different views on social issues like abortion or gay marriage.”

As you read this, you are probably wearing pants. Which is why you may be interested to learn that some of the most animated discussions in our focus groups for this project had to do with pants. “When can I take off my pants?” “Where can I take off my pants?” “Who can be in the room when I take off my pants?” No, I don’t mean literally. But figuratively, one of the biggest problems people have with Christianity is all about the right you have over your own pants. “These are my pants, you can’t tell me what to do with my pants, and just because you quote a really old book called the Bible doesn’t give you a right to tell me what to do with my pants.” And this tension really hits home when it comes to the hot-topic social issues of our day. Half of our survey participants (50%) agreed that “the Christian religion and I have different views on social issues like abortion or gay marriage.”

I have been a pastor for more than 20 years. And while I can attest that people have always been quick to throw off what they consider outmoded values, the pace of social change *has* picked up. In recent years, we have seen same-sex marriage legalized, recreational marijuana decriminalized, and physician-assisted suicide largely approved. These are the kinds of issues I have discussed with numerous folks like Barbara Walters and Piers Morgan with the cameras rolling. I have seen what I believe about these issues misrepresented and rejected. And it seems inevitable that even issues like polygamy and other marriage alternatives will be up for consideration in our lifetime.

FEEDBACK

Once home to the legendary hippie counterculture of Haight-Ashbury, San Francisco still wears its progressive reputation proudly. I looked forward to hearing from a group of men gathered there to let us know their thoughts on the Christian faith. After introductions, our facilitator sprung her opening question: “What is your first reaction when you hear someone talk about Christianity?” It was no shock when “gay marriage” was among the first responses. Also unsurprising was the fact that every participant assumed that same-sex marriage and abortion were good things and not really up for debate. One of the guys in San Francisco brought up a Facebook video he thought was funny:

“This guy goes up to interview everybody. He’s like, ‘Do you believe gay people are born or taught? Born or learned? Nature or nurture?’ The majority of them are like, ‘I think it was taught and learned.’ He said, ‘It’s a conscious decision?’ They’re like, ‘Yes.’ He’s like, ‘At what age did you decide to be straight?’ They’re all like, ‘Uh. Well. I don’t really remember. I probably can’t say.’ He’s like, ‘Do you think it’s the same way for gay people?’ They’re like, ‘Yes, probably.’ Okay, there you go.”

No one mentioned even in passing that these practices could possibly be morally wrong. When one man stated that “the Bible says being gay is a sin,” he held it up as a key point where Christianity is mistaken.

Comments in San Francisco echoed what we heard elsewhere. In every focus group in every city, sexuality was a major discussion point. A woman in Boston mentioned hostility to same-sex marriage as a reason she left the church:

“I think that’s probably why I left the Christian church.... Jesus was this loving individual, He didn’t exclude people because they’re different. He embraced people because they were different. So the fact that the Christian church won’t embrace gay marriage or being gay is a deal-breaker for me.”

CHRISTIANS SHOULD STOP TALKING ABOUT SEX AS SINFUL

Many participants thought that Christians should quit their fixation with sexuality and move on to more important problems. Two examples from

women in Austin are particularly insightful:

“They keep bringing it up [same-sex marriage]. It’s like that’s not our biggest problem, people.... Who cares?... It’s no one’s business. If you want to believe it, believe it but you don’t have any say. It doesn’t affect you in any way. If you think a gay person is going to go to hell, let them go to hell if they need to. But it has nothing to do with you, and it’s completely just tearing our country and our society apart that Christianity thinks that it is such a huge part of our country. I hear people say on a regular basis, our country is founded on Christianity. No it wasn’t. It was founded on the fact of separation of church and state.”

“It’s just stupid, and they’re bringing it to the forefront and it doesn’t even belong there. They keep pushing it. There are better things to talk about. It’s a waste of time. That’s not being taught about being respectful. Yes, you’re right. My stepmom and dad are Christian. I’m sure they’re against gay marriage and all that but it doesn’t affect them in any way, shape, or form. If you love someone you love someone. It’s not hurting their religion if a gay couple gets married in any way. It’s just their view, and they’re wanting to push it on and think that everybody needs to think the way they think. It’s just frustrating because what they’re arguing for is just the same thing that they’re arguing against. They don’t want the government to tell them what to do in their church but yet they’re going to tell the government what they can do outside of their church.”

Daniel in Austin shared his own mixed experience of rejection and acceptance as a gay man:

“Being a gay male also, and not agreeing with a whole lot of the things that people do in the name of religion and faith, why wouldn’t you be scared? To me, people believe in God because they have something to fear, and the fear is what drives them to obey. Well, I’m not afraid but, I am afraid of you because you believe in something that could harm me eventually. I have a couple of friends that are similar to me, not many, and we have dinner together sometimes and we joke.... We say things to each other sometimes, when we see some religious people doing something or whatever, and we can agree

together, that we're like, 'That makes me afraid. I'm really afraid,' because of the things that they do in the name of religion or because of something they were taught that has to do with religion.... And I work for a Catholic company who does a lot of really great things; spends half a billion dollars a year doing charity care. I don't believe in the Catholic religion or practice anything. I'm also gay. They leave me alone. A lot of people I work with in that company knows this."

Daniel went on to explain that being gay was the way he was made. "It's beyond me. I can't change it, so why would I care about it? It would be caring that I'm Mexican, or something, and hating the fact that I was born that way. There's nothing I can do about it so I don't pay any attention to it."

In every one of our focus groups, abortion was mentioned along with same-sex marriage. The two went together as issues of personal freedom. One of the guys in San Francisco summed up what many said about abortion: "This person believes in abortion. This person doesn't. If we make it illegal, neither of them can get an abortion, but if we keep it legal this person could have their abortion and this person can *not* have abortions. That's why I have a problem with this person's view and not this person's view." Same-sex marriage and abortion were clearly hot-button issues for people outside the church. What ties these social issues together is sexuality. Both issues are immense, with each meriting its own book, but for the sake of this project, we will examine each briefly.

ABORTION

When my wife, Grace, and I first met in high school, I was strongly in favor of abortion. In fact, I was somewhat familiar with the eugenics ideology of Thomas Malthus that was held by Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood. I wrongly believed that less fit people should be sterilized or not permitted to conceive and encouraged, if not required, to abort if impregnated. I argued for this both in high school classes, as the president of our student body, and later in college classroom debates.

Grace and I had an ongoing debate, as she was a Bible-believing pastor's daughter who was consistently pro-life in her convictions. I won most of the arguments from a rhetorical point of view, but she was right and I was wrong. Today, as we raise our five beautiful babies together, I cannot even fathom what I was thinking. As a new Christian, my mind was completely

transformed on this issue in reading the Bible.

Here is a summary of the eight core biblical truths that pertain to the issue of abortion:

1. God is the Creator and Author of human life (Gen. 1–2; Deut. 32:39; Ps. 139:13–16).
2. God made humanity in His image and likeness, which means that human life is unique and sacred (Gen. 1:27; James 3:9).
3. God intends for human beings to fill the earth (Gen. 1:28, 9:1).
4. God confirmed that life begins at conception and declares that an unborn baby is a sacred life (Exod. 1:16–17, 21:22–25; Lev. 18:21; Jer. 7:31–32; Ezek. 16:20–21; Mic. 6:7; Matt. 2:16–18; Acts 7:19).
5. God knows us from our mother’s womb (Jer. 1:5; Job 10:9–12, 31:15; Ps. 119:73; Eccles. 11:5).
6. God declares that when human life is taken without just cause (i.e., capital punishment, just war, self-defense), the sin of murder has been committed (Gen. 9:5; Exod. 20:13).
7. God is sovereign over the womb and can ultimately open and close it as He wills (Gen. 20:18, 29:31, 30:22; 1 Sam. 1:5–6; Isa. 66:9; Luke 1:24–25).
8. Children are a blessing from God to be provided and cared for by parents as well as extended family and the church, including those who are adopted as Jesus was (Gen. 1:28a; Ps. 127:3–5, 128:3–4; Matt. 18:5–6; Mark 9:36–37, 10:16; 1 Tim. 5:8).

In an article I wrote for Fox News, I said this regarding abortion: “Of all the Ten Commandments, number six is the only one that our nation has codified into law. ‘You shall not murder.’ Since 1973, legal abortions in America have taken the lives of 55 million people.... That total of 55 million lives equals 17.5% of the country’s current population, is greater than the population of any state in the Union, and is greater than the population of 219 of the world’s countries including South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Australia, Argentina, and Canada. Fifty-five million is about the same as the population of the 25 smallest states and Washington D.C. combined.”⁶

I went on to explain a discussion I had with Dr. John Piper about his conversation with an abortion doctor. Piper said, “Before I could get my first of 10 arguments out of my mouth, [the doctor] said, ‘Look, I know I’m killing children.’” Piper was astounded and asked the man to explain why

he would do such a thing. “To be honest, my wife wants me to because it’s a matter of justice for women [and] the lesser of two evils in her mind.”⁷

Scientifically and medically, it is beyond debate that human life begins at conception. From the initial joining of sperm and egg, the tiny baby is alive, distinct from its mother, and living and growing as a human.⁸

While the ability to express humanity and personhood changes throughout the life cycle, human essence and human personhood are innate to the living being. No matter how tiny or weak, humans deserve support and protection because they are God’s image-bearers. Princeton professor and former member of the President’s Council on Bioethics Robert P. George rightly says:

Human embryos are not... some other type of animal organism, like a dog or cat. Neither are they a part of an organism, like a heart, a kidney, or a skin cell. Nor again are they a disorganized aggregate, a mere clump of cells awaiting some magical transformation. Rather, a human embryo is a whole living member of the species *Homo sapiens* in the earliest stage of his or her natural development. Unless severely damaged, or denied or deprived of a suitable environment, a human being in the embryonic stage will, by directing its own integral organic functioning, develop himself or herself to the next more mature developmental stage, i.e., the fetal stage. The embryonic, fetal, child, and adolescent stages are stages in the development of a determinate and enduring entity—a human being—who comes into existence as a single-celled organism (the zygote) and develops, if all goes well, into adulthood many years later. But does this mean that the human embryo is a human person worthy of full moral respect? Must the early embryo never be used as a mere means for the benefit of others simply because it is a human being? The answer... is “Yes.”⁹

Furthermore, Christians have always followed the teaching of the Old Testament Jews, that abortion of a preborn child and exposure of a born child are both murderous sins. In the *Didache*, which was an ancient manual for church instruction, we read, “You shall not commit murder.... You shall not procure abortion, nor commit infanticide.”¹⁰

Some will argue that there is a difference between a child in a mother’s

womb and one outside of it, yet the early church saw both as equal living people and the taking of life in either state as equally murderous. Their convictions were based on Scripture, which uses the same word (*brepfos*) for Elizabeth’s unborn child (John the Baptizer) as that used for the unborn baby Jesus in Mary’s womb and also for the children brought to Jesus (Luke 1:41, 1:44, 2:12, 18:15). Simply, in the divinely inspired pages of Scripture, God reveals to us that a child in the womb and a child singing and dancing around Jesus in worship are equally human beings who bear the image of God, and thankfully Mary did not abort the “tissue” in her womb.

Additionally, the Bible assumes that an unborn baby is a human life and assigns the death penalty for anyone who takes an unborn life because it is murder. Exodus 21:22–25 (ESV) says:

When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out [the Hebrew term is *yasa*, a live birth—not *shakal*, the typical term for miscarriage], but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman’s husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Indeed, not to extend legal protections to preborn children because of age, size, or phase of development is a grievous discrimination and injustice akin to racism, sexism, and ageism. Finally, the Good News of Christianity is that not only did God come to earth as a baby, but He grew up to become a man who died on the cross to forgive any and all sins—including the taking of an unborn life.

THE CULTURE CHANGED AND CHRISTIANS LOST

In many circles, cultural attitudes toward homosexuality have more or less flipped since the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* stopped listing homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1974. Once considered by mainstream society to be an undesirable psychological condition, homosexuality has rapidly morphed into a cause to be celebrated. Those who are unsupportive are said to be on the wrong side of history. Because same-sex marriage is widely perceived as a civil rights

identity issue, respectful disagreement is unacceptable because it is considered in the same category as equal rights for every race.

This puts many evangelicals in a tough spot. No matter what our motivations or how reasonably we try to make our case, we are deemed a voice of hatred. Most of us do not want to be culture warriors who appear mean-spirited toward any group, including homosexuals. But most are not ready to ignore or abandon the Bible's clear teaching. Sensing that we are on the losing team, many Christians simply keep their mouths shut. They themselves have a myriad of questions. They swim in a sea of objections from others. They are unsure how to respond.

There is one fact that all sides in this debate should come clean on and admit. Everyone believes there should be some lines drawn for marriage. At least for the time being, no jurisdiction in the United States allows more than two people to marry even though polygamists say that is intolerant and arbitrary. Nowhere are adults allowed to wed or have sexual contact with minors even though pedophiles say that such views are simply outdated bigotry. I contend these protests show that it is impossible for anyone to speak on the morality of sexuality or the legality of marriage alternatives free from their own moral code. The debate is not over whether to draw the line, but where and why to draw it.

DRAWING LINES

I am not impressed with Christians who make moral judgments based on prejudice or squeamishness. Listen to this comment from a woman in Boston:

“They will have their preacher preach to them on Sunday and go, ‘This is what you think.’ Or, they’ll read their Bible and they’ll go, ‘Well, the Bible says that gay people are bad, so I’m not going to vote for equal marriage.’ They’ll just stop right there at that book instead of going out and meeting these people and talking to them and learning about them. I have an aunt who has never met a gay couple before in her life beside what she’s made up in her head and she’s seen on TV. She’s finally met my parent’s neighbors. She thinks they’re lovely. She thinks it’s a real shame that they’re still going to Hell, but this is the first time that she’s actually even interacted with them, and it’s been positive.... If she had allowed herself to have that 50 years ago, she might be a different woman. But, the church told

her what she needed to believe, and she just took that and ran. They stop people from thinking.”

I agree with this passionate woman that we should not decide whether homosexuality is wrong based on our upbringing, personal preference, or lack of exposure to people different from us. It’s important for you and me not to simply be swayed by people’s personalities, because nice people can still get mixed up in some pretty messed-up stuff. And I will defend my going to the Bible to determine my position on this subject.

If you are not with me on that point, I hope you will hear me out. I know that this debate between Christians and non-Christians falls into a predictable ditch. The Christian quotes the Bible, and the non-Christian says they reject the Bible as any kind of authority. End of conversation. But we should all keep talking.

Since the public sphere dismisses any argument that relies on Scripture, many opponents of same-sex marriage—some Christian, some not—make their case based on natural law. They put forward arguments from what they observe in the natural world. But the lessons we derive from nature are problematic. Somehow we have to pick and choose which aspects of the wild and wonderful world to imitate. Nature gives us plenty of patterns to justify sexual license. It also provides the example of lions ripping apart baby gazelles. Which example should we follow—and why? As a Christian I argue that what we observe in nature is fallen and imperfect. Not every “natural” proclivity is morally acceptable. As Rick Warren told Piers Morgan, “Sometimes I feel attracted to women who are not my wife. I don’t act on it. Just because I have a feeling doesn’t make it right. Not everything natural is good for me.”¹¹

The long-running debates over sexual morality show that a case for or against homosexuality can also be made from history and the social sciences. But many arguments are easily dismissed and even refuted with counterevidence. The bottom line? Many Christians find arguments based on natural law, historical precedent, or the findings of social scientists helpful but also sometimes inadequate. For many Christians, the only cogent way to evaluate moral issues is by holding them against Scripture. But our position is not simply that Scripture is our authority on sex. We must take the conversation further. Our position is that Scripture reveals the fullness of what sex actually is and how it is a blessing designed by God to function within certain parameters. This is what Nancy Pearcey means when she says the church must present

Christianity in a way that reveals it to be deeper and grander than anything the *Unchurched Nones* and *Dechurched Dones* are clinging to.

WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS ABOUT SEX

Before I became a Christian, I considered myself a moral person who believed in God. But in my public high school, one group of people drove me especially crazy. The Bible-thumpers had the guts to declare something is sin—like sex outside of marriage or getting drunk—but they lacked the know-how to back it up. I fought back with a simple question: “Where does the Bible say that?” They had no idea.

I shut them up. I was not kind. But if Christians claim the Bible says something, they should know where to find it for their own sake and for others. So, whether you think the Bible gives homosexuality a thumbs-up or thumbs-down, can you point to it chapter and verse? Can you explain what it actually says? How would you respond to this comment from a woman in San Francisco?

“The stuff about gay people in the Bible, I think, is totally taken out of context. I’ve done some reading up on it, and I think it was more about a procreation issue at the time. Even talking to my parents about it, they’re like, ‘Sodom and Gomorrah,’ they’ll go on and on about it. These are stories, not to be taken word-for-word literally. I don’t see how you can read any of Deuteronomy and think, ‘Oh, this is great, living by this.’ It’s more just, they take snippets to push a different agenda, which I don’t think the Bible is even really about.”

Even if you decide you disagree with the conclusion of Bible-believing Christians, let’s at least see what the Bible says so you can consider it and see where they are coming from.

SEX AT THE START

Everything the Bible teaches about sex traces back to the first two chapters of Genesis, the book that opens with the famous words, “In the beginning...” (Gen. 1:1). Human sexuality begins in the Garden of Eden, where God created all things good. He designed male, female, and sexuality. He defined gender, marriage, and sex as He meant it to be. We see the world as God made it and before sin corrupted it. When God told humans to “be fruitful

and multiply” (Gen. 1:28), He established marriage as a covenant to be consummated sexually. Moses recorded this, Jesus repeated it, and the apostle Paul echoed it. Long before human governments existed, God created marriage and established the family unit as the first building block of cultures and nations.

Across the Old Testament there are passages that carry on this positive image of sexual love, as scholar Stanley Grenz describes:

The most explicit affirmations of sexual pleasure are found in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Several of the Proverbs, for example, are devoted to the theme of finding true sexual pleasure. This theme is expressed both through warnings against seeking sexual fulfillment outside of marriage and through assertions concerning the delight that the married person should find in one’s spouse. Above all, however, the Song of Songs is significant in this regard.... The book is best seen as an extended description of the celebrative dimension of sexuality. This literature is erotic in the positive sense of the term. It celebrates sexual pleasure and eros, the attractiveness that the lover finds in the beloved.¹²

The whole of the Bible teaches that God intended the fires of sexual passion to be contained in the hearth of marriage. But almost right from the start the flames broke past those boundaries and began a destructive pattern across the pages of human history.

If Genesis 1–2 presents the world as God meant it to be, Genesis 3 reports the human race’s terrible leap into sin. Tragically, sex and marriage were among the first casualties, as the rest of Genesis reports. We see not only the triumph of love and romantic commitment (Gen. 24:1–67, 29:20) but also the disaster of polygamy (4:18–24, 28:46–49, 29:14–29) and a slew of heartbreaking love triangles (16:1–16, 29:31–30:24). In the days of Noah, many defied God’s ban on marriage between believers and unbelievers (6:1–2). A mismatched marriage causes grief that reached to extended family (26:34–35). There are also sad accounts of a loveless marriage (29:31) and the pain of divorce (21:8–14, 23:1–2, 25:1).¹³

The Old Testament records endless episodes of sexual sin and its consequences. Examples of broken sexuality include rampant lust in Sodom (Gen. 19), the womanizing of a key spiritual leader (see Samson, Judges 16), the sexual failings of great kings (see David and Bathsheba, 2 Samuel

11–12; plus Solomon’s many wives, 1 Kings 11:1–6), and incestuous rape (see Amnon’s rape of Tamar, 2 Samuel 13:1–22). The Old Testament specifically denounces the following sexual acts:

- Fornication (Gen. 2:24–25, 38:12–13, 38:24, Lev. 21:9, Num. 25:1, Deut. 22:21).
- Adultery (Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18)
- Rape (Gen. 34:1–31; Exod. 22:16–17; Judg. 19:1–30; 2 Sam. 13:11–14)
- Incest (Lev. 18:6–18; Deut. 27).
- Homosexuality (Lev. 18:22, 20:13).
- Bestiality (Exod. 22:19; Lev. 20:15–16; Deut. 27:21)
- Prostitution (Gen. 38:21–22; Lev. 19:29, 21:9; Deut. 23:17; Hos. 4:14; 1 Kings 15:12; 2 Kings 23:7)

Notice that the Bible is restrictive on many kinds of sexual activity, and no one sexual actively is singled out. Far more items concern heterosexual boundaries.

Some Bible critics dismiss Old Testament rules about sexuality because they often appear alongside other laws we are quick to ignore, such as bans on eating pork, cutting hair, or wearing clothes woven from mixed fibers. Indeed, the Bible says, “Christ is the end of the law” (Rom. 10:4 ESV), but the subject is more complex than that. Jesus fulfilled every law in Scripture by living without sin (Matt. 5:17–18). On the cross He took our place and met the Law’s greatest demand against us: death for sin (Rom. 8:3). Those who believe in Jesus are now free from the Law and ruled by Him (Gal. 3:24–26). And although Jesus has done away with a multitude of the old laws, He specifically chose to carry on many significant moral principles, including 9 of the 10 commandments—all but the Old Testament instruction to keep the Sabbath. Most important for this debate, Jesus arrives on the scene and upholds Old Testament teaching on sexuality.

SEX AND JESUS

Jesus was a rabbi—a teacher of the Old Testament. In His ancient Jewish context, homosexuality was universally seen as contrary to God’s design. Had Jesus wanted to overturn the obvious Old Testament stance against homosexuality, He would have needed to make a lot of noise. But the New

Testament offers ample evidence that His views aligned with the Scriptures He had at hand.

Like other New Testament voices such as Paul, Jesus unabashedly grounded right sexual practice in the created order of Genesis 1–2. Robert Gagnon, who has likely done more scholarly work than anyone on the Bible and homosexuality, summarizes the evidence:

There is little historical doubt about Jesus’ view of homosexual practice. Although focused on the indissolubility of marriage, in Mark 10:5–9 he clearly *presupposed* that the presence of a “male and female” was an important prerequisite of marriage (Gen. 1:27). Only a “man” and a “woman” are structurally capable of being “joined” through a sexually intimate relationship into a one-flesh union (2:24)... For Jesus, then, the Creator ordained marriage—it was not just a social construct—as a lifelong union of one man and one woman. Both the Scriptures Jesus cited with approval and the audience addressed—indeed, the whole of early Judaism, so far as extant evidence indicates.¹⁴

Gagnon draws the conclusion in another article, “Had Jesus wanted his disciples to think otherwise, he would have had to state such a view clearly. As it is, we know of no dissenting opinions on the issue in earliest Christianity.”¹⁵

It is clear that Jesus saw the male-female marriage bond of Genesis 1–2 as the prototype for human sexual relationships. Anything outside those boundaries was off limits.

Despite this strong evidence, supporters of homosexuality nevertheless often appeal to Jesus, claiming that “Jesus never condemned homosexuality” or even “He never mentioned homosexuality.” *The Huffington Post*, for example, ran an article titled “What Jesus Says about Homosexuality.” When you click on the link, up pops a tattered old Bible flopped open to blank pages, as if Jesus came up empty on the subject. The presentation might be clever, but it proves nothing. Jesus’ apparent silence on rape, incest, or pedophilia does not make Him a proponent of those things. It simply confirms those issues were settled among the Jews. Jesus was no coward when it came to speaking up in order to rattle conventional thinking and effect change. If He was silent, it was because He saw no need to challenge the position His listeners already held.

Jesus does speak of the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The

names of these ancient cities get tossed around by both sides of this debate, but you should read for yourself the actual Bible background:

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.” Lot went out to the men at the entrance, shut the door after him, and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly.” (Gen. 19:4–7 ESV)

That quote comes from the longer story in Genesis 19:1–29. Jesus later said, “I tell you the truth, the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah will be better off than such a town on the judgment day” (Matt. 10:15 NLT). Jesus declared that Sodom and Gomorrah endured God’s righteous “judgment” because they were “wicked.” He said, “I assure you, even wicked Sodom will be better off than such a town on judgment day” (Luke 10:12 NLT). And He added, “On the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all” (Luke 17:29 ESV).

If you want to look up the most concrete texts in the New Testament on this issue check out passages like Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:9–10, 2 Peter 2:6–10, and Jude 7. As Philip Towner writes, “Contemporary arguments that advocate the legitimacy of homosexuality cannot resort successfully to the biblical texts and etymology. The exegesis of these passages is not in question.”¹⁶

You can with integrity say you accept biblical teaching—or not. You cannot with integrity say that the Bible supports any kind of sex apart from heterosexual marriage. The Bible is clear, and those who read it should be clear that they agree or disagree.

The Bible is a collection of writings that Christians have historically held to be uniquely inspired by God. We believe that God has spoken in these specific writings and given them an eternal value that transcends the circumstances in which they were written and passed down. Simply put, the Bible is not an old book that is outdated but rather a timeless book that is always timely.

The content of the Bible is for us far more than a mind game. It is a practical handbook for living. We believe that when the Bible speaks, it is actually God perfectly and authoritatively speaking through human authors. And because we accept the Bible as our authority on sexuality and every

other area of life, we strive to act on what it says. It is not surprising that we rely so consistently on the book. Our goal is to wholeheartedly live according to its truths. We do not read it as if it contains a secret that no one else can figure out. We believe that its message is plain for all honest readers. We also do not read it ignorant of the trends of our society and values of our neighbors. Instead we ask, “What did it mean back then—and what does it say to us now?”

The opening pages of the Bible say that at creation God made everything “very good.” It adds that while “God made man upright, he has gone crooked chasing many schemes” (Eccles. 7:29). When God was done, everything was good, not bad. There was only life, not death. Then sin entered the world, with the result that everyone and everything was infected and affected so that nothing today is the way it is supposed to be.

The average non-Christian assumes the world can get brighter, but the average Christian assumes the world can only get darker. The non-Christian view of the world is that things are normative and improving. The Christian view is that things are abnormal and declining. We do not believe that the world is the way that it is supposed to be. We do not hold that the world is getting better. We believe that the world stands opposed to God in a state of rebellion. All of us at the core of our beings are meant to reflect the glory of God’s handiwork but the brokenness that entered the world when Adam and Eve willfully sinned has made that impossible.

As a pastor, I feel compelled to say to every person I meet no matter what their lifestyle is: “Who you are is not how you’re supposed to be. Just because it is natural for you does not mean that it is holy for you. You are a sinner.”

On the issue of sexual activity, in fact, I find it incredibly offensive when a guy keeps impregnating women with no intention of caring for the child they create. And I understand what it is like to have strong sexual desires out of line with Scripture. I was sexually active with my girlfriend prior to becoming a Christian. We should not have been dating, and we should not have been sleeping together. I won’t even pretend to be someone who has never done wrong. Upon my conversion, I started reading the Bible and taking part in Sunday services and midweek classes and Bible studies at a solid church. I learned that I was not acting in accordance with God’s Word. Loving leaders explained that in obedience to God, I needed to stop fornicating. And by God’s grace, I did. I was given the truth in love. I did not feel hated, despised, rejected, or anything of the sort. Eventually, my girlfriend and I were married and recently celebrated 26 years of faithful marriage by God’s grace.

As a Christian, I started looking to Jesus, who lived the perfect and most impactful life in the history of the world without ever having sex. For some people to follow Him faithfully means they must do the same. That news shocks our system. As pastor and scholar John Piper pointed out in an interview I conducted with him for this project, “Sex is so much a part of what it means for us to be satisfied and happy that putting any restraints on it feels like comprising our very humanity. But that premise contradicts the greatest person who ever existed. Jesus Christ was the fullest human that has ever lived. Nobody was a more beautiful human being. No one was more fully human than Jesus. And Jesus never had sex.”

For me as a spiritual leader there would be nothing easier than to say, “Go ahead and take your pants off whenever, wherever, with whomever you want.” That is once what I wanted. But Christianity is about loving repentance. In love, we should accept people wherever they are—just as God accepts us. But also in love, we should call them to repent of sin—just as God calls us to turn from our wrongdoing. If at any point God’s people fail to echo God by repenting of their own sin and lovingly inviting others to do the same, then we are in fact guilty of perpetrating a massive and dangerous lie. There is no real Christianity without practicing and preaching loving repentance. This includes repenting of being unloving when we don’t echo what the Bible says, which I have been guilty of.

DON’T FREAK OUT

Sexual sin is not a new issue. Such problems were rife for ancient Israel and its neighboring nations as well as the early church as it spread within the Roman Empire. Polygamy, fornication, adultery, ritual prostitution, homosexuality, and more—they are all in the Bible. Jesus’ own family line reads like a memorial to sexual brokenness, listing Rahab the prostitute, Tamar the rape victim, Bathsheba the adulteress, and David the murderous adulterer (Matt. 1:1–18). Sex in both ancient Greek and Roman cultures was very much like our day and even included what we would basically consider pedophilia. Ours is not the first generation that wants sex however we want it and to want no one tell us what we can or cannot do with it.

As a pastor, I understand that what I can share in the space of a chapter does not answer all the practical and even painful questions that real people made by God and loved by God have on this sensitive issue.

The rapid social changes we face force us to be prayerful and biblical

OBJECTION #2: ABORTION AND GAY MARRIAGE

and practical. They require us to reflect on crucial issues. But I do know one thing: You cannot make any headway toward effectively living out your faith in today's culture without staying in relationship with others, even with people you disagree with. This is perhaps most difficult when it comes to politics, something we examine in the next chapter.

OBJECTION #3:

POLITICS

“I don’t like how some Christian groups meddle in politics.”

I am not a big political person. Politics have never been how I seek positive change in culture, even as a pastor. I have never publicly endorsed any candidate or party. Among Christian leaders and ordinary churchgoers of my generation and younger, I am not alone in my attitude. That revelation might surprise the participants in our research, who resoundingly declared Christians too involved in politics.

Throughout our research, we heard people who consistently took issue with Christians “legislating morality” and “imposing their views” through politics. Half of our national phone survey participants (49%) agreed with the statement, “I don’t like how some Christian groups meddle in politics.” Our survey found that men in particular deride Christian involvement in politics, a fact that proved true across our focus groups as well. Men had much more to say than women about their frustration and opposition to Christian involvement in politics.

FEEDBACK

Of all the groups we convened, the men in Austin were probably the most passionate and opinionated about the involvement of Christians in politics. In most places in Texas, politics and religion bleed red, but Austin is an openly *avant-garde* exception. One guy described being dragged to church as a child: “It just felt silly,” he said. “I didn’t believe it. I thought it was make-believe stuff that they were insisting was real but obviously it wasn’t.... I would insist on going in a full Darth Vader costume when they would take me as a little boy. They posted my picture on the church bulletin.”

In Austin, our facilitator opened by asking for everyone's thoughts on Christianity in general and Jesus in particular. At one point she asked, "Anyone else have an element of Christianity you find distasteful?"

After "evangelists" and "brimstone," one guy said, "Legislating morality." Another added, "They've gone way beyond what I want the government deciding."

The facilitator asked, "Is it Christianity using politics or politics using Christianity?"

"Both, without a doubt."

"Exactly, yes."

"Politicians use the affiliations to get into a different base of people to use. The people use the politicians to get things enacted like... not being able to buy liquor on Sundays. It used to be whole sections of grocery stores you couldn't go into."

"Still can't."

"Some counties where you can't even buy liquor at all."

"You didn't used to be able to buy cat litter on Sundays. They relaxed that."

"What?"

"Yes, yes."

"The Bible Belt... technically you could only buy food or medical oriented things. South Carolina, when I lived there was a lot the same way that was 20 years ago here."

Multiple participants saw Christians using legislation to control their lives. One guy put it like this:

"I understand that there are some issues, let's say whether it's abortion is right or wrong. If you think it's wrong you should just cut out. I can't play poker online anymore, I can't buy alcohol on Sundays without restrictions. I can't smoke pot. What I watch on TV gets restricted. I can tell you I attribute it to Christians. I sure as heck don't want a bunch of Christians deciding that level of what I can do in my life. There are some big picture things that we probably all have to agree whether they are okay or not. The Christians are going way beyond that, and this gets into the politics and defining what is okay and what's not okay for people to do. I just think that's nuts."

These post-Christian participants repeatedly found the political shenanigans of the "religious right" frustrating if not downright scary. One

OBJECTION #3: POLITICS

Austin man found evangelical Christians more frightening than the dictators of North Korea and Iran:

“As far as what scares me about groups of people in the world that have the potential to do harm, you have radical Muslim extremists and evangelical Christians. Then there’s a big drop off, and you get into maybe military dictators, North Korea and Iran. Then you have everybody else slowly falling down there. But from everything, and I watch the news all day every day at work, I read a lot. As far as groups that scare me more than a little, and cause [things] to happen that I don’t want to have happen.”

When one group member countered that evangelical Christians aren’t out to blow up the world, another argued that “they have an awful lot of power and they’re using it in a way that I don’t think any group should be using it.”

“In what way?”

“In terms of imposing their view of the world on the world, on everybody else. There’s [sic] not other groups out there that are trying to impose their views.... Just steamrolling over everybody. Again that’s extreme and that’s the radical people in the group.”

“Which radical people?”

“High-level Republican leaders,” “Pat Robertson,” “Westboro Baptist,” and “Jerry Falwell.”

SEEING GHOSTS

Reading these exchanges, I often wondered if I had flipped to the “WE HATE FOX NEWS” channel. The Austin guys apparently had watched an assortment of talking-head cultural commentators and assumed they determined the agenda of the entire Christian community. We asked who worries these guys, and they’re like, “Jerry Falwell.” And I’m thinking, “How long has he been in heaven with Jesus now?”

You might not know that name, but you have seen his ghost.

If you weren’t around or not paying attention during the 1980 United States presidential elections, Jerry Falwell epitomized what went down during that era, when a few men swayed American history and reshaped how people think about politics and religion for more than a generation. Falwell was one of the original leaders of the religious Right and a co-founder of the Moral

Majority, a political advocacy group organized to battle for conservative values.

Another evangelist of the day, James Robison, was at ground zero of what became the religious Right. In 1979 he was one of a handful of TV evangelists with a national audience. At a time when the issue of gay rights was grabbing public attention, Robison was known for daring Christians to “come out of the closet.” Following an on-air sermon where he quoted the first chapter of Romans—a passage that calls homosexuality sin—censors kicked him off a major Dallas TV station under what was known as the Fairness Doctrine of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). While you might not like what Robison said, you should get First Amendment chills he was not permitted to say it.

Hopping mad, Robison made “Freedom of Speech Is Freedom to Preach” his new bumper sticker. He invited leaders like Pat Robertson, James Dobson, Mike Huckabee, Ralph Reed, and Jerry Falwell to a Freedom to Preach rally in a Dallas stadium. These men met backstage with a presidential candidate named Ronald Reagan and decided to back him. The religious Right was born.

I had a chance to interview James Robison about those days. He says that what began as a movement promoting freedom to preach was hijacked by politics, infighting, greed, and corruption. As Robison told me in an interview for this project, “I opposed what was happening, and about maybe two years or three years into Reagan, if that long, I just pulled back into the shadows. I just disappeared. I heard the Lord say, ‘Serving is great. You go serve what I’m doing. You go serve the people that have sold out to me.’ And, buddy, I went to the mission fields of the world, and that’s where I have been.”

But the old ghosts of the religious Right still haunt us. When that movement made every Christian concern a political issue, it created a backlash against Christian voices in the public square. Younger Christians want no part of politics. And as our research reveals, many out there still see Christians as a giant political steamroller.

CHRISTIANS AND POLITICS

Even at the peak of the religious Right, Christians never formed a unified front. Christians are anything but a homogeneous voting bloc. We’re a messy mix of the entire political spectrum. And when it comes to how we engage politically, you’ll find Christians wandering down four well-worn paths:

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- **Some *fight*.** These folks rally the troops, wage the culture wars, elect candidates to office, put morality to a vote, and try to take back lost ground by punching forward.
- **Some *surrender*.** This group takes the opposite approach. Sensing that the battle is lost, they surrender the controversial aspects of Christian belief. They give up and give in hoping no one else gets hurt.
- **Some *flee*.** These people escape as far and fast as possible. They unplug from media, move out of the city, and protect their family from the disease of culture by hunkering down until Jesus comes back, which some are sure is soon.
- **Some *convert*.** This minority chooses to live as missionaries within the dominant culture, seeking the common good of all, winsomely living out biblical principles, and seeking to evangelize people and cultures so they are transformed.

These markedly different options mean that we can often find ourselves parting ways politically with Christians whom we otherwise agree with in profound ways. But what is the right response?

CHRISTENDOM AND CHRISTIANITY

People outside the church are frustrated when people inside the church fail to see that there should be a clear division between the two. They feel that Christians are out of line when they treat the culture around them as if it were their church. Honestly, as a Bible-teaching pastor I agree to some degree. Some Christians are wrong in how they understand the relationship between church and society.

Throughout the Bible a clear demarcation exists between God's people and others. God repeatedly tells His followers that they cannot act like their neighbors—non-believers living among them and the culture around them. God has different expectations of His own. The Old Testament records recurring conversations between God and His people that sound like a dad whose children keep pestering him to get away with the same stuff as the neighbor kids. The dad tells them no, explaining that his family rules are different from the family rules next door. In the New Testament the words

“church” and “world” mark this split between the two proverbial families. Sin means crossing that line of demarcation. Holiness means abiding by the rules on this side of the line.

Some Christians seem to miss this. Across history and particularly in America, they see their nation as one big church, resulting in a thing called “Christendom.” My book *A Call to Resurgence* details this problem. Let me sum up what I say there.

For starters, Christendom is not the same as Christianity. While Christianity has existed for a couple thousand years, Christendom popped into being around 500 years ago (the exact date varies depending on which historian you prefer). America was an experiment in Christendom. It was to be a nation established largely by Christian people with Christian principles pursuing Christian purposes. The line between church and the world soon became very blurry.

America wasn’t the only place where this thing called Christendom took hold. But it led the nations in basing moral values on biblical principles, so that people more or less shared a common outlook on right and wrong even when they failed to live up to their ideals. Most everyone knew sex was reserved for marriage. Marriage was for a man and a woman. Pornography and casual sex were generally understood to be evil, even if many didn’t practice what they preached. And last but not least, children were viewed as a desirable part of life. All these basic mores and others were part of the common vision of the good life within a good nation that was as understood in Christendom.

At the center of cultural influence within Christendom were religious leaders and houses of worship. They were essential to upholding the moral framework of a good nation. Politicians were expected to believe in God and attend church, and political speeches were supposed to be littered with the language and imagery of Scripture. Places of worship were given benefits such as tax exemptions as a way of recognizing their value to the greater culture in promoting virtue, restraining vice, and helping the needy.

Despite the dividing line being blurred in the extreme, Christendom and Christianity are not the same thing. Christendom is far bigger and broader than Christianity, encompassing non-Christian beliefs like the deism of Thomas Jefferson, the Unitarianism of many high-level politicians, or the beliefs of outliers like the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Under Christendom, America created a new national religion that took concepts and images from Old Testament Israel and reappropriated them. In *A Call to Resurgence*, I say it this way:

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Think of American civil religion in biblical terms: America is Israel. The Revolution is our Exodus. The Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights, and Constitution compose our canon of sacred scripture. Abraham Lincoln is our Moses. Independence Day is our Easter. Our national enemies are our Satan. Benedict Arnold is our Judas. The Founding Fathers are our apostles. Taxes are our tithes. Patriotic songs are our hymnal. The Pledge of Allegiance is our sinner's prayer. And the president is our preacher, which is why throughout the history of the office our leaders have referred to "God" without any definition or clarification, allowing people to privately import their own understanding of a higher power.¹⁷

In this blatant borrowing, the spiritual symbols were kept and the substance was lost. But it is no wonder people mistake Christendom for Christianity.

Throughout some 500 years of history, Christendom and Christianity have been mutually opportunistic, each using the other to advance the cause. Christendom wanted the social benefits of Christianity without the scriptural beliefs. President George Washington said in his farewell address, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports.... Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." A century and a half later, president-elect Dwight Eisenhower said, "Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is."¹⁸

THE DEATH OF CHRISTENDOM

When people care little about the content of faith, it should be no surprise when that faith becomes irrelevant to real life. Christendom as an all-powerful system has died over the course of just a few decades. Nations that were part of Christendom are now over a 500-year infatuation and are largely post-Christendom. The Bible is no longer a highly regarded book, a pastor no longer a highly regarded person, and the church no longer a highly regarded place. Major portions of our society have wildly different responses to this new civil order.

THE REACTIONARY RIGHT

People on the political right who claim to be Christians are gravely concerned about the direction culture is trending. Conservative Christians talk a lot about “taking back America,” with older voices appealing for a return to traditional values they claim led to a more sane and safe world. Their confusion of Christendom and Christianity means they interpret the decline of Christendom as a decline in Christianity, which may not in fact be the case. The reign of Christendom simply meant that on special occasions you were to show up at some sacred building to get blessed by some religious leader so you would live some sort of good life.

Social benefits came with professing a faith you infrequently practiced and unlikely possessed, and the system produced cultural Christians like me. I was born Catholic, baptized as a baby, believed in God, showed up for worship on Christmas and Easter, endeavored to live a decent life, called myself a Christian because I was born into it just like I was born Irish—but I was not born again through faith in Jesus.

Now that Christendom is dead, younger generations are less likely to fake faith. That phenomenon explains the quantifiable rise in the numbers of Dechurched Dones and Unchurched Nones with no religious affiliation, as well as the “spiritual but not religious” who have little interest in organized religion. It also illuminates why a lot of devout grandparents not only worry about the direction of our culture as a whole, but also more specifically for their gay and pot-smoking grandkids who no longer go to church.

Among this group’s favorite Bible verses is 2 Chronicles 7:14 (ESV), where God says, “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” Religious leaders of this team frequently appeal to this verse, particularly at prayer meetings. The problem? This is not an ironclad promise to any modern nation. God spoke those words not to America but to ancient Israel, and the “land” in question is not the White House but the Promised Land. There is a great difference between a nation and a faith.

THE TRIUMPHANT LEFT

Those on the political Left celebrate the demise of Christendom. They gladly spotlight its failures. They rightly remind us of the rampant unkindness of

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Christendom toward gays, women, ethnic minorities, and the poor, with whole groups marginalized, ostracized, and demonized in the name of a greater social good. They note the astounding hypocrisy bred by social demands to put up a good public appearance, even if privately you are a politician committing adultery on your way home from church. They are quick to protest the injustice, oppression, and evil that results when the powerful forces of government and religion line up together like two barrels on a gun. For the powerless, the end of Christendom brings an exodus from cruel bondage into a freedom they have never known.

According to data gained from the research for this project, nearly everyone outside the church—regardless of their previous church commitment—falls into this category of post-Christendom. For the Right, the death of Christendom feels like a funeral. For the Left, it gives reason to break out the party favors. They celebrate with good reason, given their fears of the religious Right, a movement that still makes many focus group participants feel downright unsafe. While their fears might not be justified, you would feel the same way if the only Christians you knew had veins popping out of their neck as they rail about a culture war onscreen or over the backyard fence. It must be how the average quiet-living, hardworking Muslim feels when all we notice about their religion are the people who make bombs and riot over cartoons.

THE CONFOUNDED CENTER

In the middle on a continuum between the Right and the Left you'll find many an average Christian person or pastor. They're weary of both sides spending endless hours berating each other on television and talk radio. They agree with many of the criticisms leveled at Christendom from the Left and many—especially younger Christians—consider the culture wars of the Right a total waste of time and energy. They reject a vision of Christianity that imitates radical Islam, where one religion rules all people and there is little distinction between the sacred text and laws of the land. Many agree with Lee in Boston who said, "I don't see why 16 people on the same block can't be and do whatever the hell they want. I don't see what the problem is with that." While we might not use those exact words, there's a good chance we give a nod to the essence of what he says.

KING JESUS

Whether you locate yourself on the political Right, Left, or in the middle, Jesus calls you to something more. If He were retelling His ancient parable of a couple lost sons today, the rebellious brother would lean politically Left. The religious brother would lean politically Right. The younger brother would march in a pride parade or a protest. The older brother would picket those parades and protest the protests.

But notice this: Jesus doesn't join either brother on the Right or the Left. He also doesn't join the masses trying to duck the issues in the middle.

Jesus is greater than politics. When the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate asked if He had revolutionary aspirations, Jesus replied, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36 NIV). Jesus the King rules over all kings, and His Kingdom reigns over all kingdoms. But the Kingdom of King Jesus has not yet come in its fullness, and until we see it we are to pray as He taught us: "Your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10). When the Kingdom of Jesus arrives, sin will be replaced with salvation, death with resurrection, sickness with healing, war with peace, poverty with prosperity, and tears with laughter. From the first day we meet Jesus our citizenship in His Kingdom is secure, but until we arrive in heaven we are stuck here. But that doesn't mean you're not *meant* to be here.

Every election cycle we feel a collective ache for Christ's Kingdom to come. Our world has gone terribly wrong, and everything needs changing. So political candidates step forward to vie for the role of savior, each casting a vision of the heavenly future they promise to bring. Like worshipers, supporters throng to fund campaigns, filled with hope that things will improve if only the right person wins.

Now, some kings are better than others. That's just common sense. But no king is the King of kings, because no human king rules with Christ's perfection, justice, truth, and grace. Some kingdoms are better than others, but no kingdom is His Kingdom. No kingdom overcomes sin and the curse fully and forever. Only the Kingdom of King Jesus accomplishes what we—and every person we disagree with—ultimately longs for and needs.

LIVING IN THIS WORLD

But the question remains: how are Christians to live in this post-Christendom and pre-Kingdom world? It's an uncomfortable situation that you might find yourself in today. Part of the error of the religious Right was thinking

everything is political. We don't want to make the opposite mistake of pretending nothing is political. The most competent government will not bring the Kingdom to earth. It will not change hearts. It will not save souls. But it can hold back the worst of evil, shelter the helpless, and ensure its citizens freedom to live out their faith—and go about the Kingdom's work.

As much as we might want to simply live and let live, we can't agree with everyone and everything. We want to influence our neighbors to consider biblical principles—not because we're intolerant but because we love them. And because those principles do in fact lead to fuller and happier lives. We have strong beliefs on issues that impact human welfare and cannot advocate things that clearly violate biblical teaching—untethered sexuality that causes great pains and problems, the taking of innocent unborn life, and more. While we cannot and should not go back to the era of Christendom or expect non-Christians to live like followers of Jesus, we also cannot let issues of justice and mercy slide. In fact, such issues may be the very places that you and I can best display the Gospel and demonstrate the heart of God. Additionally, we cannot be silent as others write laws that hinder religious freedom. Non-Christians worry that our views are being forced on them. We are right to be just as concerned when their views are forced on us.

A friend and his wife were in the final stages of adopting a child they had fostered since birth when a state caseworker asked if they supported same-sex marriage. My friends were caught off guard. They were rightly concerned their response would determine whether the child they loved would be removed and given to someone else. It sounds akin to a growing list of court cases requiring that we silence our faith in public spaces like businesses or schools. For all people of faith—not just Christians—this is impossible. Our beliefs are at the center of who we are, what we value, and how we live. Telling us to keep our faith to ourselves is an intolerant way of telling Christians to stay in the closet.

TWO-STORY TRUTH

An unmarried friend of mine thought it would be a good idea to rent the basement apartment in the home of a married couple. He assumed it was clear they would stay upstairs and he would stay downstairs. The only problem was that the couple often came downstairs without invitation or announcement to intrude on his life and space. Sometimes they came down to visit, other times to snoop around, and still other times to “borrow”

something that was his without asking. He felt seriously offended by the invasion of his personal space.

When it comes to Christianity and politics, many outside the church feel like Christianity should live upstairs in the realm of faith, while politics lives downstairs in the realm of fact. Whenever religious people show up uninvited downstairs, the people who live there feel violated.

Underlying this belief is a massive assumption that biblical Christianity does not share. Building on the work of Francis Schaeffer, scholar Nancy Pearcey explains how the prevailing cultural worldview draws a thick line between values and facts. This “two-story truth” keeps “rational, verifiable” facts on the ground floor, while anything deemed “nonrational, noncognitive” has to stay upstairs.¹⁹

Everything on the first story applies to everyone. Everything on the second story is up to you, take it or leave it.

“The reason it’s so important for us to learn how to recognize this division is that it is the single most potent weapon for delegitimizing the biblical perspective in the public square today,” Pearcey writes.²⁰

“The two-story grid functions as a gate-keeper that defines what is to be taken seriously as genuine knowledge, and what can be dismissed as mere wish-fulfillment.”²¹

Religion can play in the house so long as it stays in the upstairs closet along with all of the other fairy tales, fiction, and fables.

Keeping faith and politics separate might seem like a good way to avoid conflict and keep everyone happy, like splitting up two squabbling kids. But as Christians we cannot agree to that. If Jesus is Lord there is no such thing as separating faith and facts, private and public. You can’t say, “Well, when I go to church or read my Bible, those are just for me, and when I go into the voting booth or someone asks my opinion, I chuck my beliefs so I can be objective and neutral.” All is under Jesus’ sovereign authority.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS

When Christians back away from political engagement, others are more than happy to see us go. Their idea that our faith should be excluded from the public square is only one of many objections to our involvement. I want to briefly respond to a few.

AMERICA WAS FOUNDED ON FREEDOM FROM RELIGION

Focus group participants argued again and again that Christians should stay out of politics because “our nation is built on freedom from religion.” As professor Wayne Grudem explains in an interview I conducted with him for this project, “Sometimes people raise the objection about separation of church and state and take it to mean we should have freedom *from* religion. That is, religion should be excluded from public places and public expressions and debates about legal things and moral standards.” But our real liberty is freedom *of* religion. Grudem continues, “I just ask people to go online and look at the First Amendment to the Constitution. It doesn’t say anything about freedom from religion. It says, ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.’ That means people of any faith or no faith have the right to speak up wherever they wish. Other people might not like what we say. They might not agree with our views. But we don’t have to apologize for our faith as the basis of the positions we advocate.

CHRISTIANS ARE A MAJORITY IN AMERICA

Many of our participants felt Christians have overwhelming political power based on our sheer numbers. But as I’ve said before, there are more left-handed people, more Texans, and more pet cats than evangelicals in America. Back in the day when Christendom encouraged people to profess a faith they neither deeply possessed nor regularly practiced, it was tough to know how many people were true Christians. When Christendom was hitting home runs and winning games, faith had a lot of fair weather fans. With Christendom dead and authentic Christianity fading in popularity, new numbers reveal there are shockingly few hardcore fans of Team Jesus. The most reliable data doesn’t come from asking if someone is Christian but inquiring how faith impacts their actions. The reality is only about 8% of Americans are evangelical Christians according to the polls that seem most accurate. It is debatable whether a majority in America or Great Britain ever practiced true Christian faith. Christendom created a cultural haze that made it nearly impossible to see who was or was not a devoted Christian, but we know conclusively that today Christians are a small minority.²²

CHRISTIANITY IS ORGANIZED AND POWERFUL

I can understand how people looking from the outside might fear the church as a united force intent on ruling the world. After all, we have hundreds of thousands of outposts on corners all over America. In reality, Christianity is so splintered that it is hard to get believers together to pray, much less conspire to dominate the rest of the population. Churches divide over how to respond to almost every social issue, and they disagree on the more basic question of if and how to engage culture. It gets attention when pastors have access to presidents and other politicians, but I've heard from them firsthand that talking with a leader is different from wielding authority or even influence. Most politicians meet with pastors for the same reason they shake hands with anyone else. They think a photo op with our guy will win votes.

CHURCH MONEY IS USED FOR POLITICS

Some group participants believed that churches were fronts for political campaigns. In Boston our facilitator asked one woman, "You're saying that churches have political action committee money that goes to the campaigns?" To which she replied, "Mm-hmm. Oh, yes."

This is a misunderstanding of the legal boundaries churches must live within. The Internal Revenue Service says this about churches and other nonprofits:

All section 501(c)(3) organizations are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office. Contributions to political campaign funds or public statements of position (verbal or written) made on behalf of the organization in favor of or in opposition to any candidate for public office clearly violate the prohibition against political campaign activity. Violating this prohibition may result in denial or revocation of tax-exempt status and the imposition of certain excise taxes.

The policy goes on to clarify that churches and other 501(c)(3) religious groups can have public forums on issues, hand out voter education guides, and encourage voter registration and voting provided their efforts are "conducted in a non-partisan manner."²³

Some in our groups asserted that churches should be using their money to help the poor and to do good rather than spending it on issue-oriented actions or voter education. Dr. Al Mohler counters that this is an issue of free speech. For that criticism to be fair it should also be leveled at Planned Parenthood, Greenpeace, and every other 501(c)(3) group. Dr. Mohler said in an interview I conducted with him for this project, “In reality, in this country, incorporated entities, whether profit or not-for-profit, have both the right and the responsibility to contend for their deepest beliefs in terms of public policy.” Honestly, the vast majority of pastors care far more about evangelism and in-the-trenches social action than elections. A church that panders to one political party and pushes out everyone else is the last thing they want. Nor do they want to do anything to invite criticism that detracts from their mission of preaching Christ.

ONLY CHRISTIANS ARE SEEKING TO LEGISLATE MORALITY

People in our focus groups resented what they saw as the efforts of Christians to impose their morality on others, and some even feared we aim to revive anti-sodomy laws. But non-Christians aren't the only ones worried about inviting government into our bedrooms. I no more want anti-sodomy laws than I want anti-fornication laws because I don't want the government that involved in anyone's life. I don't believe that is the role of government and even less the right way to sway people to the cause of Jesus. But the bigger fact for all sides of this debate to recognize is that every law imposes someone's morality.

As Dr. Mohler explained in his interview, “People assume Christians are trying to impose morality when others supposedly are not. But in reality all politics, all legislation, all public policy is a war of rival moralities.” Every piece of legislation—environmental law, military appropriations, foreign aid, social welfare, taxation, traffic laws—touches on moral issues. Like Mohler says, “There is no such thing as a morally neutral stance when it comes to legislation.” He continues, “Christians are unapologetically involved in this for the same reason that others with rival world views are involved. Based upon our deepest convictions, we feel that our approach will lead to the greatest human flourishing. We have competing visions of what will lead to that, and that conflict is what we see in our headlines today.”

REDEFINING WINNING

These common misunderstandings about Christianity in America can feel like insurmountable obstacles when it comes to actually connecting with someone and having honest conversations. But you shouldn't be frustrated by objections to your faith in the realm of politics or any other area. Christ told us to expect opposition, and at the dawn of the church, believers were even more outlandishly misunderstood as people even thought we were cannibals because of their misunderstanding of communion. As Christians in the West, we got so used to living in a dominant Judeo-Christian culture that we have forgotten where we came from, where we're going, and what we're supposed to be doing in the meantime.

Our biblical ancestors were always a minority group seen by others as exceedingly peculiar. Check the Old Testament. The nations that challenged Israel were notorious for their religions based on sexual immorality and child sacrifice, and their foreign policy consisted of raping and ransacking their neighbors. In that context, God's holy people were deemed eccentric and completely despised. In the New Testament world dominated by an empire ruling from Rome, Christians were rebels and outcasts politically, socially, sexually, and morally. But in the last five centuries or so, Western Christians grew more and more comfortable in our position as the cultural majority. Now that Christendom is dead and culture has moved on, everyone feels, "This is wrong. We're being discriminated against. They hate us." When actually this experience is par for the course according to the biblical storyline. As God's people, we should feel right at home in this new world where we are on the margins and not at the center of culture.

As Pastor Rick Warren once told me, "Our goal is not to win America but to win Americans." Politically speaking, we have to deal with the fact that we are on the losing team. We no longer dominate culture, and I believe it's unlikely we will ever again get a victory parade. It's very hard to get people, especially young people, fired up about a losing team.

But what I want you to see is that this new world order is nothing new to God's people, and it only presents us with a new opportunity to share the Gospel in word and deed. So we need a new definition of winning. Winning is not "the majority are Christians, the laws all favor us, we overturn all the decisions, and elected officials will sit next to us in church on Sunday." Winning is "we were faithful to Jesus, and we trusted Him with the results."

Christians who are politicians will continue to engage the political process

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as they should. Lawyers will keep fighting legal battles as they should. But unless God made you a politician or a lawyer, you have a different role to play. For the average believer, the real goal is to serve your neighbor, care about your city, live your life openly, and as opportunity arises, engage the conversation about your faith. You can learn to disagree agreeably, because your tone matters as much as your truth. You can answer questions and objections and lovingly endure with people, so even if they do come off a little intense, you hang in there. Things may have changed, but God has not, and He's right there with you.

God doesn't ask you to do something you aren't in a position to do. But He implores you to take care of the people He puts in front of you. Faithfulness in that task is more important than victory right now. In fact, faithfulness is the victory. As you lovingly engage others in a winsome way, the results are out of your hands. The people you care about might be like Saul of the New Testament. They might have scales fall from their eyes and go forth to be a missionary and plant a church in Dubai. Or you might just be able say, "I loved them. I extended my hand. I answered their questions. I was there to walk forward in relationship." To do that effectively day in and day out, it's important to have the right approach.

PROPOSE NOT IMPOSE

People outside the church have an impression of Christianity as a religion of imposition. But apart from a few loud exceptions that tend to make the news, few followers of Jesus think that imposing spirituality or morality is a good thing. Christianity is about *proposition* not *imposition*.

At the heart of our faith is a loving relationship between God and people made possible through Jesus Christ, the Mediator and Savior. Like any loving relationship, a bond with God requires freedom to choose or not choose. It takes time to get to know and win the heart of the other person. In this way, Christianity is like marriage. In fact, one way to read the Bible is as a magnificent love story. It opens with a wedding officiated by God. In the Old Testament, God's people are referred to as His bride. In the New Testament, Jesus' relationship with His people is likened to a husband who loves his wife. And the Bible closes with a massive wedding feast where Jesus welcomes His people into His eternal heavenly home to live forever with Him in loving community.

That kind of relationship cannot be imposed, but like marriage, it can be proposed. For all of us everyday Christians, our job is to keep loving people,

CHRISTIANS MIGHT BE CRAZY

to keep relationships alive, so we can keep announcing that proposal. As a result, though, we are often considered hypocrites, which we will examine in the next chapter.

OBJECTION #4:

HYPOCRISY

“Most Christians are hypocrites.”

By now you’re probably familiar with the cycle. Some Christian supposedly says or does something that someone somewhere finds scandalous. Whether or not the report is accurate, we rarely know and don’t really care. Why? There’s no time for truth when the world wide web of weird commences the now daily sacrament of rotten tomato flinging. Immediately, a mob also begins their sprint to the hardware store for ceremonial pitchforks, torches, and enough spray paint to spell *hypocrite* in letters big enough for Jesus to see from heaven.

FEEDBACK

Almost half of our survey participants (45%) agreed with the statement, “Most Christians are hypocrites.” One woman said it so plainly that even the thickest among us can understand her criticism: “They are telling me I need to live a certain way, and yet they’re not.” Across the country we heard intense conversations about what looks like phony faith. One guy complained about Christians parading on social media. He wondered, “Are you living the life, or are you just tooting the horn?” Another guy said, “Hypocrisies? Well let’s see. I could think of people who are leaders of churches who are manipulative and doing things against their teachings behind the backs of people. Stealing money or—I don’t know, all kinds of things like that.”

Some people told stories of personal hurts inflicted by religious people. One woman described her less-than-loving youth leaders. She said, “I was in a leadership group at church, and they found out that I had a beer.... I was 14, and I was going off the deep end maybe. They kicked me out

and said they were going to keep in touch with me, but the youth pastor never called me again.” Another woman described a sister who offers her parenting advice. The sister looks pious on social media, but she and her husband are addicts, destructive to the core. “They spend a massive amount of time in third-world countries feeding children and dedicating their lives to their religious community, but behind the scenes they dabble in methamphetamines. It’s horrible.” This group member wants nothing to do with her sister’s offers to pray for her. “No, thank you,” she says, “your purity is tarnished.”

One fact became obvious as I studied the responses of people who volunteered their thoughts in our groups. Many had no clue what a Christian actually is. I felt bad for these non-Christians trying to sort us out. One focus group was arguing, “Well, who are the Christians?” Pretty soon they had lumped together Catholics, evangelicals, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Hindus, and Wiccans. That’s not our team.

Maybe more surprisingly, some of the participants had no firsthand experience with a Christian or a Christian church. A woman in Phoenix said, “I’ve never known an evangelical Christian personally.” A guy in San Francisco also said, “In terms of actual memory in a church, I can’t really think of any.”

This lack of contact between Christians and non-Christians is only increasing. Missiologist Todd M. Johnson and his team at the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary says that one in five non-Christians in North America does not personally know a Christian.²⁴

With little or no firsthand experience of everyday Christians, many people in our groups and beyond base their views of Christianity on people they see in the media. We compiled a list of literally every “Christian” named in our focus groups. The person who came up most often was Billy Graham, a man deeply admired among evangelicals. The rest of the list included television preachers Creflo Dollar, Joel Osteen, Robert Schuller (retired), Jim Bakker, and Tammy Faye Bakker (died 2007). Also mentioned were evangelical leader Ted Haggard; industrialist John Rockefeller (died in 1937); politician Michelle Bachman; football players Deon Sanders and Tim Tebow; politically vocal pastors Pat Robertson, Al Sharpton, and Jerry Falwell (died in 2007). Others were Pastor Fred Phelps of Westboro Baptist, notorious for protesting at military funerals; Pastor Jerry Jones, who wanted to burn the Koran; and James Austin, a Zen Buddhist neurologist.

Those 17 people are the sum total of the “Christians” mentioned by name in our 8 groups. Of those 15 guys and 2 women, 2 are retired and 3 deceased. At least one openly disavows Christianity. Several others at best appear to miss the basics of biblical Christian faith. All are known for attracting media attention, much of it negative. As a guy in Boston said, “I think the biggest problem with Christianity is, like we all just said, the extremists, because they get the face time. That’s what you see on Fox News.”

Yep. The media favors the negative and the nutty. So if that is the case, where else do people get a feel for authentic, biblical Christianity?

“Other people and TV and movies, things like that,” noted one person. And then proceeded to list *Exorcism of Emily Rose*, *Religulous* (the Bill Maher movie), and Steve Martin’s *Leap of Faith* as examples.

Scandalous and sensationalistic media are not the best way to get acquainted with a group. Imagine basing your whole view of the United States on television shows where eccentric Americans make moonshine, catch fish barehanded, and shoot gators in the head. Not exactly the image an All-American tourism board wants to project—any more than sincere believers would pick the famous “Christians” listed above as our representatives, Billy Graham excepted.

DEFINING ‘CHRISTIAN’

Are you beginning to see the problem? Before we can discuss whether or not someone is a Christian hypocrite, we need a solid definition of what a Christian is. Sometimes people who do not act like Christians are not actually hypocrites. They are, in fact, not Christians at all. Believers might assume everyone gets this point. But as various focus groups sought to define *Christian*, their answers included not only historical branches of the faith like Catholicism and Protestantism, but also other sects completely disconnected from Christian truth:

- Jehovah’s Witnesses—the doorknockers who see Jesus as a created being rather than eternal and fully God
- Mormons—also called by one focus group member “the evangelical Christians on bikes”—a group that puts other sacred books alongside the Bible and denied the full divinity of Jesus while also teaching He made a missionary trip to America
- Libertarianism—a political ideology

- Scientology—one of several groups most Christians consider cults
- Hinduism—an entirely different polytheistic faith
- Buddhism—another belief system unrelated to Christianity
- Wicca—witchcraft that puts a modern spin on ancient paganism

People who become Christians later in life without years of soaking up information and experiences in church often relate to those wide-ranging answers. Before we jump on anyone for knowing so little about our faith, we should own the fact that most Christians would struggle to accurately explain Shintoism, Sikhism, or Scientology. Christians often assume too much. It is unreasonable to assume that in a world as large and diverse as this planet that outsiders will understand what it means to be a real Christian or what constitutes the real church. It's up to us to show them.

According to Scripture, Christians are people who believe certain truths. Authentic believers do not twist God's book to mean whatever they want it to. They instead hold tight to its core content. They do not simply believe its truth intellectually but trust it experientially.

The big idea of the Bible is the "Gospel," which means "good news." In chapter eight we will more thoroughly scrutinize the Bible itself in response to the statement, "I don't share the same beliefs that the Christian faith tells me I should." But for now we need to establish this overarching message of the Bible. Why does this matter? Because the world's continual onslaught of information has the tragic outcome of causing us to overlook the few things we truly must know. Thankfully, a short Bible passage reveals the singular most important truths in all the world. In 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 (NIV), the apostle Paul writes:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Paul conveys to us truths that are of "first importance" as compared to other things that are not of equal importance:

- First, *Jesus died in our place for our sins*. His death (promised in Isaiah 53:8, 12) is certain because He was flogged, crucified (promised in Psalm 22:16), and impaled through the heart with a spear.
- Second, *Jesus was buried*. His body was wrapped in many pounds of burial linens and spices and placed in a tomb gifted to Jesus by a rich man (promised in Isaiah 53:9).
- Third, *Jesus resurrected from death* (promised in Psalm 16:10; Isaiah 53:10–12).
- Fourth, *after rising from death, Jesus appeared to eyewitnesses*. This included His friends (Peter and the other disciples), strangers (crowds of more than 500 people), family (His brother James), other followers, and even enemies, including Paul himself who was transformed from a murderer of Christians to a Christian pastor because he saw the risen Christ.

This set of facts about Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection were penned when many eyewitnesses were still kicking around to verify them as historical realities. This section of Scripture was perhaps the earliest Christian creed, summing up the most important truths for early Christians and all Christians since. In a few verses that follow (1 Cor. 15:9–11), Paul rounds out this thought by stating that he and all other Christians are sinners and hypocrites unqualified for God's love. Only God's grace could rescue and remake this persecutor of the church.

With those straightforward definitions in mind of what it truly means to be an actual Christian, it starts to become clear what it means to be a hypocrite.

SCRIPTURE SPEAKS

Letting the best of any religion define what that faith means seems far more reasonable than dredging up the worst—at least for the start of a helpful discussion. When I want to let the Bible speak for itself and tell us what it means to be a Christian, I point people to 1 John. This short letter toward the end of the New Testament was written after the time that Jesus—according to Christians—died on the cross, rose from the dead, and returned to heaven. As Christianity grew and spread, debates flared up over who was truly a Christian and what beliefs defined true Christianity. Groups like the emerging Gnostics provided competing definitions. This brief Bible book was written to help people be certain they are Christians.

Clarifying the facts about Christianity required someone with credibility and authority, and the person for the job was named John. With straightforward and even harsh language, John combats alternative teachers and their falsehoods, calling them Antichrists (1 John 2:18, 2:22, 4:3), Liars (2:22), Deceivers (2:26, 3:7), and False Prophets (4:1).

John's passion throughout the letter is motivated by his deep love for Jesus and Jesus' people, the church. In the history of the world, likely no one has known Jesus better or loved Jesus more than John. He was the youngest of Jesus' disciples, a guy privileged to be called by Him and appointed as an apostle (Matt. 4:18–25; Mark 3:13–19). John was among the inner circle of the three disciples closest to Jesus and therefore privy to teaching and experiences with Jesus that others missed. John not only prepared the Last Supper (Luke 22:7–22), but also sat in the seat of friendship next to Jesus and asked the Lord who would betray Him (John 13:23–26). Following the Last Supper, John saw Jesus weeping and sweating blood in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–46), and he followed Jesus to His trials (John 18:15–18). John stood at the foot of Jesus' cross and watched Him suffering (John 19:16–27) and was appointed by Jesus to care for His mother, Mary (John 19:25–27). Three days after Jesus' death, John was the first person to reach the empty tomb (John 20:1–9) and, shortly after, was the first person to recognize Jesus after He rose from death (John 21:1–14). Later he stood gazing into the sky as Jesus ascended into heaven (Acts 1:1–11). John was with Jesus at all times as a witness to His life and ministry.

John carried on the ministry of Jesus with faithful and courageous devotion, leading the church through its early seasons of struggle, persecution, sin, and heresy. Even when every other apostle had been martyred, John continued to lead the early church and train its next generation of pastors. According to historical sources outside the Bible, an attempt was made to murder John by boiling him alive, but he somehow survived. Church history records that when he was too old and feeble to preach or even stand, John had himself carried into the church and, with a feeble voice, simply articulated the heart that Jesus had for all of His followers saying, "Little children, love one another."

This is simply the heart of 1 John. After all that John went through with and for his great God and dear friend Jesus, he was not going to allow fake Christians to confuse the new Christians who looked to him as pastor. John wrote a loving letter to primarily younger and newer Christians with the tone of a grandpa who continually refers to them—and us—as "my dear children."

John states the purpose of his letter is to define who is and who is not a Christian. He says, “I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13 NLT). His letter breaks down into three categories that help determine if you are a Christian. These categories demonstrate in a straightforward way that you cannot become a Christian without experiencing a transformation in your head, heart, and hands. These are tests to see if someone is in fact a Christian.

Test 1: Your Head

Has your mind changed regarding Jesus Christ? Do you believe that Jesus is who He says He is: the eternal God who became a man to live without sin, die in your place on the cross for your sins, and rise from death as Lord of your life?

Test 2: Your Heart

Has your heart changed regarding your behavior? Do you admit that you are a sinner and want to stop sinning and live like Jesus by the grace of God?

Test 3: Your Hands

How has the change in your head and heart worked out in extending a hand of friendship to love others? Do you receive God’s love, love Him, love His people, and love others?

John’s point is not that if you strive to do these things you can become Christians. Rather, it is by turning from sin and trusting in Jesus that your head, heart, and hands are changed to live the life of love you were created to lead. We want to know Jesus as we meet Him in the Bible. We want to live a new life because Jesus made us a new person by putting the Holy Spirit in us (2:20, 2:27, 3:24). We want to be part of a community with other people who love and follow Jesus—the extended family called the church. The big idea is that a Christian is a person who has met Jesus and been changed by Jesus and is being changed to be more and more like Jesus. As I’ve said for more than two decades, “It’s all about Jesus.”

What does that tell us about responding to the charge of hypocrisy among Christians? By John’s definition, every group listed above is excluded from the category of “Christian” with the exception of Catholics and Protestants who agree with core biblical teachings such as Jesus being fully

human and fully God. Most other groups include plenty of nice people who make great neighbors, but they do not fit into the category of Christian.

WHAT IS A HYPOCRITE?

People outside Christianity often see the faith not as good news but good deeds. By their definition, Christians are supposed to love people and feed people and help people—not talk about sin and repentance and Jesus. Maybe you’ve even heard someone say something like, “Christians are hypocrites because they’re supposed to love everybody, but then they go and talk about sin. And that’s not loving.” But as a Christian, we answer, “That *is* loving.” People point out my sin and help me get past it. I talk to them about their sin and assist them in finding forgiveness and freedom. That is how we love each other—because that is how God loved us. Now, that does not exclude all the other expressions of love people might expect—like caring for the needy—but those acts of love must be born out of a heart of love that comes from believing in the message of Jesus Christ.

A Christian is someone who is undergoing a theological, moral, and social transformation—a radical change in thoughts, actions, and relationships. A Christian is someone who holds tight to the Good News—the truth that Jesus died in our place for our sins, a fact proven by His resurrection from the dead. In contrast, a hypocrite is a person who does not preach what they practice or practice what they preach. A hypocrite is someone who wears a mask and plays a role, pretending to be someone they are not.

Bible scholar Larry Richards explains the concept of hypocrisy in the New Testament. He says:

The Greek words *hypokrinomai* (appears once in the NT), *hypokrisis* (6 times in the NT), and *hypokritēs* (20 times in the NT) denote someone acting out the part of a character in a play. In Greek drama the actors held over their faces oversized masks painted to represent the character they were portraying. In life, the hypocrite is a person who masks his real self while he plays a part for his audience.²⁵

That background of the word *hypocrite* in Greek theater makes for an amazingly concrete definition. Richards goes on to explain what it looks like when someone “masks his real self” and “plays a part for his audience”:

OBJECTION #4: HYPOCRACY

What characterizes the religious hypocrite? In Matthew's Gospel (where 16 of the 27 occurrences of these Greek words occur) we note these things:

1. A hypocrite does not act spontaneously from the heart but with calculation, to impress observers (Mt 6:1–3).
2. A hypocrite thinks only of the external trappings of religion, ignoring the central, heart issues of love for God and others (Mt 15:1–21).
3. A hypocrite uses spiritual talk to hide base motives (Mt 22:18–22).
4. Jesus gives this warning that to the hypocrites of every age: “Woe to you” (Mt 23:13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29).²⁶

I had an interesting discussion about hypocrisy with Greg Koukl, co-author with Francis Beckwith of the book *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*. He says that whenever someone throws around a loaded word like *tolerance* or *hypocrisy*, he asks for clarification. He says, “When somebody says, ‘Well, you’re intolerant. You’re a hypocrite,’ maybe I am, maybe I’m not. It kind of depends on what you mean. So I ask, ‘What is it that you’re seeing in my life that you think is an example of hypocrisy?’ That is, ‘What is your definition of hypocrisy that you’d think I’m one of those?’”

In the real-world setting of the New Testament, Jesus called out the religious leaders as fakers. Koukl explains, “On the outside, they were putting on a religious display, but on the inside, they were deeply corrupt and evil.”

There is no doubt that there were religious hypocrites in the New Testament. They had a sizable role in the unfolding drama as a foil to Jesus. But we are wondering about believers today. A sizeable chunk of people in our survey and focus group agreed with the statement “Most Christians are hypocrites.” But that raises a very big question: Does that shoe really fit most Christians? Like Koukl says, “I actually don’t think so. The reason I can say that is because I know a lot of Christians. When someone makes the charge, ‘The church is filled with hypocrites,’ I have what I think is a fair question, ‘When was the last time you were in a church?’”

Koukl points out that many people who throw around that accusation never darken the doors of a church, but they still have no problem drawing conclusions about what the people inside are like. No surprise there. That’s just human nature. But that doesn’t make their accusations factually

true. Koukl says, “Most of the Christians I know are real human beings deeply committed to their values, and they are not fakers. Are they perfect Christians? No. Nobody is. I’m not. You’re not. The only perfect ‘Christian’ was Jesus. The rest of us are struggling.”

EVERYONE IS A SINNER

I agree with Koukl when he concludes, “I think it’s fair to make a distinction between somebody who is inconsistent and someone who is a hypocrite.” As we try to answer whether Christians are by and large a bunch of hypocrites, I want to suggest we attempt to wrap our heads around three interrelated truths that grow out of biblical teaching:

All human beings are sinners.
All hypocrites are sinners.
Not all sinners are hypocrites.

One of the core convictions in Christianity is that everyone is a sinner who needs Jesus as their sinless Savior. The Bible is painfully honest as it exposes the sins of God’s people—Abraham commits adultery, Lot gets drunk and impregnates his daughters, Noah gets drunk and passes out naked in his tent like a hillbilly, David impregnates a married woman and then murders her husband, and Solomon builds God’s house but also builds himself an even bigger house where he could have sex with hundreds of women and be worshiped like a god. Even the guys who were with Jesus for three years don’t come off unscathed. Peter denies knowing Jesus not just once but three times. James and John display some serious issues with rage. Thomas doubts that Jesus rose from the dead. They’re all guilty of cowardice. And even though Peter undergoes a radical life change, later in life he still needs Paul to rebuke him to his face for being a racist.

The Bible could not be more clear that everyone is a sinner—me and you included. Romans 3:23 says, “For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard” (NLT). And 1 John 1:8 and 10 says, “If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth.... If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts” (NLT).

The Bible is filled with villains, scoundrels, and sinners—and a God who loves them in spite of who they are. The entire story of the Bible is that God

loves us not because we are good but because He is good.

My guess is that you—like me—would admit you are a sinner. In fact, the more people admit their imperfections the more likely we are to consider them honest, trustworthy, and even holy. We are sinners by disposition who prove that by our sinful action. In the words of a classic Christian confession, we sin “in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.” In our moments of reflection, most of us also admit to seasons and circumstances when we were not just a sinner but also a hypocrite who violated our code of right and wrong.

ALL HYPOCRITES ARE SINNERS

People who only know a Jesus who is meek and mild must be unaware of the ferocity He unleashes on true hypocrisy. Pretty much every time He speaks of hypocrisy it comes as a stinging indictment of religious leaders (e.g., Matt. 6:2, 6:5, 6:16, 15:7, 22:18, 23:13, 23:15, 23:23, 23:25, 23:27, 23:29, 24:51; Mark 7:6; Luke 13:15). He saw where only God can see, past their external show and into their empty hearts. Jesus said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and pall uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt. 23:27–28 ESV).

Hypocrisy is all about wearing a mask, and the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were masters of playing a part.

As a spiritual leader, those words of Jesus terrify me. They move me to examine my motives to uncover any hypocrisy taking hold of my life. And of the thousands of other pastors I have met, most take Jesus’ teaching to heart. They are keenly aware of their own shortcomings and concerned about their integrity. They know they are sinners with faults, flaws, and failures, and they sincerely desire to not cross the line from sin to hypocrisy.

NOT ALL SINNERS ARE HYPOCRITES

Most Christians are not as great as they should be but not as bad as they would be without Jesus in their life. They have changed... are changing... and will continue to change by God’s grace.

So I come back to what I stated above: All human beings are sinners. All hypocrites are sinners. But not all sinners are hypocrites. There is a

vital distinction between a hypocrite and a sinner. One puts on a mask and pretends to be what they are not. The other peels off the mask and strives to be more than they are. Most of us are just plain old sinners making the most of God's grace to grow to be more like Jesus.

I coach myself to remain aware of this distinction between hypocrite and sinner every time someone walks into my office. I need to consider not just where someone is but also how far they have come. I acknowledge where people have already changed before I challenge them to something more. Whether or not we believe in Jesus, isn't this how we want people to respect us? We owe others as much.

As a pastor, I confess getting frustrated with people doing what they should not or not doing what they should. Once I take time to understand the trajectory of their life, however, I have more compassion, patience, and hope for them.

Years ago there was a solid unmarried guy in our church who dated some amazing women. But every time the relationship started getting serious he broke things off for no good reason. He claimed he *wanted* to be married and have a family, but he fled every time that opportunity presented itself. I admit being frustrated with this guy who confused and hurt more than a few women by his actions. Then he sat in my office and explained his background as an only child. His father had been married seven times. He cried as he unloaded his fear that he would get married, have a kid, end up divorced, and cause his child to experience the hurt he felt as a little boy. He feared the one thing he wanted the most. He seemed like a bad guy, but the more I understood his story, I realized he was just a broken guy.

Our stories do not excuse our behavior, but they do help explain it. And the premise of Christianity is that the church is a hospital for people who need help. Jesus the Great Physician said this very thing. He declared, "I have come not to call the healthy but the sick" (Mark 2:17). This fact does not excuse hypocrisy but it does help to explain it. Much like you wouldn't show up at a hospital to declare it a failure because sick people were there, it's unfair to show up at a church and declare it a disaster because sinners are there. In fact, I encourage you to challenge the people who think we are all hypocrites to join us on our journey of getting healed.

Jesus commanded us to get the plank out of our own eye before we try to pick a speck of dust out of the eye of another (Matt. 7:3-5). Christians and non-Christians all have plenty of planks. It is the human predicament that Jesus came to resolve. And the dynamic I see going on here is once

again like the two brothers back in Jesus' story of the lost sons. The religious brother and rebellious brother are like mirrors for each other. You see the worst of yourself in the other. The rebellious brother looks at the religious brother and is like, "You're just a hypocritical jerk." You know what? There is truth to that. The religious brother looks at the rebellious brother and says, "You're absolutely self-serving." And you know what? There might be some truth to that too. Maybe not. A non-Christian might not think so. But you've probably never met another human being who doesn't have problems. I know I haven't. Some people aren't ready to call their stuff "sin," but I think Jesus was on to something when He willingly bled, died, and rose from death to forgive and fix our "stuff."

University of Virginia sociologist Bradley R. E. Wright wrote a whole book called *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites... and Other Lies You've Been Told*. I want to direct you to it as a resource. My goal is not to pretend that Christians don't have problems, but to point out that with the help of Jesus, we make measurable progress. Wright compiles statistic upon statistic showing that the more seriously Christians take their faith... the more committed they are to getting help in Christian community... the more likely they are to live differently from the world around them. Wright examines whether or not Christians really are hypocrites in areas such as marriage, divorce, sex, crime, substance abuse, and everyday honesty. The book is packed with compelling data to help all of us deal in facts when it comes to Christian hypocrisy and reveals that in general, Christians are not hypocrites. They actually practice what they preach as they grow by grace in what was preached to them through Jesus.

IMPOSTERS AND TOUR GUIDES

I have found that there is a category of people we should all be aware of. They sort of act like Christians and maybe smell like Christians, but that in no way means they are Christians. Maybe you've had experience with this type of person. The Bible's prime example is Judas Iscariot. Jesus taught him, loved him, and invested in him for three years. One day Jesus even took the role of the lowliest servant and washed Judas' feet that stank of road dirt and man sweat. Judas was in ministry with Jesus but did not love Jesus, and all the while he pretended to be a friend of Jesus. Long before he betrayed Jesus with the kiss that led to the crucifixion (Matt. 26:16), Judas was on the path to act as Satan's agent.

If the life of Judas played out today, the headlines would read that he was a hypocrite. And that would be true. But Judas was not a Christian hypocrite. He was a non-Christian hypocrite. And there are plenty of people like him today. Instead of undergoing an inner transformation, they run the other way. Instead of believing in Jesus, they reject the essential bullet points of our faith. So by no stretch of God's gracious imagination are these people Christians. But we as limited human beings cannot always discern that. My point? Beware of imposters. Do not blame God or other Christians for their deceit.

Judas hanged himself in one of the gorier scenes of the Bible (Acts 1:18). Just because Judas never changed, never returned to Jesus, and never apologized doesn't mean that *all* individuals antagonistic to the Christian faith are beyond hope. It might just show how we all start in a different spot.

I was a non-Christian hypocrite. My mother was a Catholic Christian, but as I entered my teen years I had no interest in mimicking her Christian faith. Because I didn't want to upset my mom, I attended church with her on holidays and was careful to never fully disclose that my disinterest sometimes bordered on disdain. Then in high school I met a pastor's daughter who asked if I was a Christian. She would only go out with me if I was. She was cute. I told her what she wanted to hear. It took a while for me to come around to authentic faith.

I remember being a non-Christian and having Christians invite me to their church. A few did it to score points in a contest to win a big thick study Bible wrapped in dead cow. No joke. But others clued me in about what was happening and why. A non-Christian entering the world of church is like a tourist visiting a country with strange words and customs. Without a tour guide, it is easy to get confused, lost, and end up feeling unsafe. The Bible repeatedly commands Christians to be hospitable. We are to welcome strangers and love them as friends as a reflection of how God in Christ welcomed us into friendship with Himself.

We don't always do a good job of this. One of the women in our focus groups was brought to a mega church. Barbara watched everyone sway to the rock band as the worship leader asked people who wanted to convert to put up their right hand. From the front row she glanced back at a couple thousand people doing what to her was a Nazi salute. Without an explanation that raising a hand in church is a sign of surrender and worship, it makes sense that a first-time visitor could think they had ended up at a Hitler Youth Rally.

We asked the guys in Austin if they would go to church if a Christian friend invited them. Some said no. But one man said, "I like knowing the

different churches. I'm not really a religious person, but... I would probably go." Another said, "As long as you come to mosque the next weekend, how about that?" Just because some people haven't been to church in a long time—if ever—doesn't mean that they are all unwilling to go. Some apparently just need to be asked by a Christian who takes the time to get to know them before asking them.

Classic evangelism in the era of Christendom asked, "If you died tonight, would you go to heaven?" There are all kinds of assumptions in that question. Like that they know and believe who God is and know what sin is. In this pluralistic culture rife with rampant biblical illiteracy, we have to do a lot of teaching before we can do a lot of inviting to salvation. We have to tell them who Jesus is and what sin is before we tell them to turn from sin and trust in Him.

As I've thought about this situation, I've reached three conclusions. One, *we assume way too much*. The average person outside the church does not have and should not be expected to have much if any accurate Bible knowledge. It is unreasonable, unfair, and unkind to assume as much. We make those outside the church feel defensive, as if they should know more about our faith than we know about other religions out there in the world.

Two, *we listen way too little*. One of my hopes for this project is that it puts the voice of those outside the church in the ears of those inside the church. It's easy to treat people like contestants in a spiritual quiz bowl rather than image-bearers made and loved by God. People have all kinds of fantastic questions and well-reasoned doubts. And to honestly, effectively, and lovingly engage today's unbelieving culture for Christ, you and I need to respond to exactly what's on their hearts and minds. Christians often answer questions no one is asking because they talk without listening.

Three, *we push way too fast*. To saddle up to someone with little history in the church or background in Scripture and ask if they want to accept Jesus right now or go to hell forever is bank-robber evangelism. It's like we put the gun to their head and demand they convert right now or God will blow their brains out. Why are we surprised when people bristle in response and accuse us of being unloving? God is a loving Father, and He listens to us, explains things to us, and is patient with us. It is hypocritical to bring His Good News in a bad way.

TALK ABOUT JESUS

The Bible asserts that all human beings are sinners, that all hypocrites are sinners, and that not all sinners are hypocrites. How about you? Are you a sinner? Are you a hypocrite? And what about Jesus? Was He a sinner? Was He a hypocrite?

The Bible contains four books (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) that sketch the life of Jesus on earth. They show Jesus experiencing temptation to sin. He commanded others to quit their sin. But there is not a hint that Jesus ever sinned.

Openly, publicly, and boldly Jesus said, “Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don’t you believe me?” (John 8:46 ESV). His opponents understood exactly what Jesus was claiming and responded in the strongest language they could muster. They shouted, “Aren’t we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?” (John 8:48). *Samaritan* was the name of the most ungodly group of people they could think of, and *demon possessed* was as unholy as anyone could possibly be. Hypocritical religious leaders felt threatened by Jesus and jealous of His growing fame, so they plotted to put Him to death. They brought a list of made-up charges that contradicted one another and were found to be without merit (Mark 14:55–56).

Jesus not only claimed He wasn’t a hypocrite but also claimed He wasn’t even a sinner!

No one says these kinds of things, especially public figures under constant scrutiny. If Jesus’ claim to be without sin is untrue, then Jesus is the biggest hypocrite in the history of the world. Christianity is built on His claims, including this one. Jesus’ disciples and others repeated the claim throughout their lifetimes. This includes His close friend Peter (Acts 3:14; 1 Pet. 1:19, 2:22, 3:18) and John (1 John 3:5); His former enemy Paul (2 Cor. 5:21); Judas, His betrayer (Matt. 27:3–4); Pilate, the Roman political leader who oversaw His murder (Luke 23:22); the thief crucified on a cross next to Jesus (Luke 23:41); and His devout Jewish family members. Jesus’ half-brothers James (James 5:6) and Jude (Jude 1) both became Christian pastors who worshiped their brother as sinless God. They wrote books of the Bible bearing their name. His devout Jewish mother, Mary, was a member of the early Christian church and worshiped her son as the perfect Son of God (Acts 1:14). If anyone knew Jesus was a sinner and a hypocrite, it would have been His friends and family. But without exception, they all agreed with His claim to be without hypocrisy—or even sin. They all suffered for that claim, refusing to recant even when tortured to the point of death.

OBJECTION #4: HYPOCRACY

This unequaled and unparalleled claim by Jesus means He cannot be considered just a good man. He is either the God-Man or the worst man who has ever lived. If His claim is untrue He is the biggest hypocrite in the history of the world. But if His claim is true, then He alone is God and Christ. He is the one anointed to enter history as God become man to live the sinless life we have not lived and die the death we all deserve to give the gift we cannot earn.

Ultimately, Christianity rises or falls with Christ and not Christians. And in the end, He is the one we must point to when people raise objections to His followers' imperfections. We fall short, but He alone stands above. This kind of religious exclusivity, of course, is controversial, as we will explore in the next chapter.

OBJECTION #5:

EXCLUSIVITY

“There are lots of religions, and I’m not sure only ONE has to be the right way.”

I grew up on the gritty streets next to an airport, a neighborhood where the sky rumbles and planes taking off and landing cast shadows that crisscross the ground. The area has always attracted a steady flow of first-generation immigrants. Many flee war-torn homelands. Most seek religious or political freedom. They arrive at the airport and settle under the flight paths to search for work and start their life in a new country.

The kids I played with were caught between cultures. A part of them identified with the land they left, and another part tried hard to connect with the land they had entered. My friends came from India, Africa, and seemingly every nation in Asia. In America, they rapidly became fluent in a new language and culture, but their parents were adamant that the old family religion be passed down. The blocks around my childhood house are still crowded with turban-wearing Sikh men, women in burqas that cover everything but their eyes, Muslims from across the Middle East and Africa, Buddhists, Shintoists, Hindus, and people of a long list of other faiths. Mosques, temples, and other places of worship fill the neighborhood. As a child I couldn’t keep up with all the holy days my friends celebrated, and in their homes, I often saw shrines and altars dedicated to various deities.

I couldn’t help but respect most of my neighbors as good people. They worked hard, stayed out of trouble, and hung together as a family. Most of the kids worked hard in school. Most didn’t want to get into trouble in their new country or do anything to shame themselves, their family, or their religion.

Growing up in this context, I don’t really remember ever wondering whether any one religion was right or wrong. Even as I got older, I just assumed that different people spoke different languages, ate different food,

wore different clothes, celebrated different holidays, worshiped in different ways, and believed in different gods. And that was okay because it seemed to be working for everyone.

FEEDBACK

For many of the non-Christians in our survey and focus groups—people who have left or never been part of church—that scene illustrates an ideal world where religions peacefully coexist. I get how they feel. My friends and I each had our own beliefs. No one had to hide their traditions. And certainly no one ever compelled others to accept their faith. It all seemed pretty simple.

For me things got complicated when I started wondering which if any religion was real and true. One day in college, I came to believe the words of Jesus, who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me” (John 14:6 NLT). Once persuaded of that truth, I suddenly found the stakes higher for me and everyone around me. It mattered to me whether they believed who Jesus is and what He had done for them at the cross. I went from person to person passing along His words that He was the one and only way to heaven. I will not say I always did that perfectly or even tactfully, but I do not doubt my goal was right.

Many non-Christians would take issue with my newfound beliefs and actions. Just under half of our phone survey participants (42%) agreed that “There are lots of religions, and I’m not sure only one has to be the right way.”

Across our focus groups, we heard people say they are happy to leave Christians alone in our beliefs, even if those beliefs are delusions, many added. A man in Phoenix said, “If they want a false hope, or they need some sort of hope in their life, Santa Claus, to get through, I don’t see anything wrong with it.”

A few indicated they might be open to developing some sort of faith in their own time and way. One guy cracked, “If I wake up tomorrow and see the Virgin Mary in my pancake and decide that this is something I’ve been missing out of my life since I’ve been born, and I want to learn the practices of Christianity and all that, conversion is something that’s my decision, and I’m fine with that.”

But despite this apparent openness, there was a universal boundary not to be crossed. Our focus-group participants unanimously agreed that it was wrong for Christians to advocate their faith, especially the claim that Jesus is the only way to reach God. The guy waiting for the face of Mary in his

flapjacks said this:

“What I don’t like is it’s saying that they believe that the only way to Heaven is by being born again and accepting Jesus Christ. That I don’t like because if I feel that even though there are elements of Christianity that I identify with and I like, but there are elements of Buddhism that I also identify with. So, I don’t really think that I belong to any organized religion but I do feel spiritual, I feel a connection to God. When I pass I want to be with God. I want to be in Heaven that I believe in. Having someone tell me, ‘Oh, no, no, no you think you’re going to have a relationship with God but unless you’re born again and accept Jesus, that’s not happening for you.’ That I don’t like.”

Many people in our focus groups had fundamental disagreements with the Christian faith about who goes to heaven or hell:

A young guy from Austin shared: “When I got to college I joined a fraternity, met one of my pledge brothers and he’s from Long Island. He’s Jewish, his whole family is Jewish, they all stay kosher, all these things. I was thinking about it, he’s a really good friend of mine and I was just thinking about it. One of the reasons the Bible, not the Bible necessarily but religion, tells me that he’s supposed to go to hell because he doesn’t believe in Jesus. I just don’t understand things like—that’s just a personal experience of how it’s hard for me to reconcile someone who I believe is a good person.”

A San Francisco woman said: “I’m comfortable not knowing what happens when we die, that sort of thing. That’s my stance. I guess I’m agnostic.”

And then there was this from a woman in Phoenix: “If Jeffrey Dahmer was on his last dying breath and was honestly, truly sorry in his heart, that he’d get let into the gates of heaven and sit down at the table and eat with all of us people that have tried to do right.... I don’t care how much he asks for forgiveness, I don’t want to sit at the table with him. If there’s a third option, I want to go there.”

People who spoke up in our focus groups clearly want freedom to pick and choose from various spiritual beliefs, keeping what they consider valuable and relevant and rejecting the rest. Like people scooping up food at a buffet, they consider it their right to take it or leave it:

Austin guy: “I also don’t think it’s necessary to believe in the myth of Resurrection or even God in order to take His teachings as a philosophy. I don’t think it’s necessary to believe in supernatural occurrences, just to understand the point of His teachings.”

A woman in Boston recalled: “We had a youth pastor who basically was very young and hip, and he sat down and the first thing he said to us was, ‘The Bible is a book of stories written by men, interpreted by men, and it’s just to help us understand our faith.’ And so, of course, that got me to think, ‘Oh, this is just a book of stories. This isn’t necessarily the Word of God.’ We all had this very inquisitive group.... It was very open, learning about other faiths and being inquisitive about how our faiths are tied together, rather than what separates us. That’s at 14, I started learning about that. My mom was nontraditional, into metaphysics, and so when I started having these questions, then I started asking her, ‘What are these other faiths?’ and ‘What goes on?’ She really was the one who helped me to understand metaphysics, universalism, Buddhism, all of these other things.”

And people take issue not just with the Christian message—what we say—but how we say it. Some prefer we simply keep our beliefs to ourselves:

The same Boston woman shared: “Then there’s [sic] other people that I’ve encountered that have tried to force the Word down my throat and tell me that I’m going to go to hell.”

A guy from Phoenix said, “I think a big thing for me, at least, is when people are so out with their religion where it’s just so in your face and it’s so pushy on me. I really don’t like that. It really turns me off. Even when it’s not forceful. I find it odd sometimes because I think that your relationship with God and religion is just something that you should share with yourself and God. I don’t think that it’s something that should always be talked about and always be out there.”

These comments all ring true with what I hear all the time as I encounter people as a pastor and in everyday life. So how do we respond? Do we shut up, ramp it up... or maybe change our approach?

OPTIONS AND MORE OPTIONS

Part of what I hear in these responses is modern consumerism. In a world where we can instantly find, buy, and swap anything, spirituality becomes just another commodity in the Amazon store of life. And what most people are shopping for are practical tips to live a better life according to whatever they define as better. When I spoke to Indian-born Christian thinker Ravi Zacharias for this project, he called these people “happy pagans.” These people are in no mood to ponder the four great questions of origin, meaning, morality, and destiny. They suffer no pain. They feel no distress. The anvil has not fallen out of the sky on their life. They anticipate good times ahead and see little reason to include the Christian faith in their future. Why would anyone on a roll waste time on a religion with downer concepts like judgment and hell?

But something deeper than consumerism drives the belief that “there are lots of religions, and I’m not sure only ONE has to be the right way.”

People have always had a beef with Christianity’s claim of exclusivism. They say it is wrong to claim that Jesus is the one Savior of the world or that faith in Him is the one and only route to God. If they were back in my old hood, they might say there are many airlines and flights that get you to God. They would assure you there are tons of places to take off and land.

This opposition to exclusivism is vaguely intellectual. Critics of Christianity contend that all religions are limited in their grasp of reality, as in the old story of several blind men groping an elephant. A guy who finds the trunk does not describe the elephant in the same way as another who discovers an ear. Each has only a limited perspective of a larger whole, just as each religion only sees part of God. According to this analogy, every religion actually describes the same thing. Like a guy from Phoenix said, “Jesus, or God as we know Him, Allah, Yahweh, they’re just different names for the same Almighty being.” In this scheme, religious viewpoints are essentially interchangeable and equally true.

I don’t think anyone actually lives like one faith is as valid as the next. Hardly anyone signs up to be a suicide bomber to be rewarded life with 72 virgins in paradise. Most do not worry about evil spirits lurking in trees and rocks. People feel safe ignoring Zeus. And on Sunday mornings many

people would rather worship at the Church of the Holy Comforter than walk through a church door.

This viewpoint of extreme religious pluralism doesn't hold up. Religious followers do not agree that all religions believe the same thing. Saying that all religions teach the same thing is highly offensive to all followers of all faiths. If you go up to a devout Muslim and say, "Uh, do you believe the same thing as a Buddhist?" they would say, "The Buddhist? The guy who doesn't even believe in God? No!" If you ask a Universalist, who believes that everybody goes to heaven, if they think like a Mormon, they will gladly buy you a coffee and explain how they are radically different.

People who in the name of tolerance reduce all religions to a handful of shared moral principles fail to notice their own staggering intolerance. They think they are being nice, but they are not.

Ravi Zacharias has traveled to almost 70 nations and has made the study of religions a life pursuit. He points out that Buddhism is supposed to be the most peace-loving and accommodating of all viewpoints, and yet Gautama Buddha, born a Hindu, rejected two fundamental doctrines of Hinduism: the caste system and the full authority of sacred Hindu texts. As Zacharias concluded in our phone conversation for this project, "The most unfortunate assumption that is made is that all religions are fundamentally the same and only superficially different. It's exactly the opposite. Religions are fundamentally different and at best superficially similar."

Christianity is not alone in saying its beliefs supplant all others. Every faith and every belief system make exclusive claims. In fact, anyone who asserts anything proves they implicitly accept some things as true and reject others as false. It doesn't matter whether the subject of conversation is Christ or college basketball or climate change.

From our standpoint as Christians, a world full of religious options boils down to two things: good works or God's grace. It is one or the other. Other religions require good works—living a moral life, obeying the law, reincarnating to pay off your karmic debt. Christianity holds to God's grace—getting to heaven not because of what we do but because of what Jesus has done. We do not ascend up to God through our piety or good works. God became man to reconcile mankind to God. Like the apostle Paul wrote, "For there is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus. He gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone. This is the message God gave to the world at just the right time" (1 Tim. 2:5–6 NLT). What we believe *is* different.

MEAN CHRISTIANS

People outside the church have always thought we are mistaken about Jesus and His claims. But their newest objections to Christianity have taken a harsher turn. These criticisms are not just vaguely intellectual. They get highly emotional. People believe our exclusive message is not only incorrect but also immoral. This is a massive shift from head to heart.

Long-time Christian strategist Tom Gilson explains what is going on. He picks apart the arguments of Kirby Godsey, a former Baptist university president who has launched a full-on assault on Christian exclusivism.²⁷

Gilson writes, “Godsey doesn’t tell us we should reject exclusivism because it is false. Instead he says we should reject it because it’s bad, and those who believe it are bad. Exclusivism, he tells us, is arrogant, born out of psychological weakness, ‘abrasive and hostile,’ authoritarian and so on.”²⁸

In their book *American Grace*, authors Robert Putnam and David Campbell call this the “Aunt Susan Principle.” The gist is that Aunt Susan was really nice and loved me and did not believe in Jesus, but she lived a good life and believed in God and if you say she is in hell you are being very mean and cruel.

This new objection means that we cannot open our mouths without coming off as unloving. After studying all of our focus group responses, our facilitator summed up what people considered the extreme wrongs committed by many Christians:

- They want to dominate any conversation involving religion.
- They are totally focused on convincing you that their beliefs are right and yours are wrong.
- They are close-minded to any alternatives.
- They criticize and condemn any religion but theirs.
- They refuse to listen to what you have to say regarding your beliefs, decisions, and rationales.
- They get in your face, get loud and pushy—and can’t accept agreeing to disagree.
- They won’t give up until they convert you or you turn your back on them and walk away.

Not long ago people just thought Christians were stupid. Now they think we are mean or even immoral.

This new objection requires a new response. Gilson says, “No longer is it sufficient just to defend the truth that Jesus is the only way to God. We must also demonstrate that believing that doesn’t make one a bad person.”²⁹

A generation ago we could get away with lining up Christian intellectuals to present evidence for the truth. Today we must prove our own love, care, and authenticity and connect it to God’s endless affection for us. Our responses cannot simply be intellectually coherent. They must also be emotionally compelling.

EXCLUSIVE LOVE

The couple on my couch wanted to hash out their marriage troubles. Unsure what was going on, I prayed for them and asked how I could help.

The wife loved her husband. On the job he was a hard worker, and at home a loving husband, but she admitted she found him stifling. She wanted to stick together and thought they could work out their differences. She was likeable and reasonable. The husband said he was embarrassed they needed to meet with me and wished his wife would just change her mind and see things his way. He was obviously hurt. He bristled.

For almost an hour this couple took turns speaking in vague generalities. Finally I asked pointedly, “What do you think the problem is?” She said, “He’s very demanding, jealous, and controlling.” He said, “I don’t like my wife having intimate relationships with other men.”

I didn’t see that response coming!

There was a moment of awkward silence as I gathered my thoughts. Then the husband explained, “I don’t think it’s right for a married woman to sleep with other men. She wants an open marriage. I don’t. I think our marriage should be exclusive.”

The wife jumped in to accuse her husband of being “old-fashioned” and “narrow-minded.” She would be happier and their marriage would last longer if she had her husband plus other relationships. She enjoyed many men and did not want to limit her experience to one mate. The husband just wanted his wife.

Do you agree with the husband or the wife?

Despite all of our erratic cultural boundaries regarding sexuality, the polls consistently show that most Americans think adultery is wrong. Being against your husband or wife having sex outside marriage is one of the few moral boundaries most people still agree on. If your spouse sleeps with somebody else, you want to cry foul.

The exclusivism of the Christian faith is more than a theoretical

abstraction. It gets to the core of how we relate to God. The Bible repeatedly says that God loves His people like a husband loves His wife. We might consider His exclusive demands intolerant, bigoted, and close-minded, but they actually reflect His relentless pursuit of a loving, unique, and devoted relationship. When the God of the Bible sees people chasing other gods, He feels like a husband who walks in on his wife with another man. When they dabble in other religions and spiritualities, God calls it adultery.³⁰

ONE LOVING WAY

All the exclusive claims of Jesus need to be heard in that context of God's relentless love. When Jesus speaks truth about who He is and what He has done, His words flow from nothing less than His infinite love.

I didn't make up the claim that Jesus is the only route to God. Neither did some other preacher out to create a job for himself and a market for his message. Jesus Himself was the first to state the essential Christian precept that He is the one and only way to heaven. Given all the different opinions floating around about Jesus, I want us to keep in mind what He said about Himself. Here are a dozen amazing claims Jesus made about Himself compiled in *Vintage Jesus*, a book I co-authored:

1. *Jesus said He came down from heaven.*

“For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.... At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ They said, ‘Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, “I came down from heaven?”’” (John 6:38, 41–42 ESV)

2. *Jesus said He was more than just a good man.*

“As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. ‘Good teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ‘Why do you call me good?’ Jesus answered. ‘No one is good—except God alone.’” (Mark 10:17–18 NIV)

3. *Jesus said He was the Son of Man.*

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign

power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13–14 NIV)

“At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.” (Mark 13:26 NIV)

4. *Jesus performed miracles.*

“‘Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’? Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.’ Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp.” (John 10:36b–39 NIV)

5. *Jesus said He was God.*

“Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?’ ‘I am,’ said Jesus. ‘And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’ The high priest tore his clothes. ‘Why do we need any more witnesses?’ he asked. ‘You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?’” (Mark 14:61–64 NIV)

“Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!’ At that point they picked up stones to throw at him. But Jesus was hidden from them and left the Temple.” (John 8:58–59 NLT)

“‘I and the Father are one.’ Once again the people picked up stones to stone him. Jesus said, ‘At my Father’s direction I have done many good works. For which one are you going to stone me?’” They replied, ‘We’re stoning you not for any good work, but for blasphemy! You, a mere man, claim to be God.’” (John 10:30–33 NLT)

6. *Jesus confirmed to others He was God.*

“But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ ‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied. ‘But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He

has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy.” (Matthew 26:63–65 NIV)

7. *Jesus said He was sinless.*

“Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don’t you believe me?” (John 8:46)

8. *Jesus forgave sin.*

“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” (Mark 2:5 ESV)

9. *Jesus taught people to pray to Him as God.*

“I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” (John 14:13–14 NIV)

“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.” (John 15:7 NIV)

10. *Jesus promised to judge all people as God.*

“Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.” (John 5:22–24 NIV)

11. *Jesus said He was the only way to heaven.*

“Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” (John 14:6 NIV)

“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.’” (John 11:25 NIV)

12. *Jesus claimed authority and supremacy over all people, political parties, races, genders, nations, religions, cultures, beliefs, and sexual orientations.*

“Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’” (Matt. 28:18 NIV)

Whether we are exploring Jesus for ourselves or attempting to introduce Him to others, we need to ensure we get at the biblical Jesus unfiltered by cultural assumptions or even our own attempts to make Him more acceptable to skeptics.

SPEAKING TRUTH

Some university students approached me for help on a research project on world religions. They brought their own wide range of spiritual backgrounds. A few were international students. Some were Muslims, at least one was Hindu, and another was raised Jehovah's Witness.

The questions they pressed the hardest were about the exclusivity of Jesus. I tried to lovingly but clearly explain that Christians believe Christ alone saves because Christ Himself taught that. He was put to death for saying it, and for 2,000 years, Christians have said the same thing and suffered in similar ways.

At the outset I feared I would unnecessarily offend these nice people I had just met. So I tried my best to be tactful. During the conversation, a student visiting from an Islamic-ruled country made me rethink. He said, "You are a Christian, and I am a Muslim. We worship different gods and believe different things. It does not offend me when Christians say that because it is true. What offends me is when people who do not understand our religions say they are basically teaching the same thing, because they are not."

Our discussion turned to the difference between our religions. The Hindu said it was reincarnation and not resurrection that would deal with our problems. The Muslim said it was our faithful life and not Jesus' faithful life that counts. And the Jehovah's Witness said that Christians were wrong about Jesus and that the only real church was his.

It became obvious as we talked that we all thought the followers of other religions were wrong and would pay for their error in the life to come. We each tried to make the best case for our belief system in hopes of compelling the others to consider it for themselves. While I disagreed with the others, their beliefs were genuine. And because they were trying to help me by converting me, I felt loved.

It is not mean for a Christian to tell others that Jesus alone saves. It is like warning a friend getting sucked into a bad relationship. You see danger, but they have been duped. Speaking up might feel uncomfortable, but it is the only compassionate choice.

Illusionist and atheist Penn Jillette tells about getting handed a Bible after a show. "I wanted you to have this," the man said. "I'm kind of proselytizing.

I'm a businessman. I'm sane. I'm not crazy." The man likely knew he was talking to a resolute atheist, but he was neither aggressive nor defensive. He just looked Jillette in the eye, said some kind words about the show, and gave his gift. The outspoken Jillette says this about the encounter:

I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and hell, and people could be going to hell—or not getting eternal life or whatever—and you think that, well, it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward.... How much do you have to hate somebody not to proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?

Jillette concludes, "This guy was a really good guy. Polite and honest and sane—and he cared enough about me to proselytize and give me a Bible."³¹

When my friends and I were growing up under the flight paths, none of us went out of our way to explain our religious beliefs to each other. There were no attempts at persuasion or proof. We never debated whether one faith was true and the others false. We were as unaware of the import of our beliefs as we were of the planes that constantly roared overhead. Why? It felt like there was nothing to gain or lose. What someone believed—or did not believe—didn't matter. Now I know it does. All eternity depends on whether people hear and respond.

THE NARROW DOOR

Many Bible passages clarify the exclusive, all-important claims of Jesus regarding salvation. One of the most obvious is Luke 13:22–30. As Jesus taught His way through Israel's towns and villages, someone asked Him a question for the ages: "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" (Luke 13:23 ESV). Who will make it to heaven?

Salvation is one narrow door.

"Strive to enter through the narrow door," Jesus responded. "For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24 ESV). Every home has a door, and God's heavenly home is no exception. Jesus declares that such a door exists. It separates insiders from outsiders, family from foe, those who are welcome from those not on the guest list. God lives on one side, and we

live on the other. On His side is holiness, and on our side sin. On His side is life, on ours, death. And the door between us and God is “narrow.” What does that mean? Few find the door. Fewer still go through it. Apart from this door there is no salvation, no forgiveness of sin, no hope for sinners, no eternal life. The only door of salvation is narrow indeed.

The narrow door is exclusive and inclusive.

On this point Christianity is the most exclusive of all religions. But it is also the most inclusive, because *all* are welcome to pass through the narrow door. In some religions you must be of a particular race, ethnicity, or people group, but not so in Christianity. All nations are invited to pass through the narrow door of salvation. In some religions you need to learn Hebrew or Arabic, but all tongues can enter here. In some religions you must be smart and studious, but at the narrow door even the simple can find the way in. In some religions you need to be rich so you can buy your seat or go through layers of teaching, training, and cleansing, but at this door the poorest of the poor are welcome, and even given a place of honor.

The narrow door is closing.

God has opened a door of invitation. But that door will close. Jesus said, “When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from’” (Luke 13:25–26 ESV). There is no reincarnation, no annihilation, no second chance for salvation after death. Hebrews 9:27 (ESV) says, “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.” You live, you die, you are judged. That is the truth. When you die, the door of opportunity slams shut behind you.

The narrow door divides heaven and hell.

Jesus also says this narrow door divides heaven and hell. He first describes hell: “In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out.” And then Jesus describes heaven: “And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first,

and some are first who will be last” (Luke 13:28–30 ESV). Heaven will be feasting and laughing and blessing, an enormous sin-free party where sickness is conquered, disease destroyed, and God glorified. The nations will come together, and we will live forever under a good king’s gracious rule. But Jesus describes hell in the most painful of terms, speaking of unending torment more than anyone else in the Bible. People will weep profusely and never stop grinding their teeth in agony. Hell lasts just as long as heaven: forever.

The narrow door IS Jesus.

In the end, Jesus finally reveals that He is that narrow door. His death opens the way for us to enter heaven. He says, “Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem” (Luke 13:32–33 ESV). God has opened one narrow door from us to Him, and that door is Jesus Christ, who says, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved” (John 10:9 ESV). Jesus knew His mission and was absolutely committed to seeing it through. God became man to open a door of opportunity for men and women to come to God. He who had no sin became sin for us. He died in our place for our sins as our substitute and Savior. Jesus says, “I am the door!” He is the door of salvation, the door of invitation, the door from man to God, the door from hell to heaven.

THE WHOLE TRUTH

For Christians, there is no getting around the fact that this door exists and proves all the alternatives false. Atheists are wrong: God is real and there is a world beyond this world and a life after this life. Pluralists make a grave mistake: There are not multiple doors leading to eternal life, and not all religions go to the same place. And universalists lie: Not everyone dies and goes to heaven. Simply dying does not usher anyone into paradise. The decision we make in this life for or against Christ ultimately determines where we go at life’s end. This assertion is non-negotiable if we are to accept Christ’s own words, but that doesn’t mean you are unloving or immoral for being a Bible-believing Christian. The question is how do you convey that truth to the Unchurched Nones and Dechurched Dones.

Rather than condemning God for creating a narrow door, we should

acknowledge none of us does this for our enemies. At home we do not throw open the front door to those who have harmed us, abused us, abandoned us, betrayed us, or maligned us. We do not leave a light burning to invite them in. We never welcome them into our home so we can love them and lavish goodness on them and feast with them. We are all hypocrites. God is better than us all. God owes us nothing, yet He has opened a door into His home.

These are hard words, but the world needs the truth. Our message is this: Don't complain about the door. Don't go searching for another door. Don't try the thousands of doors of religion and ideology and philosophy. Don't criticize the door. Don't critique the door. Don't just stare at the door. Don't walk away from the door. And don't place your hand on the wrong knob. Don't walk through the wrong belief system—that is a trap. Instead, run to Jesus! Run through the narrow door that He's swung wide open to you!

In our attempts to sound a little more sane and reasonable to the people around us, Christians have a long history of shooting to the stratosphere of theological detail. We lay out the cosmological argument, the ontological argument, the teleological argument, the intelligent design argument—but in the end, people are no closer to Jesus. For most people, He might as well be on Pluto.

The average person just needs to hear about Jesus. Whatever the conversation, your goal is to turn the topic to Him. When someone says, "There are all these other religions." *Well, let's talk about Jesus.* "A lot of paths lead to God." *Well, let's see what Jesus thought about that.* "Everyone goes to heaven." *Well, let's check with Jesus. He is the expert on that.*

The Bible is one story about one guy: Jesus. He is perfectly fascinating and totally compelling. Even though the majority of people in our focus groups barely knew anything about Him, they still liked Him. So let's play the only hand we've got. Let's start with Jesus. Let's finish with Jesus. Because if people are going to reject something, it should be Jesus. If they are going to trip over a rock, let's clear the yard and leave them the right one.

As we convey this one story about one guy, we need to make sure people get the whole hard truth. If we actually believe in hell, in the hope of the Gospel, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, then we need to say that. Maybe not all at once. But "not all at once" does not mean "never at all." Right from the start the best friends of Jesus preached that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). We can do no less.

Jesus said He has been given the duty of judging the world (John 5:19–29). Ironically, they judged Him to be the sinner. People became so furious

that Jesus would judge them that they had Him arrested, unjustly tried, and murdered. Now that Jesus has risen and ascended into heaven, we read in Revelation 20 that one of the final events in world history will be the return of Jesus seated upon a white throne as the judge of the living and the dead:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11–15)

This is hard truth. But it is the whole truth that people need to know.

I was walking through an airport recently and saw a very elderly couple, easily in their 90s. They were shuffling along slowly, holding hands the whole way, looking incredibly happy together. Jesus wants a relationship with His people like that—intimate, connected, step-in-step, lifelong, always growing. And sharing that news with our world is anything but mean.

Some who hear that news will understand that the exclusive message of Christianity is actually a sign of God's affection. Others will not. But our job is to make everyone aware. Salvation is a narrow door named Jesus. It is exclusive: There is one door. But the good news is that it is also inclusive: All are welcome. The narrow door divides heaven and hell, and it is closing. When people die, the door slams shut behind them, and they will stand before Jesus. He is the one who will judge them. Right now He weeps, imploring them to run by faith through the door that He suffered, died, and rose to open. And we need to weep too, so that more people outside the church will see clearly that our "exclusive dogma" is an invitation for all to be included in the family of God. The decision is theirs, but you and I have to extend the invite. In the next chapter, we will examine how many people find this to be just another example of Christian inequality.

OBJECTION #6:

INEQUALITY

“All people are not created equal in the Christian faith.”

My friend never anticipated the question that erupted from the back seat on a drive home from school. “Mom,” her young daughter asked, “how come we don’t believe in equality?”

The girl’s teacher had been saying that lots of people love each other and can marry and no one has the right to judge them. Over and over the teacher threw around the word *equality* to describe same-sex marriage adding that anyone who disagreed was unloving. This perspective was embedded in the curriculum my friend’s daughter was to learn and affirm, which to this Christian single mom felt more like indoctrination than education.

The conversation in the car that particular day was triggered by a bumper sticker in the next lane that said, “I believe in marriage equality,” a popular slogan where I live. It sends an unsubtle message that opponents of same-sex marriage are in fact advocates of inequality.

FEEDBACK

Across our phone surveys and focus groups we often heard that Christianity is “unprogressive” and even “repressive.” Instead of supporting the ideals of the future it defends prejudices of the past. Nearly a third (29%) of our survey participants agreed that Christians don’t believe all people are created equal. They perceive this bias as both a historical pattern and a present reality. One man explained, “Since its very conception, people have never been equal in Christianity according to the way it’s been preached. It’s never been about equality. It’s community versus community. To put it in broad terms, the haves and have nots. You don’t belong to my community;

therefore, you are lesser than I am.” People spoke out against Christian prejudice toward women, racial minorities, and anyone who does not self-identify as a committed heterosexual. A man in Austin summed up what many thought: “The Christian church has consistently been on the wrong side of history in terms of things like civil rights.”

This objection is a conversation stopper. Who wants to wave the flag for inequality? What decent human being sets out to oppose civil rights? But when people say Christians are on the wrong side of history, I have to interrupt. These accusers are on the wrong side of the facts.

THE ORIGIN OF EQUALITY

The idea of equality did not pop into existence like a cartoon thought bubble. History shows where equality as a value and way of life did or did not emerge. And a pair of surprising forces have been no friends of equality. World religions did not come up with the idea of equal rights. Nor did it originate in a secular, non-religious outlook.

No major faith apart from Christianity mandates a deep commitment to the equality of all people. In every other religion certain individuals and classes rank higher than others on a ladder of spiritual attainment. They are more enlightened, more holy, further along in paying their karmic debt, closer to the divine by virtue of their good works, and so on. And the result can be horrific inequities. In Hindu culture, for example, the caste system made untold masses unequal and untouchable. In Muslim culture, sharia law gives women and outsiders nothing resembling the rights and privileges of the male faithful. Eric Metaxas, author of *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery*, sums it up this way in an email interview I conducted with him for this project:

In India, the concept of caste is a perfect example of how some cultures today believe and act upon the belief that some human beings are inherently better than other human beings. In many Muslim countries today, a Jew or Christian is viewed as subhuman, and they are routinely called “monkeys and pigs” and thought to be fit for extermination or slavery.

Subjection breeds ignorance and pain. When you ask yourself, “Do the religions of the world contribute to equality?” the honest answer is no.

The idea of equality of all people likewise did not originate in a non-religious belief system. The foundation of a dominant secular worldview—evolution—leads to the conclusion that some are more fit than others. Some deserve to be winners, and losers deserve to die. And by placing animals and human beings on a continuum of development, evolution has given rise to racist views that some individuals, peoples, and races are more advanced than others. In our debate on *ABC Nightline*, Deepak Chopra, for example, referred to myself and some other people as “primitive.” Charles Darwin himself wrote, “At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world.”³²

Taken to its logical end, an unadulterated evolutionary view of humanity cannot lead to equality.

Those who say Christians are haters and bigots are on the wrong side of the facts because the concept of equality, as generally understood today—though sometimes misappropriated—actually originated and advanced in Christianity. Human religions and philosophies have never seen equality as an idea worth espousing, but the equality of all people has been essential to our faith since the very beginning. The Bible teaches that everyone equally bears the image and likeness of God in creation (Gen. 1:26–28). As a result, we share an equal dignity as uniquely created beings. We have equally fallen into sin (Rom. 3:23). And we are equally forgiven and saved by Jesus Christ when we come to Him in faith (Rom. 3:21–25). Both the Old and New Testament put these assumptions into practice by affirming equality in practical ways:

- “Do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great.” (Lev. 19:15 NIV)
- “Showing partiality is never good.” (Prov. 28:21 NLT)
- “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” (Col. 3:11 ESV)
- “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.” (James 2:1)

The equality of all human beings is a biblical idea that has made a powerful impact far beyond the walls of church. It has touched societies around the globe and been adopted even by our most vocal opponents.

Scholar Nancy Pearcey points out that none other than the eminent

atheist Friedrich Nietzsche gave Christianity credit for the concept of equality. In *The Will to Power*, he wrote, “Another Christian concept... has passed even more deeply into the tissue of modernity: the concept of the ‘equality of souls before God.’ This concept furnishes the prototype of all theories of equal rights.” Pearcey cites the postmodernist Richard Rorty as another radical atheist who admits that “the idea of universal human rights was a completely novel concept in history, resting on the biblical teaching ‘that all human beings are created in the image of God.’” Pearcey comments: “Rorty admits that atheists like himself have no basis for human rights within their own worldview. He calls himself a ‘freeloading atheist’ because he is fully aware that he is borrowing the idea of rights and human dignity from the Christian heritage.”³³

Whether others acknowledge it or not, this basic Christian belief has driven the fight for equal rights throughout history. Pearcey maintains that the success of many secular movements advocating equality today derives from “a beauty and an appeal that comes from their origin in a biblical worldview.” Arguments are ripped from their Christian context, redefined, and distorted, but they retain a measure of their original power.³⁴

She says, “The only reason that movements for equality are making headway today is that they borrow their best lines from Christianity.”³⁵

Even as our neighbors and friends join together to right wrongs like human trafficking for sexual slavery, we should not let others hijack our leading role in human rights. Christians are not tagalongs or freeloaders. We have been at the forefront of battles for racial, legal, social, economic, educational, and gender equality throughout history and across societies.

RACIAL EQUALITY

Christians broke ground on the battle for racial equality. Why? The Bible teaches that every person is created by God in His image and descended from one family. Each has the opportunity to be adopted into a spiritual family with God as Father and Jesus as Big Brother. Racial equality logically follows.

Jesus Himself broke harsh racial taboos by making friends with a Samaritan woman (John 4:27–42). The Samaritans were the next-door neighbors of Israel who were despised for their mixed-race heritage and false beliefs. The Jews had a habit of walking the long way around their land to avoid contact with its supposedly disgusting people. But Jesus strolled right into enemy turf and sat down for a chat with a Samaritan woman drawing water from a well.

OBJECTION #6: INEQUALITY

The woman was alone, an outcast among outcasts. After five failed marriages, she was living with the latest guy. But God had come to earth to court this woman at a lonely well in the heat of the noon sun. Jesus revealed her sin, exposing the dirtiest and most scarred portion of her soul, the part that smelled like sin and death and hell. He cleaned it, healed it, forgave it, and replaced it with grace.

People ask why Jesus or His first followers didn't overthrow slavery in the Roman Empire if they cared so much about equality. Besides overlooking the ridiculousness of a few hunted disciples hurling themselves against an immense social institution protected by the might of Rome, that dig ignores the radical steps Jesus and early Christians took that set the stage for widespread change centuries later.

Slavery was so pervasive in the days of Jesus that in some parts of the empire roughly half of the population were slaves.³⁶

Jesus broke ranks with His religious and political peers by identifying closely with those in bondage, calling Himself a “servant” or “slave” and welcoming them as His friends (John 13:4–5; Mark 10:45; Phil. 2:7). The early church included many slaves who were attracted to a faith that treated them as equals. This reality explains why the New Testament contains instructions regarding slaves—many were church members, leaders, and pastors. The apostle Paul called himself a slave of Christ (Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Philem. 10). He listed slave trading among the most heinous of sins (1 Tim. 1:10) and pleaded for the escaped slave Onesimus to be received as a brother (Philem. 10–19).

Following in Paul's footsteps some 500 years later, the former slave Saint Patrick became a powerful Christian voice opposing slavery, one of the first public figures to take such a bold stand on the issue. Historian Rodney Stark argues that slavery in medieval Europe ended “*only* because the church extended its sacraments to all slaves and then managed to impose a ban on the enslavement of Christians (and of Jews).”³⁷

The power and reach of the church over civil authority made that prohibition practically a decree of universal abolition.

Eric Metaxas describes similar Christian involvement in bringing down slavery in England and the British Empire in the early 1800s in the email interview we conducted for this project:

It was Christians who fought passionately to end the slave trade and slavery itself. William Wilberforce and other Christians stood against

secularists and for African slaves precisely because they believed that all men are brothers and all human beings are created in the image of God. Those who did not believe the Bible thought that notion a joke, and thought the darker-skinned races to be as obviously inferior to the light-skinned races as dogs were superior to rats or bugs.

Scholar Wayne Grudem added in our interview for this project that fully two-thirds of the leaders of the American abolitionist movement were Christians preaching that slavery should end. In more recent years, it was Christians like Rosa Parks, Jackie Robinson, and Martin Luther King Jr. who used biblical imagery and language to move a nation to stand against racial injustice, as Metaxas pointed out in our interview.

Christians across time and geography have followed Jesus' example of welcoming all peoples. Today, Jesus is worshiped among more races and cultures than any deity in history. There is simply no organization of any kind that has as much racial diversity as Christianity.

LEGAL EQUALITY

Christians were pioneers for legal equality. In most places throughout human history, the dictum that *might is right* has prevailed. Those in charge made, enforced, bent, flouted, and changed laws to their advantage. But the kings and peasants of ancient Israel lived under the rule of law given by God. The Bible begins with five books referred to as “the Law” because they contain 613 rules governing God’s Old Testament people. Both the Old and New Testament contain other laws that grow out of God’s unchanging character. It’s important to note that Scripture holds these laws to be binding on all people—no matter who they are or where they rank in society.

We may assume that equality for all people under the law is normative, but it is in fact not so. In much of the world (past and present), those with power and money live completely above the law as a law unto themselves. The influence of the biblical concept of law ruling over all people equally has forever altered Western culture.

Christianity began as an unwanted and outlawed fringe ministry group that was often persecuted. With the Roman Emperor Constantine, things changed as Christianity found itself as the official religion of the famed Roman Empire. As a patchwork of previous political groups, there was no such thing as consistent laws across the empire. Making matters even worse,

only the richest people could afford the professional help to navigate the complex legal system. As Christianity spread across the Roman Empire, spiritual leaders called bishops were given oversight of various geographic areas, and this included the legal right bestowed by the government to decide legal cases. Eventually, there was a Christian named Justinian who became Emperor, and he was largely responsible for establishing a more organized and formalized version of Roman law that helped pave the way for the legal systems in America and Europe today. As Rodney Stark notes, “Documents as important as the American Declaration of Independence or the European Charter of Human Rights can therefore be traced back to the ideas of the Christian legal system of Justinian.”³⁸

Because all people equally bear God’s image, heterosexuals and homosexuals stand eye-to-eye as human beings and deserve equal protection under the law. For this reason, most Christian leaders I know agree that legal protection should be given to gay couples on issues like inheritance rights, hospital visitation, and end-of-life decisions. While many of us disagree with the gay community over the definition of marriage, we believe that all people—gay, straight, and otherwise, deserve legal equality.

SOCIAL EQUALITY

Christians also took strides toward social equality—especially when it came to unwanted children. Children in the time of Jesus often lacked legal protection or parental affection. Sacrificing and abandoning children was common. Discarded children often died from exposure or were taken as slaves, prostitutes, or gladiators. This was especially true for children from the bottom rungs of society. But that’s just where Jesus came from. He was the King of the Universe come as a baby to a poor rural family. And in a society that dismissed and abused children regularly, Jesus loved kids and kids loved Him. They flocked to Jesus, and He welcomed, embraced, and prayed over them, as we learn from some of the fondest Bible stories ever. Because of His example, Christians began to treat children differently, including adopting discarded children. That work still continues with orphanages, foster care, and adoptions around the world developed and operated by Christians who have God’s heart for the value of all children from all backgrounds.

That same heart was extended to the way Christians cared for the needy. Hospitals in the Roman Empire were not open to the poor. But Jesus the Great Physician (Luke 4:23, 5:31) and healer inspired Christians to care

for people's physical as well as spiritual wellbeing. Luke the medical doctor and author of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts wrote more of the New Testament by volume than anyone, attentively recording the healing ministries of Jesus and the early church. Later, the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) decreed that hospitals should be established wherever there was a Christian church. Many modern hospitals and senior care facilities trace their roots to Christian denominations. Even the Red Cross began as a medical ministry founded by a Christian businessman and activist, Henri Dunant.

ECONOMIC EQUALITY

Christians were also pioneers for economic equality. The Bible from beginning to end describes God's heart for the poor and commands His people to be generous toward those who possess little or nothing. Jesus Christ understood this life firsthand. He was born poor. He lived poor. He did miracles for the poor, including feeding thousands to set an example for Christians to follow. And the poor found that same welcome in early Christian congregations. Historian Wayne Meeks concludes that churches connected to the apostle Paul's ministry drew people from a wide array of social classes. "A Pauline congregation," he says, "generally reflected a fair cross-section of urban society."³⁹

Christianity does not allow us to equate net worth with self-worth. Efforts like soup kitchens, food banks, and homeless shelters funded and staffed by Christians find their origins with Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia.⁴⁰

It is believed he piloted the first versions of these ministries to the poor and established the first social service support network.⁴¹

While Western critics of Christianity often forget the Christian roots of economic opportunities in their own nations, outsiders sometimes have a less clouded perspective. Historian Rodney Stark quotes one of China's leading scholars:

One of the things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West all over the world. We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we have realized

that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West is so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this.⁴²

EDUCATIONAL EQUALITY

Educational equality is a hot topic in politics these days, and once again, history shows Christians to be at the forefront of this campaign. Jesus Himself was well taught. He was called Rabbi (“Teacher”). And His followers have shared His commitment to learning:

- Didymus the Blind essentially invented Braille in the 4th century.⁴³
- The Christian Emperor Charlemagne ordered monasteries to open schools to educate children.⁴⁴
- In AD 797, priests were sent to open schools in every community so that the poor could be educated. School was priced according to what parents could pay and offered for free if necessary.⁴⁵
- During the so-called Dark Ages, Christian monks hand-copied books to save them from being lost.
- Oxford University started in a church.⁴⁶
- The University of Paris had a strong theology department that graduated one of the world's greatest thinkers, Thomas Aquinas.⁴⁷
- Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits pioneered education that continues in many schools today.⁴⁸
- In the 1500s, John Calvin opened one of the first tuition-free schools, which eventually grew into a university. He helped start other universities that worked together to form the first free and integrated educational system.⁴⁹
- The first society known to achieve full literacy was educated by the Jesuits in the 1600s.⁵⁰

The entire Protestant Reformation was made possible in large part by the invention of the printing press, by language formation and translation, and by systematic education. Christians want everyone to be able to read the Bible for themselves in their language, so they have spent countless dollars and hours creating written languages in cultures where a written system does

not exist and translating the Bible into languages spoken around the world.

Education in America was made possible in large part by Christians and churches. From the landing of the Puritans in 1637, virtually all education was private and Christian, often housed in churches for more than 200 years. Literacy rates were high, and nearly every one of the first 123 American colleges and universities founded in the United States were of Christian origins, including Yale, William and Mary, Brown, Princeton, NYU, and Northwestern. Harvard was started by a donation of money and books by Rev. John Harvard. Dartmouth was founded to train missionaries to the Indians. Many schools in the United States and around the world remain Christian by heritage, including schools Nelson Mandela attended.⁵¹

GENDER EQUALITY

People outside the church might be willing to consider the historical fact that biblical Christianity originated the ideal of equality that inspires Western values and continues to take hold throughout the world. They might even acknowledge that Jesus' followers have boldly led the way toward racial, legal, social, economic, and educational equality. But many nevertheless flatly reject the idea that Christians believe in gender equality because of inequities they perceive among us. Here is a sample of statements we heard in our focus groups:

Austin woman: "I think that the overbearing patriarchy of the Bible has inadvertently put women in the position that they're not respected as much and that they don't have as much equality."

Austin woman: "Men are always supposed to be above women. Women can't be above a man.... It's basically almost this thing that worships men."

Boston guy: "Women can't be priests. Women can't be in control of their body, even if it puts their lives at risk."

Boston woman: "I would take it one step further and say not only is it exclusive, it also excludes women, making it a male-dominated religion. And the way that women are talked to and degraded under the guise of Christianity is unacceptable."

Our group facilitator summed up a prevailing attitude among women:

“Women are so easily able to use the Bible as a reason not to be involved in the Christian faith because the stories involve women as chattel, women as owned.... That was their biggest push away. They don’t believe they’re being good mothers if they are ‘enslaved’ to something written 2,000 years ago.”

I grieve when I hear these things. Besides the issues that women have with the Bible or what they see acted out at church, I know there are other unspoken issues. The real trouble in gender equality today is men—especially young men. Guys are waiting longer than ever to marry for the first time. Until they make that commitment, they are dating, relating, and fornicating. They are drinking, carousing, and pornifying. They objectify, sexually assault, and impregnate women with no intent of marrying or fathering. They get high and laugh away their days, not knowing that their life is the joke. They might have a degree and a condo but they do not have a clue. They are anatomically men but functionally boys. They are boys who can shave. Perhaps ours is not an age of gender equality because men have so much catching up to do.

None of that reflects the ideal lived out by Jesus, who was a revolutionary in His relationships with women. He was unafraid to break manmade cultural taboos, although was careful never to transgress God’s law. Jesus talked with the woman at the well and the widow of Nain (Luke 7:12–13). He cast demons out of women and healed them (Matt. 9:20–22; Luke 8:40–56, 13:10–17). He lifted up women as examples as He preached (Matt. 25:1–10; Luke 4:26, 18:1–5, 21:1–4), and He taught women along with men, a highly controversial act in that day (Luke 10:38–42, 23:27–31; John 20:10–18). Jesus did not flinch when a sinful woman anointed Him and scandalized the religious guys who witnessed her devotion (Luke 7:36–50). Jesus was close friends with Mary and Martha, women He loved like sisters who had Him over to eat in their home (Luke 10:38–39). Women were among the most generous financial supporters of Jesus’ ministry (Luke 8:1–3). And women were granted the great honor of being the first to discover Jesus had risen (Matt. 28:1–10).

Rodney Stark sums up the dynamics of Jesus’ ministry among women and the appeal of the new faith He founded:

In Roman as in Jewish society, women were regarded as inherently inferior to men. Husbands could divorce their wives but wives could not divorce their husbands. In rabbinic circles, only males were allowed to study the Torah. Jesus challenged these arrangements.

Although he called only men to be apostles, Jesus readily accepted women into his circle of friends and disciples.... Christianity's appeal for women was a major reason that it grew so rapidly in competition with other religions of the Roman Empire. Then, as now, most Christians were women. The new religion offered women not only greater status and influence within the church but also more protection as wives and mothers.⁵²

I have been to the Middle East, and to this day, their cultures treat women considerably different than those nations influenced by Christianity. Jesus elevated the status of women in a way that much of the world never has.

Christians since that time have indeed been pioneers for gender equality. They fought against cultures where women were relegated as second-class citizens and regarded as the property of their husband. India offers painful examples such as the practice of suttee, burning a wife alive with her dead husband since she had no point in living if not to serve him. Female infanticide was rampant. Little girls were made "child widows," put to work as temple prostitutes for male pleasure. These evils were outlawed with the coming of Christian missionaries such as William Carey and Amy Carmichael. Elsewhere, Christians in China led efforts to ban the custom of binding women's feet, and Christian activism in America helped secure voting and property rights for women.

Scripture teaches a fundamental equality of women and men. One of the best-known verses Christians cite to prove this point comes from the apostle Paul, who wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

MEN AND WOMEN IN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Christians believe in gender equality. Where biblical Christians do divide is over practical questions of women's roles in ministry and at home. In the area of ministry roles, one group highlights Bible passages like Paul's words to the Galatians that there is neither male nor female in Christ (3:28). Christian egalitarians point out that godly female leaders guided God's people in the Old Testament (Deborah), in the ministry of Jesus (Mary), and among early Christians (Priscilla). Since these biblical women and many more ministered with God's obvious blessing, Christian egalitarians argue that women and

men should all therefore take their full place as pastors or priests.

Another group of Christians lean on other writings of Paul. He told the young pastor Timothy, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tim. 2:12). Later in the same letter Paul wrote, “An overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife” (3:2). Based on males occupying the highest spiritual office in the Old Testament (priests), in the ministry of Jesus (His inner ring of disciples), and among early Christians (pastors), Christian complementarians argue that only men can be pastors or priests.

I have no doubt that all of us—women and men on both sides—try to faithfully interpret and apply Scripture’s highest ideals. Because of our differing views there are some churches that reserve the highest leadership roles for men. There are many other churches and bodies where women take lead roles as teachers, worship leaders, elders, board members and chairs, pastors, bishops, and more. In some settings, male pastors can be disciplined or removed for failing to support the full ministry of women.

Complementarians also believe that God calls men to lead their homes (Eph. 5:21–33). This is a functional distinction (a role based on responsibilities) not an ontological distinction (a rank based on inherent value or worth). Speaking ontologically, the Bible teaches equality. Everyone, everywhere, no matter who they are or how society sees them, are equal in God’s sight. Speaking functionally, the Bible also teaches that some people are in positions of leadership over others.

Being in leadership does not mean that someone is superior to those they lead. Being functionally over others does not make someone intrinsically more valuable than people under their authority. Teacher and student, coach and player, or police officer and citizen are all equal. Even Jesus at times was under authority. As a child He submitted to His parents, Mary and Joseph. He yielded to government by paying taxes. And before going to the cross Jesus prayed to His Father saying, “Your will be done.” Jesus was not less valuable than His parents or political leaders or even God the Father. He stood equal to all. Furthermore, as a leader, Jesus is a humble loving servant and the model of perfect leadership.

Admittedly, Christians disagree on this issue even though we agree on even more important doctrines like the deity of Christ and the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation. I know that creates confusion among people outside the church who think that Christians do not support gender equality. None of us want our stance to cause hurt or to be a deal breaker for people

coming to Christian faith. There are innumerable churches, traditions, and denominations that vary in their understanding of women in leadership at church and in a Christian home. People who want to follow Jesus can find a spiritual family anywhere along a wide spectrum. But that's not really the issue we're discussing when it comes to the objections of those like in our focus group. The heart of the issue there is to not only clarify why their charge is untrue, but to also convey the beautiful way Jesus came into a world dominated by inequality and elevated everyone in His love.

In summing up why biblical faith became popular in the early Roman Empire, Rodney Stark says, "What Christianity gave to its converts was nothing less than their humanity."⁵³

So the question for us is how do we champion biblical equality today?

BATTLING INEQUALITY

I know we cannot argue anyone into agreement on this issue. More than anything, non-Christians want to see living proof of our commitment to equality. But I do think it is fair at some point in our conversations with non-Christians for us to say, "In the Bible all people are created equal because they are made by God who loves them. So why do *you* think people are equal?"

The burden of proof falls on our critics, because other belief systems do not come with a built-in respect for human worth. Whatever value non-Christians place on equality derives from the lingering ideals of Christendom. Like most people who move homes, when folks move on from Christendom to their new cultural worldview, they bring a few of their favorite things with them from the past.

Without a thorough grounding in the biblical truth that all people are created equal, people come up empty on reasons to advocate equality. With no moral justification for equal rights or background in the ideals inherent in the Bible, they offer up all kinds of inconsistent ideas of where equality does or does not apply.

Consider this discussion among the guys in San Francisco. One man raised this dilemma: "I know my kid is going to have Down syndrome so do I abort and wait for the next one?"

Ponder the responses.

"There's [sic] too many kids being born that shouldn't be born."

I wonder who decides which kid is one too many—and on what basis.

"Maybe society is better off with abortion. Maybe people's individual

rights aren't particularly invaded upon with abortion."

I think the aborted child would disagree.

"If abortion wasn't legal then you'd have all these people that shouldn't be having kids having kids."

I wish I had been there to ask, "What kind of people having what kind of kids?" The answers all added up to kids born to mothers who are young and poor.

Do you see the hypocrisy? These guys argue in the abstract that everyone is equal—everyone except a child with Down syndrome or a child unlucky enough to show up in the womb of a poor teenage mom. Why are those reasons okay and not others? Why not abort a girl if you want a boy? Why not terminate the babies born of certain races if we are discriminating on the basis of class? Does anyone care that abortions devastate minority populations? What about the rights of the half of all aborted children who are female? Apparently some people are more equal than others.

For Christians, this debate hits close to home. Let's just roll the numbers on Jesus' mother. Mary was probably a teenager, poor, possibly uneducated, living in a small rural town. She gets pregnant out of wedlock in a highly religious cultural context. If she walked into a clinic today, we know what she would be encouraged to do. But Mary gave birth to God. Jesus came into the world through the womb of a woman who fits the stereotype of someone who "should" get an abortion. Thankfully, Mary courageously brought Jesus into the world so that He could save the world. We will learn more about Him in the next chapter as we examine what Scripture says about His life and mission—and consider why so many people think the Bible is just outright bad.

OBJECTION #7:

SCRIPTURE

“I don’t share the same beliefs that the Christian faith tells me I should.”

As a kid I don’t remember reading the Bible. I did see one almost every day. Displayed on our living room coffee table was a family Bible as big as another coffee table. It had pictures of a long feathered-hair European Jesus wearing a dress that seemed miraculously clean considering all the sheep nuzzling up against Him. Reading that Bible would have been difficult. If I had held it on my lap it might have cut off my circulation and made my legs fall off.

I attended a Catholic elementary school for three years. I was given the job of altar boy and occasionally assisted with Mass. My duties included marching in and out of church with the priest. I hoisted another gigantic Bible up high for everyone to see. I don’t remember ever opening that Bible either.

Even without knowing much about the Bible I assumed I got the gist. *Believe in God. Be a good person. Try your hardest. Don’t fret when you mess up because nobody is perfect. Treat people the way you want to be treated. And judging people is unloving and mean. Don’t do that. Be nice.*

For high school graduation my girlfriend, Grace, and her father, a pastor, gave me a nice leather Bible with my name stamped on the front. At the time, I didn’t open that Bible either.

In college—a state university—I had a philosophy professor who was by all accounts not a Christian. He taught how various belief systems saw the world and our place in it. Of all the thinkers he covered I was most intrigued by Augustine, a father of the early church. I was surprised that he was a lot like me—young, prideful, unbelieving, sexually active—when he realized the sinfulness of his life far from God. In his view, human beings were by nature infected and affected as if diseased. Frankly, I was offended by his

pronouncing people corrupt to the core.

The professor said Augustine was deeply influenced by the apostle Paul. So I finally picked up the Bible my girlfriend had given me and started reading the New Testament books written by Paul. I ended up even more offended by him than by Augustine. The more I read the more upset I felt. The Bible's language seemed harsh and judgmental, its view of humans entirely negative, and everyone's personal business was aired in public. That felt way out of line.

FEEDBACK

People who read the Bible for the first time often react like I did. They likely see it as a collection of stories that have undergone so many alterations as they were translated and handed down through time that they no longer convey the intent of the original writers. As one woman told us, "Those stories change and evolve over time. It's like a game of telephone. What you tell me and I tell her is going to be something different by the time it gets to her. Stretch that out over thousands of years, you've got—." Another woman finished her sentence. "A bunch of muck."

Many focus group participants felt the Bible was little more than a collection of helpful hints for life. Barbara in San Francisco said it like this:

"Jesus wasn't, from my understanding, saying, 'I'm the focus.' What he was saying was, 'Follow my teachings, and you'll have a better life.' That's the gem. For me, whether he performed the miracles or whether he's the Son of God, all that is not important. His message was a wonderful message, and if you muck up that message with your own agenda, or with focusing on the details, you've lost the message. The message is fantastic, and it has a value unto itself."

It might be surprising to you that many non-Christians agree with parts of the biblical message. Our phone survey tracked the percentage that held various Christian beliefs:

- Jesus was a real person: 88%
- God exists: 78%
- An afterlife—heaven and hell—is real: 68%

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- Angels and demons exist: 65%
- Jesus rose from the dead: 59%
- Satan is a real entity: 53%

Despite this agreement, respondents also held other beliefs that contradict the Bible or took stands where the Bible is entirely silent—like the existence of alien life. They believed in:

- Evolution: 74%
- Karma: 71%
- The spirituality of nature: 68%
- Extraterrestrials and/or UFOs: 46%
- The existence of multiple gods: 19%

Beliefs across various age groups were generally similar, although those older than 25 were more likely to believe in God and those ages 18–24 more likely to accept evolution in exclusion of the creative influence of God. Men and women in our survey showed some differences.

	Male	Female	18–24	25–34	35–44
That Jesus existed	88	89	87	88	90
God	75	81	70	81	80
Evolution	77	70	78	68	76
Karma	65	79	69	75	69
Afterlife (as in heaven and hell)	64	74	66	70	68
The spirituality of nature	64	72	65	67	71
Angels and demons	60	73	63	69	63
That Jesus rose from the dead	54	66	52	61	63
The devil, or Satan	51	55	50	55	54
Extraterrestrials and/or UFOs	51	40	56	43	42
The existence of multiple gods	19	19	18	23	17

Overall, a significant portion of the people in our survey (29%) said, “I don’t share the beliefs that the Christian faith tells me I should.”

Our facilitator, Susan, met all of our focus group participants in person and heard every opinion firsthand. Her impression was that their knowledge of the Bible was superficial at best, even among the many who were once active in church. In an interview I conducted with her for this project she said, “They had learned bits and pieces.... They cling to the very few stories that they remember from childhood.”

NEW APPETITES

In a great irony, I love the book I once hated. I have spent most of my adult life as a Bible preacher and teacher. And I love nothing more than explaining the Bible to people who like to rip it apart. I sometimes wonder if God designed His book to rile us up so we would engage rather than ignore it.

My own attitude toward the Bible shifted almost overnight when God started changing me while a member of a college fraternity. I thought, “I’ll have fun. I’m in college. Nobody knows me. I don’t have to be the good Catholic boy anymore. This will be great.” So, I joined a fraternity.

One Friday night, the frat had a couple of sororities over for the first big party of the year. I was standing at the threshold of the basement stairs. The music was pumping, and everybody was dancing. They were all on their way to drunk, but I didn’t drink. And just before I stepped into the party, the weirdest thing happened. I thought, “I don’t want to do this.” So, I turned around and walked away. I went to the nearly empty college library. And for hours I sat there and read my Bible. I was in the process of becoming a Christian. So, I moved into a dorm and left the frat.

Within maybe a week my fraternity pledge class got arrested for stealing. For the rest of the school year they spent their evenings in community service and their weekends in jail. There is no explanation for what happened other than God changed me and this saved me from a possible jail sentence. Christians call it *regeneration*, which is actually what it means to be born again.

I think if anyone at that time had come along and quoted a Bible verse to me—like, “This is fornication, you will not inherit the Kingdom of God!”—I would have thought, “Hey, thanks for taking the T-bone and shoving it down my throat.” They would have made something tasty into something distasteful. But because God remade me from the inside out, no one had to yell at me to change. My desires were different. I had new appetites.

There is a difference between a non-Christian mind and a Christian mind. Peter wrote that believers are like newborn babes craving the pure

spiritual milk of God's Word (1 Pet. 2:2). When there is a new birth, there are new appetites. Once you get saved you think differently, feel differently, desire differently, and act differently.

THOSE CRAZY CHRISTIANS

If we learned anything in our research it is that more than a few people think Christians are crazy. And I will boldly agree that on some points we are guilty as charged. I hold to a powerful faith that is not always a reasonable faith, from a naturalistic point of view. What makes sense about a teenage virgin giving birth to the God-Man? Or how about that God-Man rising from the dead? Or what about all the rules in the Old Testament? There are regulations about everything, and I mean everything. Christians sometimes forget how insane these things sound to outsiders. We should try to empathize with one non-Christian who said, "The Bible! At first pass the Bible makes Scientologists sound coherent."

I find confidence in the fact that parts of the Bible are too crazy to make up. Their presence in Scripture is proof that no committee sat down and cooked up the Bible. But I also find the craziness compelling. The book doesn't read like self-help or psychology or the latest five steps to a better you. That intrigues me.

We should be honest with ourselves and others that God called the core of His Word out-and-out crazy. Paul wrote, "The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18 NLT). The world with all its wisdom chose to ignore God, so He determined to "destroy the wisdom of the wise and discard the intelligence of the intelligence" (1:19). He came to humankind with this crazy message of the cross. Paul said, "So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense" (1:23). The ancient Jews were scandalized that God could hang dirty and disgraced on the cross. The Greeks found the whole idea of the cross intellectually foolish.

I'm not surprised when the Bible makes little sense to a non-Christian, because God ultimately makes its contents believable—not just a half-hearted nod to a dusty book but a wholehearted acceptance of truth worth living and dying for. I'm also not surprised when people come to believe the Bible, because I see God bringing about that change all the time.

THE BIBLE SPEAKS

Christian belief stands or falls with the Bible. New Testament scholar Darrell Bock puts it like this in an interview I conducted with him for this project:

You can't talk about Christianity without the Scripture. If you take Scripture away, you won't have much left. Although you might have a belief in God and might know a little bit about who Jesus is, you wouldn't know very much. That's a starting point and a reference point for all of us. Not that we're worshipping the Book, but we're engaged with the concepts that put us in proper relationship to God.

Because the Bible is so central to what Christians believe, at some point each of us has to settle what we think about the Book. Most disagreements between Christians and non-Christians come down to whether or not we think the Bible is true. A non-Christian might consider a few parts of the Bible curious. They might write some of its words on a sticky note for inspiration. They accept some points but not others. They approach the Bible like a salad bar: "I'll take that, I'll leave that, I'll take that, I'll leave that." But for Christians, the Bible is fully true. It is not a salad bar. It is a boxed lunch—take it or leave it.

When Christians make enormous claims about the Bible, they are in fact simply restating what the Bible says about itself. The Bible asserts that God authored the entire book down to every word. It also claims God did this through human authors. These authors retained their own style, voice, perspective, and cultural distinctives, yet God uniquely inspired them to write down what He wanted recorded with complete accuracy. This is different from the Koran or Book of Mormon, for example, which adherents of Islam and Mormonism claim were the result of someone taking dictation. This makes the Bible unique from, superior to, and in authority over everyone and everything else on the earth, because when the Bible speaks God speaks. The following are some examples of the Bible claiming divine authority:

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (2 Tim. 3:16 ESV)

"And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to

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which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Pet. 1:19–21 ESV)

"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Heb. 4:12 ESV)

I became a Christian and grew as a Christian when I actually opened the Bible and became convinced for myself that its enormous claims were true. As I understood more and more of what the Bible was all about, my previous objections fell away. In our focus groups, we heard many recurring difficulties people held about the Bible. I want to take up seven of the most frequent misconceptions one by one so we can gain a better understanding of how to respond with clarity.

SEVEN MISCONCEPTIONS

Misconception 1: "The Bible has been edited by too many people."

People in every focus group said the Bible has undergone so many changes throughout its history that we no longer have access to its original message. As one guy said, "The people that are obeying it to the letter of the words, they might not be following what Jesus really said because it's been passed down from so many different people, so many different scholars. It's been edited by too many people. So, do we really know what the word of God in the Bible is? We don't, there's no way to know."

Those who say the Bible is the product of many different people are only partly correct about its creation and transmission. There were indeed roughly 40 human authors who contributed to the Bible. Authors include the rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless, the highly educated and the informally educated. The content they composed covers a wide variety of forms including history, personal letters, songs, poetry, romantic correspondence, legal

documents, sermon transcripts, census reports, personal diaries, travel plans, family trees, geographical surveys, accounting records, and supply inventories.

These writings were recorded over the course of a few thousand years. The Bible that resulted encompasses a library of 66 books divided into two parts. The Old Testament covers the period before Jesus walked on the earth in 39 books. The New Testament details the era of Jesus and the early church in 27 books. As a general rule the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, the New Testament in Greek, and a few sections of the Bible in Aramaic.

Christians assert that the Bible came about through a miraculous process of inspiration called *revelation*. God revealed who He was and what He wanted to say. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, He inspired people to perfectly record His words (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20–21). The result was an original copy called an autograph.

In the days before the printing press and electronic files, trained scribes copied manuscripts letter by letter to preserve and disseminate them. While critics object that we do not possess the original autograph, the ancient age and quantity of copies we do have on hand means we are nevertheless certain of the Bible's original message. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, for example, gave us some 40,000 ancient inscriptions. From these fragments more than 500 books have been reconstructed, including some Old Testament books, such as a complete copy of Isaiah.

As far as New Testament documents, “We have access to literally thousands of manuscripts and fragments that are used in translating the Bible, not a long chain of degraded translations,” says Darrell Bock in our interview. “We have over 5,800 Greek manuscripts of one sort or another.” There are another 15,000 copies in other ancient languages. This compares with fewer than a dozen copies of most ancient works.

Tragically, opponents of Scripture have attacked its trustworthiness by falsely stating that our current English translations are built upon poorly transmitted copies. However, the bibliographical test of Scripture flatly refutes this argument. This test determines the historicity of an ancient text by analyzing the quantity and quality of copied manuscripts, as well as how far removed they are from the time of the originals, the autographs mentioned earlier. In the next section we will examine this fact in greater detail.

The quantity of New Testament manuscripts is unparalleled in ancient literature. There are about 5,800 Greek manuscripts and about 15,000 manuscripts in other languages.

As the following chart illustrates, both the number of transmitted

O B J E C T I O N # 7 : S C R I P T U R E

manuscripts we possess of Scripture and their proximity in date to the autographs are unparalleled when compared to other ancient documents.

Author	Work	Date Written	Earliest MSS	Time Gap	Manuscripts
Homer	<i>Iliad</i>	800 BC	c. 400 BC	400	1,757
Herodotus	History	480–425 BC	10 th C	1,350	109
Sophocles	Plays	496–406 BC	3 rd C BC	100–200	193
Plato	Tetralogies	400 BC	895	1,300	210
Caesar	<i>Gallic Wars</i>	100–44 BC	9 th C	950	251
Livy	<i>History of Rome</i>	59 BC–AD 17	Early 5 th C	400	150
Tacitus	<i>Annals</i>	AD 100	1 st half: 850, 2nd: 1050 (AD 1100)	750–950	2+31 15 th C
Pliny, the Elder	<i>Natural History</i>	AD 49–79	5 th C fragment: 1; Rem. 14 th – 15 th C	400 (750)	200
Thucydides	History	460–400 BC	3 rd C BC (AD 900)	200 (1,350)	96
Demosthenes	Speeches	300 BC	Some fragments from 1 BC. (AD 1100)	1,100+ (1400)	340
New Testament		AD 50–100	AD 130 (or less)	40	5,795

In an interview for this project Darrell Bock adds,

If we're going to discount the text of the New Testament, we should shut down our classics departments in universities around the country. We would have to reject the content of most of the works we use to understand ancient history. The idea that we don't know the text of the New Testament documents is simply something close to crazy. We've got by far more manuscript evidence for the text of the New Testament than any other ancient work. And it's by miles, it's not just close.

Comparing ancient manuscripts against each other shows where changes have occurred. We find that "the vast majority of these variations involve mere changes in spelling, grammar, and style, or accidental omissions or duplications of letters, words, or phrases," according to New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg.⁵⁵

"Overall, 97 to 99 percent of the original Greek New Testament can be reconstructed beyond any reasonable doubt. Moreover, no Christian doctrine is founded solely, or even primarily, on any textually disputed passage."⁵⁶

We can demonstrate that the Bible is not a collection of fables and legends assembled over long periods of time. The book we hold in our hands faithfully reflects what God spoke through the original authors.

Bock highlights a second faulty assumption about the transmission of Scripture. Many people think the Bible was written in some ancient language long ago, but has since been translated and re-translated over and over into so many different languages that we cannot trust it anymore. The reality is that teams of translators/scholars painstakingly go back to the original Greek and Hebrew to create Bibles in English and other tongues of people around the world. These linguistic experts have as much or more schooling than many rocket scientists, and their work is open to evaluation by anyone who wants to wade into the details.

Misconception 2: "The Bible says..."

People often judge the Bible based on what they think it says. Here is a sample of some of the claims we heard in our focus groups:

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- “You’re supposed to sell your first daughter into slavery.” Um, the Bible says no such thing.
- “Give a man a fish, and he’ll eat for a day, and teach a man to fish and he’ll be fed forever.” Smart words, and I kind of wish they were in the Bible. Literary types think they trace back to the story “Mrs. Dymond” by Anne Isabella Thackeray Ritchie (1837–1919).⁵⁷
- “The Old Testament character Job [had sex with] his daughters. Incest is allowed according to the Bible.” Actually, the Bible repeatedly condemns incest and the exceptionally righteous man Job did no such thing. Our participant might have been thinking of Lot’s daughters, who got their dad drunk in an effort to get pregnant (Gen. 19:30–38). That episode is a horrific story that illustrates the principle that the Bible often *describes* behaviors it never *prescribes*. It often records awful events as a warning, not as a recommendation on how to live.
- “The Bible teaches Jesus was born on Christmas.” In fact, the Bible makes no attempt to clarify the date Jesus was born. The traditional observance of Jesus’ birth on December 25 started during the reign of the Roman emperor Constantine (AD 306–337).

The important takeaway is that we always need to separate hearsay and tradition from the real Bible, and it’s easy enough to check strange ideas against Scripture. I do think these side issues pose a spiritual danger, because they take our focus off Jesus as the Bible’s big idea:

The Bible has a lot of stories but is ultimately one story.

The Bible has a lot of principles to live by but is ultimately about a person to live for.

The Bible is for us but is ultimately not about us.

The Bible is about a lot of people but is ultimately about one person, Jesus Christ.

Misunderstanding the main point of the Bible is nothing new. One day Jesus had it out with His religious opponents. He got in their faces and said, “You search the Scriptures [the Old Testament] because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life” (John 5:39–40 NLT).

Then there was the time when Jesus met a couple of troubled disciples as they walked a road to a town called Emmaus after His crucifixion. He appeared as a stranger as they struggled to make sense of the death of their Master and reports of an empty tomb. In response to their confusion, Jesus traced His own story as told through the Old Testament. Luke reports, “Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Jesus is truly the big idea of the whole Bible.

Misconception 3: “The Bible is full of contradictions.”

Another frequent objection is that the Bible is full of contradictions that undermine its credibility. This is no small complaint. Why should anyone agree with a book that can’t agree with itself? One woman spoke for many when she said the Bible had no shortage of passages that say completely opposite things. She felt it was “mindboggling” that anyone believes the Bible.

Often people who make these claims are simply parroting what they have heard and have no idea what they are talking about. So when they say “contradictions,” it is more than fair for you to say, “Show me.” But we also have to be honest. While the Bible claims to be true, trustworthy, perfect, and God-breathed, it does not claim to always be easy to understand. Jesus’ good friend and follower Peter wrote,

And remember, our Lord’s patience gives people time to be saved. This is what our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom God gave him—speaking of these things in all of his letters. Some of his comments are hard to understand, and those who are ignorant and unstable have twisted his letters to mean something quite different, just as they do with other parts of Scripture. And this will result in their destruction. (2 Pet. 3:15–16)

Peter packs a lot into those words. He declares that the letters Paul wrote were in fact “Scripture” alongside other Bible books, showing that Paul’s writings—13 or 14 (there’s a debate on who wrote Hebrews) of the 27 books in the New Testament—were accepted as sacred as soon as they were written. Peter had to admit that even though Paul wrote with God-given wisdom, his letters contained comments that were at times tough to understand. Nevertheless, people are not free to interpret any passage of the

Bible however they want. Already some “ignorant and unstable” people were twisting Paul’s meaning and misinterpreting his writings and other Scriptures was so serious an offense that it would result in destruction.

Understanding the Bible can be challenging because of the cultural distance between our day and ancient times. Or sometimes we struggle to grasp key concepts just like if we picked up a textbook on linguistics, mathematics, or anything that requires serious brain wattage to comprehend. And it is absolutely necessary for us to understand some of the established rules for all readers attempting to interpret any written communication, including the Bible.

- We need to put aside preconceived ideas and not make the Bible say what we want it to say. Our job is to search the text for what the author aimed to communicate.
- We should look for the most obvious meaning—usually the literal meaning unless a passage signals that it is figurative. Like when someone says they are so hungry they could eat a horse, we know to get them a sandwich rather than a saddle.
- We need to dig into cultural settings, grammar, and the meaning of individual words.
- We should examine the immediate context of a statement and other passages throughout the Bible where the topic appears.
- We must major on majors and minor on minors.
- We need to study the Bible with other Christians and hear what they say—not only friends nearby but also from around the world and throughout history.

Those are just starters, and these principles of hermeneutics serve us well in whatever we study. My point is that no serious Christian tries to brush off difficult parts of the Bible. But you don’t need to get anxious over supposed contradictions in the text. There are entire books that reason through the toughest points of Scripture.⁵⁸

As Christians, we also trust that God makes clear the true essentials of our faith, a principle called the perspicuity of Scripture. We also humbly admit that sometimes the Bible feels challenging because we don’t like what it says. Our problem often is less that we don’t understand what it says and more that we don’t agree or don’t want to obey.

Misconception 4: “The New Testament was largely written by people who didn’t even know Jesus.”

A woman in Austin exposed a common attitude toward Bible accounts when she claimed the New Testament was written by people who had never met Jesus. She said, “To me Jesus is this guy who lived and then they wanted to create a religion around him and so they changed the end of what they call the Old Testament, the Torah, and built this new religion.”

As we read Bible narratives about Jesus, one of the crucial facts to recognize is that all but a few New Testament writers claim to be eyewitnesses to the events they recorded (John 19:35, 20:30–31; Acts 1:1–3, 1:9, 10:39–42; 1 Cor. 15:6–8; 1 Pet. 5:1; 2 Pet. 1:16; 1 John 1:1–3). Luke did not meet Jesus firsthand but received his information from Paul (2 Tim. 4:11) and the numerous eyewitnesses he interviewed (Luke 1:1–4). Mark derived his information from Peter, the close friend of Jesus (1 Pet. 5:13). James and Jude were Jesus’ brothers and witnesses to much of His life and ministry.⁵⁹

The Bible says that upward of 500 witnesses saw Jesus risen from death at one time, and most were still alive and willing to testify about it publicly (1 Cor. 15:1–8).

These details are intensely relevant. Devout Jews who believed that the act of worshiping a false God would damn them to hell forever started worshiping their friend, brother, and son as God. Many were tortured and died as martyrs without one of them ever recanting that Jesus was God who rose from the dead. Additionally, many of the historically verifiable figures of the early church such as Polycarp, who was himself martyred for his testimony of Jesus, were disciples of the Apostles.

Some people imagine that a chronological gap between the reality of Jesus and the writing of His story made room for corruption, legends, and even myths to develop. In actuality, the time between the New Testament events and their recording is very short, especially compared with other ancient documents. Paul wrote that statement in 1 Corinthians 15:1–8, for example, within about 25 years of Jesus’ life. Plenty of eyewitnesses were still around to object if what Paul wrote and the church taught were historically inaccurate. And the earliest surviving manuscript fragment of the New Testament—from the Gospel of John—dates to about AD 130, within decades of when John penned his Gospel in AD 70–100. New Testament scholar Daniel Wallace reports that a fragment of Mark may date to the first century, even earlier than the one from John.⁶⁰

Misconception 5: “There’re some stories that are kept in and some stories that were kicked out.”

Participants across our focus groups believed that many early Christians played fast and loose with the facts about Jesus, including only select details when they compiled the Bible:

A woman in Austin said, “They put together the whole New Testament so there’s [sic] some stories that are kept in and some stories that were kicked out. I think some of the real history is in there. I just don’t think we have all of the story.”

A San Francisco woman shared, “I’ve heard the Vatican hides sections of the Bible that portray Jesus in a more negative light.”

And another Austin woman noted, “In the Bible there’s [sic] 26 original gospels. Only four of them got put in the Bible. I think that maybe there’s [sic] more to that.”

Our focus groups repeatedly mentioned Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code*, which popularized the idea that there were numerous competing “gospels” and church leaders chose their favorites and rejected others, including the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Barnabas, the Gospel of Philip, or even the Gospel of Judas. Whenever these “other gospels” get bursts of media attention, it seems to challenge the credibility of the Bible.

There are a couple obvious reasons these “other gospels” are unreliable as real history about Jesus. First, all of them were written long after the accepted New Testament Gospels. So despite their names, these brief books were not written by Thomas, Barnabas, Philip, Judas, or anyone else with firsthand knowledge of Jesus. Second, although orthodox at points, these writings include ideas that are downright bizarre when set next to the New Testament Gospels. In the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, for example, Peter supposedly says, “Women are not worthy of life.” Instead of correcting His friend, Jesus promises to make women into men so they can enter the Kingdom of heaven.

Many participants were curious about or highly committed to alternative theories about Jesus. One woman said that Jesus studied under Indian mystics for some 30 years. Another called Him a lightworker. Many guys thought He

was a magician like David Copperfield or Criss Angel. One guy asserted that Jesus was not a zombie but a lich. A few people even called Jesus an alien, *à la* the History Channel series called “Ancient Aliens.” Like Tony said, “That’s my favorite series. What I love about that show is that they base it off of actual facts. They have proof that blows my mind when it comes to religion.”

Is it possible Jesus was a mystic, lightworker, magician, lich, or alien? Perhaps—but is it probable? Is the evidence for those profiles more complete than the ancient eyewitness testimony of Scripture? Would low-budget specials on the History Channel or Discovery Channel hold up to the same scrutiny as the New Testament has faced for 2,000 years?

It is simply false that at some point long after Jesus that Christians selected from among competing ideas to create a storyline that would consolidate their own power. Church leaders did convene in councils including Laodicea (AD 363), Hippo (AD 393), and Carthage (AD 397). But they simply recognized writings already known and trusted by Christians everywhere as inspired Scripture for hundreds of years, in the case of the New Testament, and thousands of years, in the case of the Old Testament. The fact that these councils convened nearly four centuries after Jesus attests to the wide consensus that existed until heretics arose in that era.

Misconception 6: “Christianity borrowed from ancient religions.”

“If you look at Egyptian cultures,” said Kirk from the Phoenix focus group, “there’s the story of a virgin birth in there somewhere, and if you look at it even further...” That was one assertion among many, that Christianity stole its best ideas from outside sources.

The easiest way to decide if early believers indeed borrowed key elements like the resurrection from other ancient religions is to read those supposed sources. Like the story where a corn god died, was buried, and came back to life as new crops. Or the yarn about Osiris and Isis, Egypt’s ultimate power couple. In the oldest version of the myth, the divine Osiris is killed and dismembered, with his body parts scattered across Egypt. His wife, Isis, retrieved every last piece—save for his phallus, which unfortunately had been gobbled up by fish. Isis made a gold phallus and sang a song to bring Osiris back to life. Osiris then impregnated Isis, and she gave birth to the new king, Horus. And did I mention that Isis was Osiris’ sister?

It is hard to see how we should consider myths like these as inspiration for stories of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which

is an actual historical event attested to by eyewitnesses. After thoroughly researching ancient beliefs about resurrection, theologian N. T. Wright concludes: “Nobody in the pagan world of Jesus’ day and thereafter actually claimed that somebody had been truly dead and had then come to be truly, and bodily, alive once more.”⁶¹

Edwin Yamauchi has immersed himself in no less than 22 languages and is an expert in ancient history, including Old Testament history and biblical archaeology, with an emphasis on the interrelationship between ancient near Eastern cultures and the Bible. He is widely regarded as an expert in ancient history, early church history, and Gnosticism. He has published over 80 articles in more than 3 dozen scholarly journals and has been awarded 8 fellowships. His writing includes contributing chapters to multiple books as well as books on Greece, Babylon, Persia, and ancient Africa. After a lifetime of careful academic study on this issue, Yamauchi has concluded that there is no possibility that the idea of a resurrection was borrowed because there is no definitive evidence for the teaching of a deity resurrection in any of the mystery religions prior to the second century.⁶²

In fact, it seems that other religions and spiritualities stole the idea of a resurrection from Christians! For example, the resurrection of Adonis is not spoken of until the second to fourth centuries.⁶³

Attis, the consort of Cybele, is not referred to as a resurrected god until after AD 150.⁶⁴

Some have postulated that the *taurobolium* ritual of Attis and Mithra, the Persian god, is the source of the biblical doctrine of the resurrection. In this ritual, the initiate was put in a pit, and a bull was slaughtered on a grating over him, drenching him with blood. However, the earliest this ritual is mentioned is AD 160, and the belief that it led to rebirth is not mentioned until the fourth century. In fact, Princeton scholar Bruce Metzger has argued that the *taurobolium* was said to have the power to confer eternal life only after it encountered Christianity.⁶⁵

In summary, whatever similarities might exist between points of Jesus’ story and ancient religions, it is far more likely that the other faith borrowed from Christianity than vice-versa.

Misconception 7: “The Bible is so old and outdated.”

A couple guys in our Boston group highlighted an objection we heard over and over. Brian said, “Don’t you think in the current times, the Bible, you

can't relate it to current events? It doesn't connect." Eugene replied, "People still believe that everything that was written in the Bible 2,000 years ago is still relevant today. I mean, look around you. Nothing else is the same as it was 2,000 years ago. It's so old and outdated." Ironically, the same participants who dismissed the Bible because of its age nevertheless showed great enthusiasm for other ancient sources like books left out of the Bible or documents about possible aliens on earth.

I admit there are portions of the Bible that to us sound ridiculous, especially the kind of Old Testament regulations I mentioned back in Chapter 3, like prohibitions against eating pork, cutting hair, or wearing clothes woven from mixed fibers. Or for that matter, consuming shellfish. Like one group member said, "There are plenty of Christians who eat lobster in Boston." Those restrictions are no longer binding on followers of Jesus, but the moral components of the law still matter.

"Old" does not equal "outdated." On page after page of the Bible I find keen and helpful insights about friendship, work, finances, marriage, parenting, business, and a long list of very practical life issues. The Bible's real usefulness is how it puts us in right relationship with God and others. As Darrell Bock said in our interview, "Most people think of the Bible as a list of dos and don'ts, or a list of unusual and crazy stories. But it is useful. . . . It shows us in a profound way who we are as people, what we're designed to be and to do."

Bock compares it to trying to turn a flathead screw with a Philips screwdriver—a dysfunctional, unproductive, frustrating experience. He says, "The Bible is about getting the right screwdriver for the right screw. When you have the right screwdriver for the right screw, then turning the screw is actually pretty straightforward. The Bible is designed to remove the dysfunction in our lives. It drives us back to what we were created to be." The Bible is not just true, but helpful.

PRAYERFUL PATIENCE

Sooner or later we all have to settle what we think about the Bible. We shouldn't make that decision based on hearsay or speculation, but on what the Bible actually is, what it says, and what it does. Other people can't determine our opinion. We each must make a decision.

Scholar Wayne Grudem has spent his life studying and teaching the Bible, and watching people wake up to what the Bible is all about. He describes how that happens in an interview I conducted for this book:

OBJECTION #7: SCRIPTURE

“Hundreds of millions of people throughout history have begun to read the Bible with an open mind and then said, ‘Wow, this book speaks to my heart like no other book I have ever read. This is unlike any other book. These are the very words of God.’”

The Bible itself claims to be God’s words in written form. And that is our starting point. “Am I going to believe that claim?” Grudem asks. “I think the only way for people to evaluate that is to give some serious time to reading the Bible and studying it and seeing if it rings true as being the word of God. Do I hear the voice of my Creator speaking in it when I read it?”

For me that nails it. When I open the Book, I hear my Father’s voice. That is the reason I rely on the Bible day after day. But it took a lot of years for me to come around. We often want our non-Christian family and friends to instantly bow to the Bible’s truthfulness and helpfulness, but that recognition usually requires time and effort on their part and prayerful patience on ours.

When the Bible says that the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers (2 Cor. 4:4), it means that they really can’t see what we see. We might nag them. We might talk down to them. We might holler at them. But that’s like yelling at a colorblind guy about what’s on a painting. Yelling will not make him see.

I was blind the first 19 years of my life. Then God opened my eyes and I was like, “Oh!” So when I meet somebody who is spiritually blind I think, “I know what that’s like. You’re not stupid. You might be way smarter than me. You’re just blind.”

The ability to see the truth of the Bible is not an intelligence issue. It’s a condition issue. We should bring the same compassion and respect we would show anyone who is physically blind. If you know someone who is spiritually blind, drop some real money on a sweet Bible. Put the person’s name on it and give it to him or her. Then pray your guts out that the Holy Spirit opens their understanding as they read it. Why? Because we need God to get involved in this. It takes a miracle as big as Jesus healing a blind guy. The good news? He still heals the blind. In the next and final chapter, we’ll see if there’s any hopeful message for our messy world as we launch into a new era for Christians in the West.

POSTSCRIPT

REDEMPTION FROM RELIGION AND REBELLION

As a young man, I stopped going to church because I found it irrelevant. Like vegetarians find steak sauce irrelevant and left-handed golfers find right-handed clubs irrelevant, I left my parents' church because what it offered was no help for my vision for my life.

I remember the day I hit the eject button. I sat in the pew bored out of my mind yet again, ignoring a priest who sounded like the teacher from Peanuts. "*Waa waa woh waa waa.*" He made sound but no sense.

I wasn't alone. Many people look at whatever version of Christianity they have encountered and conclude it doesn't matter to their life. Some respond by leaving both internally and externally. They don't love God or church and refuse to fake it. Others stick around externally but bolt internally. They don't love God or church but go through the motions like a loveless marriage. Some have never shown up at church. Others walk in only to turn around and walk out.

FEEDBACK

A guy in Boston suggested that the promise of Christianity had gone stale. "Religion has the potential to have an awesome community," he commented. "The fact that nothing seems to be updated really just throws a wrench in the whole thing." A woman in Austin who works with troubled youth asserted that Christians missed the mark when it came to real people and real issues. She said:

"I'd rather focus on feeding the hundreds of hungry kids that come through my door every day than trying to figure out something that happened however long ago.... I think [Christians] get so caught up in these petty tiny little things. Why don't we worry about real problems like world hunger and the fact that

we're not going to have any water in 50 years? We might destroy ourselves in the earth. Why don't we talk about that?"

Another Texas woman looked back on the years she spent in church and noted how little her beliefs mattered to her now. She said, "I think about where I am now and I'm like, 'How can that change so drastically? How can I be on such the opposite side of the fence?' I just ignore that topic. I ignore Jesus. I don't even know if it's real or not. It doesn't really matter much anymore because it's not applicable, but it used to be so meaningful."

Most of the people we talked to felt they had their lives put together. "I went to college," they would say. "I got a job. I'm healthy. I'm having sex with whoever I want. I'm doing what I like. I don't need Christianity. It has no relevance to me." Their perception was that faith is for people with broken lives, unlucky individuals laid up by some cataclysm. Church is like a hospital. You go there if you are gravely injured or ill, but otherwise you drive right by. These non-Christians were exasperated by Christians for trying to convince them how terrible their life is. A woman in San Francisco summed up what many thought when she said, "What if people already have something going on? What if they're happy with their lives? That doesn't seem like it's ever considered. It's like people must be miserable because they don't know Jesus. People are quite contented with no faith, or whatever other variation."

Christians and non-Christians live in separate worlds. The two realms coexist like alien nations. Christians long for a bridge between these worlds. We want to go love people in their world and invite them to visit ours and consider Jesus. Our aim is not to invade and occupy their world, and we do not want them to attack and overthrow ours. But extremists on both sides try to set the bridge on fire, because to keep it intact is considered by some to be compromise. So, they call us names, and we call them names. We hurl accusations, and they fling them back. They kick us out of their world, and we toss them from ours.

And now, well, the bridge is ablaze. Unbelievers have no way to venture into our world, and we can no longer cross into theirs. They are glad to be rid of the crazies, and we feel good that we are protected from the other world's evil inhabitants. There has to be a way to bring us together.

THE REBELLIOUS AND THE RELIGIOUS

There's a biblical story that frames our situation, a famous parable of two very different lost sons, a religious older brother and his rebellious younger brother. Here are Jesus' words in full:

“There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate. Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And

he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’” (Luke 15:11–32 ESV)

The rebellious younger brother bottomed out having pursued sin until he was face down in pig slop. Flat broke, hung over, and headed for starvation, this son eventually turned around and went home to his father.

His father’s response warms us. He didn’t turn away from his sin-loving son but instead ran to meet him, making a real scene because no respectable older man in that culture would break into a sprint. Why did the father run? He couldn’t wait another second to forgive and embrace his wayward child. The words used to describe their reunion include “love,” “compassion,” “embrace,” “kiss,” and “celebrate.” With lavish grace the father gave his son the ring used to emboss the family seal on legal and financial documents, the equivalent of handing him a stack of platinum credit cards and power of attorney over the family estate. The father put shoes on his son’s bare feet, declaring he was never to be treated as a slave or even a second-class son. He loaded his son down with gifts when it would have been customary for the son to bring his father a gift. In a demonstration of extravagant grace, the father threw an enormous party to celebrate his son’s repentance. The rebellious brother was not a great son but he was greatly loved by his great father.

The roar of that party greeted the religious brother as he came home from working the fields. He reacted with instant fury to the lavish forgiveness extended to his guilty and dirty brother. He was so mad he refused to enter the home and join the reconciliation of his broken family.

The religious son and the rebellious son said nothing to each other. But the religious son had plenty of complaints behind his little brother’s back. This “son of yours,” he ranted to his father, had devoured family property and hooked up with prostitutes. And along with these proclamations of the rebellious brother’s failings, the religious brother professed to be completely righteous. “All these years I’ve slaved for you,” he grumbled to his father, “and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to.” Really? Not once? He never snuck off to see his friends? He never took a nap in the barn when he promised his dad he was working? Doesn’t his resentful heart taint whatever good he did? The religious brother claims he is nothing short of perfect. Like all religious brothers, he is quick to point out he is better than others. He sees others’ sin rather than his own.

The father had every right to be as frustrated and grieved by his older son as

he was by the lost-and-found son. The religious son was disrespectful, rejecting his father’s joy. He was ungrateful, whining he had been overlooked when he would still one day inherit double what his younger brother had squandered.

It turned out that the heart of the older brother was as guilty and dirty as any. Honestly, neither brother loved their father. Both used their father. The key difference was that the rebellious brother repented and the religious brother did not.

Rebellious brothers and sisters live on today. Religious sisters and brothers still populate our world. Here is how their rebellion and religion stack up side by side:

REBELLION

Innovation
 Non-conformity
 Self-expression
 Liberal
 Visible sin
 Unrighteous

RELIGION

Tradition
 Conformity
 Social order
 Conservative
 Invisible sin
 Self-righteous

- Rebellion prefers the future and innovation in life, sexuality, and spirituality. The 1960s and 70s, for example, broke with the past using slogans like “The Age of Aquarius” and “The New Age.” Religion prefers tradition, arguing that things have been just-so since the distant past and that deviating from the tried and true is perilous.
- Rebellion prefers non-conformity, meaning rules are made to be broken and no one should bow to “the man.” Rebellion wears jeans and miniskirts while banging to punk rock and gangster rap. Religion likes conformity where everyone knows the rules, does the rules, and never ever *ever* attempts to rewrite the rules. Religion wears suits and long skirts while humming along to church tunes.
- Rebellion values self-expression and outing yourself and your truth, tying it closely to creative types like artists and musicians. Religion values social order and doing what is best for all people rather than just a few who want to break the mold.
- Rebellion tends toward liberal politics, social ethics, and spiritualities, leaning Left as a general rule. Religion tends toward conservative politics, old-school social mores, and traditional faith, almost always trending to the Right.

- Rebellion makes its sin visible by celebrating nonconformity openly and unashamedly. Religion tries to make its sin invisible, hiding it behind proud commendations of self and loud condemnations of others.
- Rebellion is unrighteous, openly defying calls to holiness and obedience. Religion is self-righteous, openly denying God's grace by taking credit for its own warped version of holiness and obedience.

Christianity at its core is not about either religion or rebellion. It is about repentance.

REPENTANCE

Christianity is not self-help or pop spirituality. Both assert that I control my life, meaning I live under my own rule and manipulate people and things to achieve my vision for my life. Christianity says I do not control my life. I instead live under the sovereign rule of God and gratefully steward the resources He gives me to achieve His vision for my life.

The big difference is autonomy versus sovereignty. Do I have a right to rule all aspects of my being, inviting God in only at the times and places I deem Him helpful? Or do I give up my right to rule all aspects of my being, recognizing that God reigns in all times and places, even if I choose to exclude Him from my life? Autonomy says I am an isolated individual ultimately responsible for my own happiness and accountable mainly to myself. Sovereignty says I am a connected part of God's Kingdom, responsible for myself and others in a dominion that extends to everyone everywhere. I am fully accountable to God. When the Bible declares that God is sovereign, it means He has a right to speak into and direct my entire life as a father directs his child. His rule extends to the places I go, dollars I spend, decisions I make, words I speak, and thoughts I have.

Living apart from God and existing independently is the essence of all sin. The younger brother lived autonomously. He literally left his father and had to walk back home. While the older brother never left physically, he bailed emotionally and spiritually and needed to come home internally. Neither brother lived under the full sovereignty of the father.

God is calling the rebellious people of this world to repent of their living apart from Him. That call to repentance is not news to non-Christians. They likely find it completely offensive. But they will be surprised that repentance is

what makes faith relevant to their everyday life.

Psychologist John Townsend describes how a non-Christian might deal with the wrongs they have committed—an abortion they feel bad about, or drugs they have done, or a relationship they shattered. He says in an interview conducted for this project, “The natural answer is to say, well, just learn from it and move on.” But there is more to moving on than that. Townsend continues, “There’s a part of us God made inside of us that says I can’t really move on until my wrongdoing has been forgiven.” Scripture says that something inside all of us nags at us that every wrong breaks God’s standards. But we try hard to quiet that inner conviction. Paul wrote that people “know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused” (Rom. 1:19, 21 NLT).

Townsend explains that people will come to talk to him about some wrong they have committed, and he can say, “Yeah, I’ll help you grieve that. I’ll help you let that go and help you learn.” But another step is necessary. “In the deepest part of us, we want to be forgiven by somebody external to us. It’s impossible for me to forgive myself. I just can’t get myself off the hook and say, ‘Hey, you tried your hardest.’” People know they violated a standard. They might have concluded long ago that Christian faith has nothing to do with real life, but the liberating experience of forgiveness makes faith absolutely relevant right here and now. Our job as Christians is to explain the way to true freedom. “To truly be free of the guilt and shame and bad feelings we have about something we’ve done,” Townsend says, “the only answer is the cross.”

Non-Christians might not use the language of sin. They probably will not understand the cross right away. But as those of us who are Christians talk with people who have suppressed what they know of God and His righteousness, we can own up to the fact that we all make mistakes. We can admit that we all live with regrets. And as Christians, we all have a personal story to tell of the freedom that comes when we understand we are forgiven. By dealing with guilt we can finally grieve and move on. Townsend says, “When people feel bad about something they’ve done, at some point they need to have their regrets, own it, confess it, and have somebody that’s an external authority say, ‘The debt is canceled. You don’t have to go to prison.’ But they can’t go through the normal grief process of feeling the sadness and letting go and saying I’m sorry and I want to move on, until the guilt is

solved.” He adds, “People go for years and years beating themselves up over something they’ve done, and then they can never grieve it and move on. Letting yourself feel guilt takes the lid off the grief process that God created, to say now you can get this out of the way.”

Forgiveness not only frees people from the wrongs they have done to others but also lets them move past the wrongs that have been done to them. Once we receive forgiveness from God, we can give it away to others. This is absolutely necessary to become whole. Townsend says, “Whoever you haven’t forgiven owns you. They steal your energy and occupy your thoughts. And the problem of being wounded by others can only be answered by forgiving others. You’ve got to cancel the debt, as the Bible says. Only then can you get comfort and support to grow past your injuries.”

When we get and grant forgiveness we can also let go of vengeance, because we can trust God’s justice. Either at the cross or in hell, Jesus will sort everything out. One way or another, sin will not be overlooked. Whether we are a perpetrator or victim, violators or the violated, forgiveness sets us free. Nothing could be more relevant.

The rebellious people of the world are not alone in their need to repent. Religious brothers and sisters have their own autonomy problems, and God calls them too to repentance. The religious person thinks, “I didn’t break the rules!” Maybe not—but God knows you can be a jerk. Does He get to rule as Lord not only over externals but also over internals like your personality, disposition, and motivations?

All of us have met the law-abiding, morally upstanding, rule-keeping guy who is a despot at home and work and church. He thinks that because he has met Jesus he has no autonomy issues. But the religious guy gravitates toward positions of authority. He seizes control. He blackens your eye before he gives you any bit of power. Instead of submitting himself to God’s sovereignty he puts on God’s robe and takes his seat as judge in God’s place. He makes everyone pass by his bench while he slams his gavel and recites his verdicts and decrees. He is all too happy to make judgments and determinations but is likely insensitive and emotionally aloof. Not long ago I met a difficult person exactly like this. I walked away sweating like I was on trial. Court was in session, and I felt like I was zip-tied to the defendant’s chair. That is how religious people are. It is a sovereignty issue.

Religious people’s faults manifest themselves in religious ways. For self-righteous people to truly repent they must own up to their invisible sins, the wrongs they pushed so far out of sight they no longer can see or admit their

sin. Some Christians think that knowing what is right is the same thing as succeeding at obeying. Non-Christians will never believe our explanations of the wonders of forgiveness if we refuse to confess our sin, access forgiveness, and press on to live differently than we did the day before.

My wife, Grace, and I like to say that the key to love and marriage is repentance and forgiveness. In our more than 26 years of marriage, I have had to own my faults and failures many times with my best friend, asking her to forgive me. On other occasions, the tables have been turned. Because we know that Jesus took a beating and died for our sin, we don't beat each other up or let some sin kill our relationship.

THE FATHER

The fundamental problem with humankind is that both the rebellious and the religious live apart from the loving rule of the Father. They just do it in different ways. One is no better than the other. And the father in this parable illustrates how our heavenly Father welcomes us all home.

The image of the father in the parable of the lost sons gives us insight in a day when few people have a father who is genuinely loving, present, generous, truthful, helpful, and humble. It is not surprising if we forget how a real father is supposed to act. A dad who lets us do whatever we want cares little about us. The dad who says yes all the time actually lacks real love. Sometimes a dad feels compelled to say no precisely because he is loving. At that moment, children understandably think that no is an unloving response and feel frustrated that their father is unhelpful, even irrelevant, to their vision for their life.

A bad dad always says yes and a good dad sometimes says no. I grew up with a kid who talked nonstop about how great his dad was. His mom and dad had split. He lived with his mom and spent occasional weekends with his dad. His dad was all about being relevant, so at his dad's house my 12-year-old buddy could watch porn, drink beer, and smoke pot. All he had to do was ask for these things, and the answer was always yes. The kid had a vision for his life and found his dad was relevant to making it happen. He thought his dad was cool and loving and his mom uncool and unloving. Obviously, he got it backward.

The father in the parable was beyond good. Note that he did not wander off with his rebellious son to the big city to break commandments. Nor was he a joy-sucking man of religion when his son showed up to repent. He models

what it means to have God as our Father. Just because our Father in heaven says no does not mean He is irrelevant to our life. A God who loves us like a dad but disagrees with the trajectory of our life might be the most relevant person we know. Maybe the vision we have for life seems smart to us but is really a road to ruin. Maybe we are like kids moaning that our dad is old and out of touch. He needs to quit combing his hair over his bald spot and get with the times by agreeing with us and helping us do what he has forbidden us to do. But what if dad is right and we are wrong? What if dad is wise and we are foolish? What if new is not improved? What if old is in fact an unchanging eternal perfection?

According to Jesus' parable and all of Scripture, God is a Father—a flawless, loving, gracious, generous, enjoyable, wise, patient, amazing Dad. Sure, the older we get the less we think of ourselves as kids who need a Father. But the truth is we always need our Dad, and we are never too old to reap the benefits of a fantastic Father.

That fact seems astoundingly clear to Christians. It is a sweet story to share with non-Christians. But they might not understand what we are saying right away. As believers, we need to be sympathetic. Consider this analogy. Let's say there is a dad filled with wisdom and grace and encouragement and love. He is the world's greatest dad, and not because he has it written on his favorite coffee mug. This dad is the real deal. He already has some kids that he has adopted, and he has brought together a beautiful little family. He and his wife decide it is time to adopt another child, so they make the trek to an orphanage. While the dad and mom talk to the director of the orphanage, one of their kids looks around. This kid has already been adopted. He knows his dad's love and has built a friendship and a relationship that oozes trust like peanut butter gets along with jelly. This kid had a rough start in life but he heeded his dad's counsel and his whole life has changed. Dad's wisdom transformed everything. So this family kid meets a kid up for adoption and says, "Man, my dad's the best. If you just do what dad says, it's so much better. If you live at our house, Dad's the boss. Dad's in charge. Dad makes the rules. And you gotta do what Dad says." And the kid says, "I don't know Dad."

A Christian might tell a non-Christian, "I know Dad, so when He tells me something I listen. You should too." That might not convince a kid still up for adoption. That kid is just getting to know Dad. That kid isn't even sure if Dad is his dad. That kid needs help deciding what to make of Dad.

For all of us who want to know more of what Dad is like, Jesus came loaded with answers. Like His good friend John explained,

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.... No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” (John 1:14, 18 ESV)

Jesus shows us a humble God who got off His throne to lay in a manger. A glorious God who came to swing a hammer. A generous God who took nothing from anyone but gives His righteousness to anyone who asks. A selfless God who left His Kingdom to be homeless. A sympathetic God who left the worship of angels to be misunderstood, abused, and despised. A helpful God who came to heal the sick and die for the sinner. Jesus came to fill us in on what the Father is like. He came to lead us to our home in heaven.

THE THIRD BROTHER

Jesus is another brother in the story of the rebellious and religious brothers. He is the third brother, the one who told the parable. That brother isn’t just a son but the Son of God. He sides neither with the rebellious brother nor the religious brother but invites both to repentance.

Christianity’s hope is not in the rebellious or the religious but rather in the Redeemer—that third Son sent from the Father to encourage both kinds of sons to turn to Him. The rebellious and the religious have fought for thousands of years, and on certain points they are both right. The rebellious can be downright selfish, doing some nasty things especially when it concerns substances and sex. And the religious can be downright self-righteous, doing some nasty things in their hearts while pretending in public to be someone they are not.

These two brothers and their followers have trod two well-worn paths. Both are wrong and without an alternative we are doomed to continue in folly and misery. So another brother came down from heaven to provide a third way, which is really the only way. The Son of God came to carve out a new path. He came to die and put rebellion and religion to death. He came to rise and reconcile the rebellious and religious to their Father. The Son of God came to welcome them both to His eternal home where love and grace await them just as in the parable.

By telling the parable of the lost sons, the Son of God brought a message on behalf of God the Father. The message was not relevance but repentance. The point of the Bible from beginning to end is not that rebellious people are

right or that religious people are right. They are each right on some things and wrong on other things. And they both need to repent.

God does not go looking to be relevant to our life.

He instead asks us to repent of our life

and receive an entirely new life

with a new identity

that leads to new activity

and a new eternity.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about repenting not just of what we do but also of how we think and what we desire at the deepest level of who we are. Repentance is a change of mind, change of desire, change of identity, change of direction, and change of allegiance. Repentance happens when the religious seek to get their heart straightened out and when rebellious people seek to get their life straightened out. Christianity is in fact a movement birthed and sustained by repentance. The Church began when Peter lifted his voice (Acts 2:14) and said:

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:38–41)

This is the burning heart of Christianity. The wick wasn’t lit by tolerance but repentance. Not by religious diversity but by Jesus’ exclusively. Not by God doing what people wanted but by people doing what God wanted.

Christianity has always been about repentance. It’s not about self-love, self-help, or self-acceptance all acquired by our own efforts. It’s about God’s love, God’s help, and God’s acceptance all unleashed by grace through our repentance. When Christians stop practicing repentance they become hypocrites and heretics. Religious people need to repent of their religion. And rebellious people need to repent of their rebellion. Both need to trust in their Big Brother Jesus and be reconciled to God their Father and one

another. The Good News is that Jesus reconciles us vertically to our Father and horizontally to our spiritual brothers and sisters.

How about you? Are you more prone to rebellion or religion? I am certainly more inclined to being the religious brother. I can be judgmental of others and bristle with impatience at their lack of progress. Some days I find their flaws far more grievous than my own. I have seen myself do all the right things on the outside with a smug self-righteous heart on the inside. How about you?

HEADING HOME

There has to be a way to bring the rebellious and religious together. And there is: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who tells the parable. Unlike the rebellious son, He obeyed the Father perfectly and lived without sin. Unlike the religious son, He gladly reconciles with anyone who is repentant. He came to rebuke and renew both the religious and the rebellious as their Redeemer. He has come from the Father to reveal to both brothers their sin, forgive both religion and rebellion, and walk both brothers home to the Father. As we study the full picture of Jesus Christ in Scripture, we see this:

- Jesus Christ is tolerant, welcoming home everyone no matter what they have done. Jesus is intolerant, welcoming only those who repent of sin and trust in Him.
- Jesus Christ is perfectly pure, living the most meaningful, valuable, and impactful life ever without once having sex.
- Jesus Christ is political, ruling as a perfect King over a perfect Kingdom that will never end.
- Jesus Christ is free of hypocrisy, practicing what He preached and rising from the dead to prove He was God.
- Jesus Christ is inclusive, saving people of every nation, race, tribe, tongue, and background. Jesus Christ is exclusive, inviting them to salvation through Him alone.
- Jesus Christ treated everyone equally, calling all to repentance and dying for all the world's sin to give equal opportunity for all to live eternally.
- Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Scripture, having lived in joyful obedience to all of God's commands.
- Jesus Christ is relevant to everyone, everywhere, in every circumstance because He is Creator, Savior, and Judge, and we come from Him, rely on Him, and will one day stand before Him.

On the cross, our Big Brother Jesus died for our rebellion and our religion. Three days later He rose from death, opening up for us a path of redemption to get us out of the ruts of rebellion and religion. Today He lives in the Father's house, preparing for a party that will last forever when all the children of God make their way home to the Kingdom. At that party, we will eat without being gluttons, drink without being drunkards, and enjoy a perfect party that does not end up with us face down in pig slop.

THY KINGDOM COME

As a kid, I can vividly recall seeing a prison riot broadcast live on the news. Apparently, the entire prison divided into two gangs that had escalating tension until a riot erupted. With mattresses burning and cameras rolling, guards tried to keep the peace in the middle and took a beating from both sides. Today, America is pretty much one big prison riot between the older brother on the right and the younger brother on the left.

This leaves us in a precarious position. With two groups rioting (the Progressives and the Conservatives), Christian leaders can easily get caught up in the frenzy and feel the mounting pressure to pick a side and join in on the melee. The problem, however, is that most Christians don't like their options.

With the Conservatives, there is a call to go back in time to the more "traditional" values of the past. Tragically, the past included some things that are unholy and unhelpful, such as racism and slavery, which the Bible denounces. Any honest Christian has to confess that no nation, including our own, is a photocopy of the righteous culture in God's Kingdom.

With the Progressives, there's a call to go forward into a new era where such things as taking unborn life and redefining marriage are part of the vision for a more "evolved" and "enlightened" society. For anyone who holds the Bible and historic Christian teaching in any high regard, this seems like the spiritual equivalent of slapping Jesus in the face for approval ratings in the culture.

Not surprisingly, older Christians are more inclined to want to go back, while younger Christians are more inclined to want to go forward. The result is a divided church groping for answers in a divided culture.

Is there any alternative? Yes.

Instead of going backward, or forward, we need to go downward in humility and prayer and look upward for hope and wisdom.

Ultimately everything you know—your life, family, community, and nation—will end, and when everything else goes away, the Kingdom will

come down. That Kingdom is the Kingdom of God. God's Kingdom will replace every culture on the earth. God's Kingdom is your eternal home if you are a child of His through Christ. Your residence may be in your city and country, but your citizenship is in that Kingdom to come.

That Kingdom has a King named Jesus. He has authority over every nation, culture, and category of people. And King Jesus told us to live and pray *kingdom down* and not *culture up*.

"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," as Matthew 6:10 says.

When we boil all of life, history, and culture down to the bottom line, it's pretty simple: people either live culture up or Kingdom down. Those who live culture up tend to see their cultural morality, politics, and spirituality as superior and normative. Such people then judge other people and other cultures by their own culture. People from the other cultures do the same in return. The results are aptly called culture clashes, and they lead to culture wars.

Division literally means *two visions*, and these two visions are the cause of the ensuing division on most every cultural issue. Culture wars are what happens when two visions collide and cultural, political, moral, spiritual, and sometimes even real war is waged with the winning culture ruling over the other. This state continues, of course, until the next subculture or counterculture rises to dethrone the majority culture.

Think of it as the kids' game "King of the Hill." In that game, all the kids push and fight as they battle over who will stand atop the hill as the king. Eventually the biggest, strongest kid wins and stands on the hill gloating in victory. The other kids who lost then band together as an alliance, hoping that their combined efforts can overthrow the king of the hill. Eventually they wear down the king of the hill, and someone from their group becomes the new king. Those who are not the king then repeat the process of plotting and overthrowing the current king of the hill.

Yes, all of human history is a version of a kids' game played by adults who fight to get their way with legal maneuvering, personal threatening, public attacking, and private deal making.

If you pay any attention to what is happening culturally, you can quickly grow despondent. Different sides fight to get their king on the hill, and even if they make it, eventually someone else knocks their king off the hill, and the culmination of all the battling seems to get us nowhere. Like the guards in a prison riot, any reasonable person caught in the middle takes a beating from both sides.

Thankfully there is another option. Our King got murdered by a mob when He brought Kingdom culture to the earth and offended all other cultures by the simple act of declaring Himself King of every hill. The Bible tells us that history has a destination, and it is moving toward the Lord Jesus, who is returning to the earth to be our forever King of the hill.

For the Christian, our goal should be to live Kingdom down and not culture up. Our goal should be to seek the values, character, and culture of our eternal home in heaven and bring those to bear in our cultures and subcultures. This happens by focusing on the character of Christ, and living under the authority of the Bible. Until the King shows up again, we shouldn't expect the culture to feel like home for one simple fact: it ain't.

What does this look like for you right now? Consider for a moment, how you will be and how you will behave a thousand years from now in the Kingdom of God. When God is all done with you, and the true, real, perfect you is all that remains, what will be different about you than the person you are today? Are there unbiblical thoughts you are keeping, ungodly habits you are feeding, or unholy emotions you are harboring that will one day be gone forever? Is the way you are treating some people not the way you will be treating others in the Kingdom? Are there some excuses you are making that won't be continuing in the Kingdom? God the Holy Spirit has likely already been speaking to you about the changes you need to make to take the next step in your walk with God. The key is to take that next step, and then take the next step, and the next step... until you are walking with Jesus around the Kingdom forever!

For the Christian, the key is to figure out how to understand and explain the Kingdom of God to non-Christians in plain language they can understand. For people who have only seen this world, and have no vision of the world that is coming, we have a massive opportunity and responsibility to try to help them get a glimpse of the greatness of what life will be like when everything is as God intends it to be. Most non-Christians think that heaven is where people become chubby angelic babies sitting on cotton clouds plunking harps forever. That is not a compelling vision in any way. When the Bible speaks of heaven like a home for God's children, like a meal for the nations to sit down in peace and build loving relationship, and like a flock of vulnerable sheep being cared for by a Good Shepherd, the imagery is intended to awaken our imagination and stir our emotions to look forward to that Kingdom. How would you explain the Kingdom of God to the non-Christians who are closest to you? This is your assignment as an ambassador

POSTSCRIPT

for another world who is here to invite others to learn about your forever
Home and the cultural differences it has to offer that bring life and joy those
who are sick of this world and hoping there is more.

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MARK DRISCOLL

With Pastor Mark Driscoll, it's all about Jesus! With great passion, he has devoted more than 20 years to life-giving Bible teaching. *Preaching* magazine named him one of the 25 most influential pastors of the past 25 years.



Born in North Dakota in 1970, Mark Driscoll grew up the son of a union dry waller in south Seattle. He graduated from Washington State University with a bachelor's degree in speech communication from the Edward R. Murrow School of Communication. He later completed a master's degree in exegetical theology from Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon.

Most importantly, Pastor Mark is a family man. In 1988, when Mark was a 17-year-old high school student, a young woman named Grace gave him a nice Bible. Mark, a non-practicing Catholic at the time, was born again in college after reading Romans in that Bible. He and Grace were married at the age of 21, graduated at 22, and planted a church at 25 in the living room of their home, while both working full-time jobs. At the age of 26, they welcomed their first child, Ashley, and today they have three sons and two daughters. The Driscoll kids are all walking with Jesus and helped plant the Trinity Church in Scottsdale, Arizona, as a family ministry.

Pastor Mark has debated Deepak Chopra on one of his multiple appearances on ABC's *Nightline*; discussed marriage with Barbara Walters on *The View*; bantered with the hosts at *Fox and Friends*; co-hosted *Loveline with Dr. Drew*; and argued for the truth of God's Word on separate occasions with Piers Morgan and D. L. Hughley on CNN. Additionally, he has authored books including *Spirit-Filled Jesus*, *Real Marriage* (with his wife, Grace), *Who Do You Think You Are*, *Vintage Jesus*, *Doctrine*, and many more.

You can find Pastor Mark's Bible teaching at MarkDriscoll.org.

You can learn more about the Trinity Church at thetrinitychurch.com.

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