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Adventures in churchland: discovering the beautiful mess Jesus loves

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ADVENTURES IN CHURCHLAND:
DISCOVERING THE BEAUTIFUL MESS JESUS LOVES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
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BY
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ABSTRACT

A growing number of young adults (those in the 18-30-year-old age range) are not engaging, becoming involved or entering into the church of America. An increasing number of those who grew up attending church are leaving after their high school years.

I have observed this as a pattern when visiting churches and talking to church leaders across America. Statistics are showing this as seen in studies such as Dave Kinnaman’s research and writings from the Barna Research group¹ and Ed Stetzer’s research from LifeWay Christian Resources.² This is a very significant problem because if the church loses connection with new generations, there will be drastic impact on the future church and her mission in the world.

Solutions are discovered when churches awaken to this problem and re-educate this generation (as well as some church leaders) as to what “church” is, theologically and practically, in the lives of its members. They need to understand that they can make change in the church without abandoning it or their faith. Apologetic training is needed to help them think through the cultural issues of today, which can be confusing and even pull the 18-30 year olds away from orthodox Christianity.

The project, which is being published by Zondervan Publishing, is directed toward those in that age range. It gives a biblical understanding of “church” and their role in it. It encourages readers to be part of solving the problem rather than abandoning their faith or the church. The project will create hope for the future church on mission in our


world. Specific insights to some of the tougher questions this generation wrestles with are also part of this project.
SECTION 1: THE PROBLEM

There is a growing number of young adults (those in the 18-30-year-old age range) that are not engaging, becoming involved with, or entering into the church of America. There is also an increasing amount of young adults who were part of a church growing up, but are leaving the church after their high school years. Jean Twenge, a professor from San Diego State University, used findings from the largest intergenerational research study ever conducted – with data from 1.3 million respondents spanning six decades – to understand the changes happening. She writes in her book, *Generation Me*:

GenMe is also less willing to follow the rules of organized religion. Church attendance across all faiths has declined 30% since the 1950’s, and about half of that decline occurred since the 1980’s. Unlike the Boomers, who seek spirituality as a chosen quest, GenMe is not very religious. Only 18% of 18-29 year olds attend religious services.¹

In the context of actual ministry I first noticed this while serving at Santa Cruz Bible Church in Santa Cruz, California, in the 1990s. We had a high school ministry of over 300 students meeting every Wednesday night and 175 or more coming on Sunday for another meeting. One hundred and fifty of them were being mentored in small groups. In this ministry we paid a lot of attention to tracking trends, taking surveys and understanding the dynamics of what was happening with the youth. However, as we tracked students transitioning into the whole church from the youth ministry, we observed that this transition wasn’t occurring consistently. Only about 20% of the teenagers were transitioning, which had us asking them a lot of questions. It wasn’t as though we didn’t try

to transition them. We had them attend the gatherings so they knew what they were like. We intentionally included talk about the whole church so they understood that the youth ministry was not a church in and of itself but part of a whole church body.

At the same time we noticed that there were barely any college students or young adults coming into the church. There was a college group of around 30 people. But in a church of 3,000 people that was not much – and in a community where there is approximately 30,000 young adults, this was not encouraging. At the same time we began hearing that other churches were experiencing the same thing – small college and young adult ministries regardless of the size of the main church body. Hardly any non-Christian young adults were becoming Christians and joining the church. Leadership Network, an organization in Texas that studies trends, began bringing together church leaders who were noticing this development. This was not an issue unique to Santa Cruz, California. It was recognized in Texas, southern California and all across the USA.

The awareness of this trend, and then the refocusing of efforts to reverse it, became known in the USA as “the emerging church” between the years of 2000-2005, because it was focusing on rethinking church for emerging generations. Since then the phrase “emerging church” has changed and become vague and often confusing. The fact that emerging generations are missing from the church is still a problem for many churches. Many young people who grew up in the church are still leaving.

In the recently published book, Generation Ex-Christian, author Drew Dyke gives some rather depressing data to show this is a broad experience. He writes:

The first indicators are church attendance and involvement. Here the sta-
tistics are grim. According to Rainer Research 70 percent of youth leave church by the time they are twenty-two years old. Barna Group estimates that 80 percent of those reared in the church will be “disengaged” by the time they are twenty-nine years old. Unlike older church dropouts, these young “leavers” are unlikely to seek out alternative forms of Christian community, such as home churches and small groups. When they leave the church, many leave the faith as well.¹

In exploring why such trends occur, one observes that many studies provide insights into the reasons behind this problem. Dave Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons discovered from national surveys in their book *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity... and Why It Matters* that there are plenty of negative impressions of church and Christianity among 18-30 year olds. The authors offer this list of common perceptions:

- 91% Anti-homosexual
- 87% Judgmental
- 85% Hypocritical
- 75% Too Political
- 72% Out of Touch with Reality
- 78% Old Fashioned
- 70% Insensitive to Others
- 68% Boring ²

As a result of these impressions, Christian young adults are leaving the church, and non-Christians are not joining. Studies like this indicate that this is not just a local issue for the community of Santa Cruz. It is a broad national problem. A nice summary of the problem was written by Sheryl Young in a Yahoo news article called “Why Teens, Young Adults are Leaving American Churches.” Her summary is worth including here as

she compiled several people’s research into bullet-point summaries of the main problems.

She writes:

Starting from kids on up, a great variety of reasons for the exodus exists. The following are gathered and generalized from well-informed sources: *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith ...and How to Bring Them Back*, (Drew Dyck, Moody Publishing, Oct 2010); *Already Gone: Why your kids will quit church and what you can do to stop it* (Ken Ham & Britt Beemer, Todd Hillard, New Leaf, Aug 2009); *The Last Christian Generation* (McDowell, Green Key, 2006); and Lifeway Christian Resource Surveys from 2007 and 2010.

- Churched kids and teens spend six of seven days each week hearing other people say how judgmental Christianity is, and that the Bible should be taboo.

- Churches use outdated methods of Sunday School, rotating the same Bible stories year-in and year-out without relating the morals to daily living. When kids want to know why someone like Gabrielle Giffords was shot, they don’t need another lesson on Noah’s Ark.

- Teens can only eat so much pizza at church social events before they see through this thinly veiled attempt at keeping them occupied and out of trouble.

- Those surveyed say there aren’t enough good reasons given for holding Bible beliefs other than “the preacher says so...” or “your parents say so.”

- Sometimes kids are routinely kept out of “grown-up church.” From infancy to four years old, they’re in nursery. Then they get “children’s church” with a short Bible lesson, crafts and refreshments. For teens, a separate youth service geared to “their” music. By eighteen, they’ve never been expected to sit through a whole Sunday service. It’s culture shock.

- Young people can see that the Church in general hasn’t yet been able to conquer racial reconciliation, domestic abuse and the rampant church divorce rate...sometimes in their own families.

- Older generations won’t blend a moderate amount of contemporary music with traditional hymns, to show young people that newer ideas are respected.
• Or, the Church feels pressured to impress their younger members with new technological avenues. So they discard all the old hymns that were written out of peoples’ struggles with life, pride and suffering. Thus, the newer generations don’t hear about how God can help them through hard times.

• Parents are expecting the church to teach what may fall within their own responsibility.

• But then, young parents raised in the last twenty years have themselves grown up under the new pop psychology of never receiving or deserving any discipline or criticism. They’ve seen church become irrelevant. Now, as parents, they’re hesitant to make (or even ask) their kids to go to church or develop a backbone in faith.

• Lastly, everyone’s too busy for church. There are too many other attractions in life.\(^3\)

Proposed solutions to this scope of patterns is what I will focus on in the Track-2 artifact project. It will be a trade book (which is written for those primarily in their twenties – not just church leaders) that addresses the problems raised here. I will show that I believe the underlying root problem to be an understanding (or misunderstanding) and teaching (or lack of teaching) of a biblical ecclesiology. When a church thinks it exists for itself, rather than to be Jesus in the world, it forgets how it comes across in the world.

We can ignore the patterns of how emerging generations perceive Christians and the church. Often what we do can even reinforce these negative impressions, although we aren’t intentional about it. In addition, the church has often failed to take into consideration the rapid changes that have occurred in our culture over the past 20 years and how young adults, both inside and outside of the church, have been impacted by these changes. Many churches have gone on with business as usual and thus lost connection with an

entire generation, which has now gone missing.

Further contributing to the problem is the fact that teenagers and young adults have not been taught what the church is. They have come to see church as something you go to, rather than something you are. Furthermore, they have not been incorporated into leadership in ways that could help shift the church into missional thinking for their generation. So many have become disillusioned with the church and left. And the church has not been connecting with those outside of it in the world. So we have both young adults in the church leaving and young adults outside the church not coming in.

The Track-2 artifact will also explore some solutions for addressing this problem. Part of the artifact will address some of the specific struggles young adults have with the church, such as whether “organized religion” is a good thing or not. This age group consistently resists “organized religion” and the oft-repeated mantra “I am spiritual but not religious.” I will acknowledge that organized religions can be a bad thing, but can also be a good thing if organized around the right things. Hospitals are organized. The “One” campaign was highly organized. Organized religion can be a good thing when organized around biblical values and Jesus’ teaching. A young adult does not have to abandon the church or leave faith because of organized religion.

Another question that will be addressed in the Track-2 artifact is why young adults so often consider Christians to be judgmental. I will explain a biblical understanding of what “judging” should and should not be, along with some answers as to why perhaps the church needs to judge itself more than it does – but in a healthy way, based on Scripture and not on opinions. If the church was more concerned about hypocrisy within itself, and held Christians in the church accountable to living out the ways of Jesus, then

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perhaps the world would not see us as being so messed up.

Another proposed solution to this problem is an understanding on the part of both church leaders and young adults as to the primary purpose of the church – that is, the church’s role as worshipers on mission in this world. It is important that leaders teach to this end and that young adults understand the implications of this in their lives and church involvement. There is a huge difference between a church that goes through motions of being church and a church hat revolves around mission. A mission-focused church functions in a way that is radically different from one that isn’t. When a church understands this to be its purpose, it then focuses its entire ethos and strategy on training people in the church to be on mission their world.

In this model, the church itself serves as a community base, like an overseas missionary base would. Young adults then see themselves as missionaries (as does the whole of the church). When a missionary notices that there is a missing people group (such as young adults) they strategically pray and think through what it takes to reach that people group. Teaching how to respond to common questions of the day would be part of this training to the missionaries. An evaluation and understanding of the negative perceptions a population has about the church and Christians would also be part, so as to be able to teach what responses we can give.

All this leads to empowering young adults to help shape the mission to reach their peers. Who better to understand how to reach twenty-year-olds than those who are in their twenties. It takes creating a culture in a church to see this happen, teaching young adults and youth about the church and their role in it. They can help shape the future church and there is great potential in that. George Barna, someone who extensively stud-
ies churches and demographics, states, “The church could use the infusion of energy, ideas, and leadership that young adults can bring to the table.” The church must not ignore this generation in contributing to the leadership and future of the church.

The Track-2 artifact raises the problem, then addresses the specifics of what is and isn’t “church.” I address a few (there are many) of the primary misunderstandings of church that young adults have, casting vision for a future church that they can help shape. One major point I make in the book is that although the church has made mistakes and has been messy, we must not give up on it. The church is messy, because we are messy human beings. Together we can help clean up the messes so they aren’t made as often. We can move toward becoming the church that will be impacting our culture and new generations. Ultimately, this is important because Jesus loves the church. The church is His bride and is what He chose to represent Himself in this world today. There are problems, but there is great hope!

SECTION 2: OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The problem I raise in this artifact is a wide one and there are many ways to address it. In my proposed solution, I focus on a core issue – a biblically grounded ecclesiology that assigns priority to the missional nature of the church. As we examine and discover the purpose of the church, solutions more naturally develop. However, churches have other ways of finding a solution to this problem.

1. Start an alternative worship service. Some churches such as Willow Creek

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Community Church in Chicago, Northpoint Church in Atlanta and Westgate Church in San Jose start an alternative worship service as a solution to seeing young adults engaged in the church. A church service then can be designed in addition to the other services in the church that caters to the musical style, preaching style, aesthetic environment of young adults. I believe this is a valid solution, as it does answer some of the problems of young adults who feel disconnected. It can provide a community within the whole that young adults can resonate with in terms of music and preaching, and a place where they can meet and socialize with other young adults.

However, there are some cautions to pay attention to with this solution. For one, it may be a temporary fix. As these young adults then grow older they still may not connect to or relate to the whole church body. In a sense another “youth group” has been created, which simply delays the problem. Many churches that launch these Sunday night gatherings for young adults discover this problem. Some end up launching these Sunday night gatherings as church plants such as Twin Lakes Church in Aptos, California and College Avenue Baptist Church in San Diego did. They learn that those in the young adult ministry didn’t connect to the main church when they reach the age of 30, or whatever the cutoff age is. So some became church plants instead of young adult ministries within the whole.

2. **Start a video venue with different music.** Other churches opt to create a video venue for young adults, rather than provide a uniquely separate young adult service. Churches like North Coast Church in Carlsbad, California or Saddleback Church in Orange County, CA have experimented with this approach. This allows the young adults to hear the same preaching as the rest of the church, but in a venue specifically catering to
their needs and tastes. The music and décor can be changed for the young adults in the video venue but the preaching and senior pastor remains the same. This can be effective as well and some churches have seen success with this.

But many have not. From discussions I have had with leaders at Mosaic church in Los Angeles, I learned they tried this approach. However, they found that the types of young adults who were choosing to trust church enough to come to Mosaic rejected the concept of watching the preaching on a screen rather than in person. It felt impersonal to this group, so church leaders cancelled it several months after it began.

This approach also raises questions about the limitations of a “change-the-worship-gathering” solution. While it may be necessary to change the worship gathering, it seems like these are superficial, aesthetical issues that do not address the root of the problem of why young adults leave the church and stay away from the church. I believe it is more than just the style of the worship gatherings. It is also about leadership values and culture. About how spiritual formation happens. How evangelism is done. How the preaching is done. You may have a video venue with great music that fits those in their twenties, but the preaching doesn’t. The preaching may use illustrations not relevant to the age group or insensitive to the values and culture of those in that age group.

This approach may serve as a solution to the worship gathering part of a church, but it is more of a “surface” fix than a “root of the problem” fix. By focusing on only changing the musical style and aesthetic of the worship gathering, you still may not be addressing the whole ecclesiological issue of “what is church?” to young adults. You may even reinforce a consumer mindset in which the goal is for a church is to cater to culture and style, rather than representing Jesus to the world as an others-focused missional train-
ing center. I do believe that musical styles and aesthetics are very important, but I believe we need to make change holistically, not only in the style of the worship gathering. Ed Stetzer in his book *Lost And Found: The Younger Unchurched And The Churches That Reach Them*,\(^6\) identified some patterns in churches that see those in their twenties becoming part of them. Ed shared that musical style is a factor in how young adults experience worship. But the greater factors were the depth of community, the depth and style of teaching, responsibility given to those in that age range, cross-generational connection, how authenticity is defined and lived out and a team leadership approach. So it is beyond just the music and aesthetics, although those are important and not to be ignored. Ambient church in the UK, in its description of designing a new church, observed that changing only elements like music is like changing “window dressing.” They describe this as follows:

> We’ve wanted this vision of a creating a different expression of church to pervade everything we do so that people who may not know our values can still intuitively know that what we’re doing isn’t window dressing. So it’s been important to define what our values are right from the start. Ambient wonder deliberately removes power from an individual at the front. We make a commitment to using all of our senses, drawing on the creativity within all of us and an expectation that the event is about creating space to explore and experience rather than to prescribe and give answers.\(^7\)

3. **Make changes to existing worship services.** Another solution churches choose by which to address the problem is to change the entire church’s worship gatherings in order to appeal to younger generations. In this solution you may see changes in the musical style. You may see the décor and environment change. In this way a church is shifting in order to keep younger people from slipping away. Unfortunately it is often the older

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generation that sacrifices most, as the familiar look and feel of their home church begins to change. I have heard success stories – and also sad stories where churches almost split, or the older generation leaves, feeling their church was taken over from them. This is a way for churches to change, although it does mean changing not just the style of worship gatherings but other, deeper things as well. The weakness can still be that it does not create a mission-focused church but only develops a church that attracts more Christians who like the music and style. Much attention would be needed to address the root problem instead of merely symptoms.

4. Plant a new church specifically for this age group. Another solution is a church plant specifically designed to suit to this generation. This is possibly the easiest in terms of being able to totally start afresh, but if it becomes too young adult focused, it can miss older generations and the wisdom and stability they bring. There are examples of church plants that eventually became more multi-generational, but the leadership overall was younger and closely connected to the needs and culture of their peers.

I personally applaud and love all ways that churches try to solve the problem of new generations not connecting to the church. If a church makes change of any sort in order to present the gospel to next generations, I am thrilled with that. It is important, however, to examine the possible root causes of why generations are either leaving or not coming to many churches.

Whether it’s a church plant, or adding an alternative young adult gathering, or launching video venues or making changes in existing worship styles – we also need to address the issue of purpose: What do people of the church think their role is in the church? How do they define “church?” What are the theological questions that need to be
addressed? People will have questions about Christianity and the church, and teaching and classes can be given to address these cultural questions (such as the validity of the Bible, sexuality, religious pluralism, etc.). We need to be paying attention to so many things, not just the worship gathering, in any model of a solution to the problem of missing generations in our churches.

SECTION 3: THE THESIS

Although there are many ways to approach solutions to the missing generation of young adults in church, for the Track-2 artifact we will narrow the solution to some core issues. One will be to show how those outside of the church do see the church and Christianity. We will address the problem by showing what the problem is. We will show some of the various perceptions that people have of the church. But then give some solutions and responses.

I will show that this problem can be addressed in at least 3 ways:

1. *Redefine “church” to a generation or two that does not understand a biblical ecclesiology.* The goal is to deconstruct incorrect understandings of church, and reconstruct a biblical understanding. Throughout history there are times when a generation has to redefine their cultural understanding of church. For this current generation a main issue is for them is to be identifying “church” not as a place you *go to,* but something *you are* throughout the week. The rationale here is to help youth and young adults understand the ownership involved in “being the church.” The goal is also to promote a biblical understanding of church as the Bride of Christ, valued and important as something Jesus loves. The truth is that every time we say, “I don’t like the church,” or “I don’t want to go to church,” we are not merely talking about a program we attend, but about the Bride whom
Jesus loves. Even when the church is messy, Jesus loves us. It does not give us excuse to continue making messes. (By “messes” I mean when people are hurt by poor leadership decisions or when churches lose their mission and become consumed with power, influence control, comfort, or anything else. The list of ways we can sin and mess things up in the church is a long one!)

2. Directly address critical questions this generation asks. Because there is such confusion about Christianity and the church in our culture today, we must address the pressing questions and issues of the day. Christians need to know how to respond to the questions of those outside the church. This is what missionaries do when they go into a foreign culture. They study the culture and mindset of the community they are seeking to reach. It is likely, for young adults today, that the questions being asked by their friends are the same ones they are facing. We need to address the questions of our culture both for missionary training and for personal training as well. Perhaps as we address these questions it will help prevent Christians from leaving the church because they feel their questions are ignored or unwelcome.

You see this happening at Mars Hill Church in Seattle where they regularly have people in the church text questions to the senior pastor who answers them after the evening gathering. Churches are recognizing the need for dialogue and not just intake from a sermon when learning Scripture. Ed Stetzer gives several examples of this in his book *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched And Churches That Reach Them*. Ed writes:

> From our surveys we noted a common goal of many churches is to get their people to connect with the message beyond the weekend service. One way churches are doing this is to have small groups unpack previous messages through group discussion, often with discussion guides posted on Web sites and blogs.

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8 Stetzer, *Lost and Found*, 174.
We are seeing a change in how teaching occurs and is much more interaction and discussion oriented. Even when larger churches don’t have discussion in the main worship services they find other ways for it to happen because of this value. Zondervan launched “The City,” which is a website many younger churches are adopting. Besides the social networking and normal things contemporary church software offers, there are features of dialoguing about theology, such as asking questions of the teachers about the sermon and breaking down the distance from the deliverer of the sermon to the people. Many things are developing to see more dialogue happen in churches that are seeing younger generations become involved with them.

By redefining church to younger generations and clearly depicting their role in it, along with directly addressing the difficult questions they have, we can do much to reverse the trend of absent younger generations in our churches. Church leaders need to be leading the way with these solutions. However, the Track-2 artifact will be addressing these solutions to those in this age range in the churches – specifically written for Christians, but in a way that will appeal to non-believers as well.

To determine which questions to address in the Track-2 artifact, reliance on the national survey by Dave Kinnamin in his book unChristian will be used (the list was given in Section 1: Defining The Problem). This survey shows a national perspective and not just a local one. I will also refer to the informal collective pattern of questions I have gathered in my personal discussions and interactions with church leaders across the country. This information helped in the writing of the Track-2 artifact, as I wanted it to have a broad appeal and not just a Santa Cruz, CA (where I am from) context. I wanted my

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learning and information gathered to be broad and not just from one context, so I have spent formal and informal time interviewing leaders from various churches who intentionally strive to see younger generations reached. Some of those included are:

- **Willow Creek Community Church, Chicago**: an affluent suburban church reaching a wide variety of ages but lacking in the 20-something crowd
- **Mosaic Church, Los Angeles**: Primarily a church of those in their 20’s
- **Sanctuary Church, Minneapolis, MN**: a very ethnically diverse church which has more of an inner city younger crowd
- **Solid Rock Church, Portland, OR**: a Calvary Chapel type of a church in the suburbs of Portland which attracts many 20-somethings
- **Imago Dei, Portland, OR**: a church that has seen a lot of non-Christians put faith in Jesus. It is younger overall, but very multi-generational
- **NewSong Church, Irvine, CA**: a multiethnic church in Orange County. High percentage of Asians in this church with a predominantly Asian leadership staff
- **NorthPoint Church, Atlanta**: a very large suburban church which has experimented over the years with various ways of reaching younger generations
- **National Community Church, Washington DC**: a church which attracts a lot of 20-something professionals
- **Mars Hill, Seattle**: a highly Reformed Church that has grown primarily by those in their 20’s and 30’s

I also have visited and spent time with leaders in denominational churches including:

- United Methodist
- Assemblies of God
- Presbyterian USA
- Southern Baptist
- Disciples of Christ
The breadth of conversation within evangelicalism has been fairly extensive in learning what are patterns of churches that are either losing this next generation or those seeing them come into the church. Speaking at conferences during the year has also given me exposure to a diverse group of churches listening to their stories and insight. The frequent speaking engagements in Christian university chapels and classes have also afforded many opportunities to listen to stories from academic leaders and college-age people from around the country.

Although I intentionally listen and learn from a national perspective on what is happening with younger generations and the church, major insight comes from our local setting and church. Every year at Vintage Faith Church we do a survey of our church. I send out a mass email to our church and ask what it is they would find helpful for the teaching on Sundays. I break it into categories of books of the Bible, issues of personal struggle, practical living type of questions and theology questions. Everything really is a theological question. We recently took the top 12 themes of theological questions, and then did another survey in order to narrow it down to 5 questions. We then taught a 5-week series based on those questions.

In the most recent survey taken in September 2010\(^\text{10}\), the top 10 theological questions being asked are:

1. Should Christians judge anyone? Why are Christians known to be so judgmental? What does Scripture actually say about this? Do we live where nothing should be judged? What does “judging” even mean? (This

matches with the findings from the book *unChristian* which gave statistics that 87% of people describe Christians as judgmental. So it naturally makes sense then, this would be a top question.)

2. What does the Bible say about homosexuality? If you are an evangelical Christian does it mean you are anti-gay? (This aligned with the Kinnaman survey as well).

3. Can we trust the Bible? Is it human-made and inspired? What about other religious writings? Isn’t it a circular argument to say the Bible is inspired, just because the Bible itself claims that?

4. Is Christianity “organized religion?” And why do we need any form of organized religion because we can have our own spirituality without dogmas and the church telling you how to think or worship.

5. Is Christianity and the Bible chauvinistic and oppressive to females?

6. Is the Bible a cause of hatred, war and violence as so many atheists are writing about today? The “God” of the Old Testament seems one of violence, genocide and egotistical. How does the peaceful and love-focused teachings of Jesus align with this?

7. Did Christians copy other religions and create Jesus in the hero-myth way of a dying and resurrecting “god” like many other pagan religions of that time period? Did Christians deify Jesus to match other pagan gods?

8. Are Christians arrogant to believe that they are right and all other world faiths wrong?

9. Is there really a hell? If God is loving why is there a hell and is it used for scaring people to believe?

10. Don’t Christians have a illiterate mentality if they reject science and still believe in creation from Genesis and other mythological stories of the Bible?

Having taken these surveys for several years, most results remain the same with fluctuations in order of what was most popular. The question of why God allows suffering and evil in the world is also raised, but in this last survey we did not include that question as we had recently done an entire teaching series on that question.

There are many ways of looking at this problem of young adults leaving the church. Whether it is being sensitive to questions they ask. Whether it is statistics of
overall numbers over time. Or whether it is trying to discern what happens to them after they leave as another way of looking at this problem. Drew Dyck in his book, *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are leaving The Faith...and How To Bring Them Back*, studied this and put those who left the church into categories. He lists six types of young adults who leave the church according to his studies. He writes in a summary of these categories of what he covers in the full study that is worth noting here:

**Postmodernists:** Postmodernists reject Christianity’s exclusive claims and moral absolutes. They care about the poor and oppressed but feel that Christian faith is too narrow.

**Recoilers:** These leavers may cite intellectual doubts as the reason for their departure, but deep hurts and psychological scars are what really caused them to abandon the faith.

**Modernists:** Modernists completely reject supernatural claims. God is a delusion. Any truth beyond the reach of science is dismissed as superstition.

**Neo-Pagans:** not all actually participate in pagan rituals, but they deny the reality of a transcendent God and see earth as the ultimate source of true spirituality.

**Spiritual Rebels:** They don’t want anyone telling them what to do. The temptation to engage in sinful behavior and the desire for autonomy cause them to push God away.

**Drifters:** Drifters do not suffer intellectual crisis or consciously leave the faith; they simply drift away. Over time God becomes less and less important until one day he’s no longer part of their lives.\(^\text{11}\)

Whether one agrees with these specific categories or any of the ways you can start approaching the problem of young adults leaving the church and what happens, there is one thing in common. Everyone pretty much agrees there is a problem. There is an overall concern that young adults are

leaving the church and that we aren’t seeing growth with this generation. I applaud and am thrilled when people make attempts at discovering symptoms and looking to various possible ways to address the problem. There is a feeling we are in this together and can learn together. This Track-2 project will be an additional source of learning and encouragement for solving this problem we all generally acknowledge.

SECTION 4: THE TRACK-2 ARTIFACT

The artifact is a book published by Zondervan Publishers in Fall 2011. It is a trade book, which means that it is written for a general audience and not just church leaders. The targeted readership is mainly those in their 20’s and 30’s. Older readers may also end up reading this book as it does not directly say that it is for a certain age group. Although like music, the style and approach often appears to a specific age range. And the marketing of this book by the publisher also caters to that age range.

I wrote *Adventures in Churchland: Discovering the Beautiful Mess Jesus* in both a narrative and an apologetic format. The personal stories are designed to earn the readers’ trust, much like you do when you give a sermon to a new audience that doesn’t know you. It is additionally beneficial that narrative and personal stories are often what readers can identify with and remember. So I use stories in the book to make a number of key points throughout the book. There are also specific theological and apologetic answers to some questions relating to the absence of 20-somethings from the church.

I try to address the problem by directly by speaking to those in that age range who are missing from and often disillusioned by the church. If we can grab their hearts and
have them understand a theology of “church,” perhaps they will shift in their understanding of the church and want to bring about change within church because they see how important it is both to Jesus and to the mission Jesus has laid out for us.

The basic flow of this book is laid out in the introduction, first admitting that the church is messy (because we are messy, sinful people), but then offering hope.

The first section of the book is more of a personal narrative of my entry into the church. I tell about the parts that were odd and the things I didn’t understand, and the parts that I didn’t like. This is an important section in terms of gaining the readers’ trust.

I then address the objection to church as “organized religion.” I point out that just as hospitals are organized, and the ONE Campaign is organized, the church can be a beautiful thing when organized for a purpose. I build a case for why the church can be an organized force of good in this world.

I then address the issue of “judgmental Christians.” making a case that perhaps if the church were more judgmental of itself, in a healthy way, it would be a better representative of Jesus in the world. I give personal stories of when the church judged me in non-healthy ways, and make the case that the church should not be judging the world; only God is supposed to do that.

I then argue that the reader must not give up on the church. Jesus loves the church and we are His bride; furthermore, it is through the church that God intends to show himself to a world in need of Him. I conclude by casting vision for those who may have given up on church and a plea that they give it another chance, putting their energy into helping to create the future church. Again, while this book raises the problem of the current state of the church, it will also hold out hope and offer a stiff a challenge – an invitation
to join in and make the changes needed to effectively serve Jesus on mission as the church.

The Table of Contents for the book, below, follows the format as previously described:

ADVENTURES IN CHURCHLAND:
DISCOVERING THE BEAUTIFUL MESS JESUS LOVES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: I love the church, despite its weirdness and messiness

PART ONE: CHURCHLAND: THE MUSICAL

1. Welcome to Churchland
2. A Christian misfit taking music lessons
3. I probably wouldn’t like Christians if I wasn’t one
4. I See Mean People
5. Ovaltine, the Bible and Elderly Ladies Fighting in a Basement
6. Cannibals and Creepy Pastors
7. Is the church supposed to be judgmental?
8. Judging the way Jesus taught us to Judge
9. Is the church supposed to be organized religion?
10. Organized religion as the hope of the masses

PART TWO: FROM CHURCHLAND TO GRACELAND

11. Escaping Churchland and Bad Music
12. Would Jesus attend a church today?
13. Is asking “Do you want to go to church anymore?” the wrong question?
14. Messy people, messy church
15. Misfits in Graceland

Something to note about this book is that it was originally conceived as two separate books. I had, in addition to the questions about judgmental Christians and organized religion, several more questions from the surveys taken in our church. Other big topics were whether the church is anti-gay, whether other world religions are valid, and how to prove the validity of the Bible. Zondervan decided to turn it into two books. The Churchland book is actually the introductory chapters and the closing chapters of the original
book. The next book will come out in Spring 2012 and is tentatively titled “Do You Like Jesus But Not The Church? Exploring the Uncomfortable Questions about Christianity and Church.” As the one book became two, we kept the apologetic content in this first book, but allowed room for more narrative, especially the beginning chapters.

I believe this book does give a solution to the problem of the missing generations in churches. It is practical, as it is written to the generations themselves. And the format and style of writing is a match for that. The claim of the problem and how it is addressed is not just theory, but comes out of national surveys such as in the book unChristian and from personal experience in a local church.

In comparison to other solutions, this book goes into the major root issue of ecclesiology, which impacts how the young adult population perceives the church.

SECTION 5: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

Artifact goals: to provide a resource that encourages people in the 18-35-year-old age range to not give up on the church. Instead, a challenge is given to understand the biblical reason for the church and to join in on its mission and help change the future. This work is intended is to provoke thinking and provide responses to some of the primary questions and negative perceptions this age group has about the church and Christianity. These are barriers that people have about wanting to give the church another try, and they are questions that Christians need to know how to respond to when asked.

Audience: target audience is Christians in the 18-35-year-old age range. The readers may be older as well as non-Christian but that is the primary target group. Church leaders are also a target group of those who work with this age range.
Content: the table of contents and basic description was given in SECTION 4:

THE TRACK-2 ARTIFACT.

Evaluative “standards of publication”: The artifact is being edited and published by Zondervan Publishing. They will be keeping it to a high professional standard of editing and all the standards of a published book with a world-leader in evangelical publishing.

“Action plan” for completing the Track-2 artifact: The artifact is in the editing process right now with Zondervan editors (as of January 2011). The plan is that I will get it back by May and then do final editing on it for release in fall 2011. The action plan is underway and on current schedule with Zondervan is for a fall release.

SECTION 6: POSTSCRIPT

This artifact was birthed foremost from being in ministry to the target age group of readers. In terms of the solution being practical, I believe it is from the experience of being immersed in ministry to this age group. We have had the joy at our church in Santa Cruz to see so many people return to the church and so many putting faith in Jesus for the first time. This artifact is not theoretical as much as birthed from a ministry context. As I was writing it, I was picturing in my mind faces of people who either had bad experiences with the church or had the questions I raised in the artifact. It was natural to write, since it is flows from real experience.

The process of developing it was a fun one personally as I was able to reflect on my own story as part of it. Since I grew up outside a Christian home and didn’t know much about church, I have a little edge to understanding the mindset of those who also didn’t grow up in the church. Many of the questions that people have today are the ones I
also had coming into the church from a non-Christian culture and set of friends. As I reflected on my story I was thankful for how God brought me into a tiny church and used the pastor there and others to help me gain trust in the church and Christianity.

In the development of the artifact, I was constantly energized and affirmed to be serving on mission the way I am in our local church. Because our church is comprised of so many in that age group, it felt natural to be writing about it as I was really writing to them and can picture real people and real stories and questions. Because I believe so much in how to solve the problem raised in this dissertation, it gave my joy to write it.

The triumphs of the artifact were being able to dive into real questions and issues that are keeping the 18-30-year-olds from church. Across the country there are so many good things happening as churches do dive into these issues of ecclesiology and tough questions this next generations is asking. But asking the questions and doing some self-inspection in the church is not often pretty. We may discover things about ourselves that are quite “messy.” The hope is that from this discovery onward, we can change…and empower younger generations to make that change and to be the change. It is happening in many churches that see this and have made changes. There is hope.

A shortcoming of this artifact is that there are many more questions that could have been addressed. That is why Zondervan Publishing turned it into two books. Other questions and further solutions regarding the problems raised in this artifact will be addressed in the next book being published after this one. Only so much can be covered in one book. But even so, this book is a practical source of encouragement and hope. My hope is that it encourages young adults who are not engaging to become involved and enter the church of America rather than giving up on the it; thereby helping to shape its fu-
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Something to note about the bibliography is that in the Track-2 artifact itself, I intentionally did not use too many footnotes or endnotes. There aren’t too many references to other sources or quotations used. But that is intentional. The reason is that the book is a popular level of reading book, not a research or academic book. You will notice however in the artifact, that I intentionally do put a lot of Scripture references. That is because one of my goals is to constantly be weaving in Scripture references and hopefully pique curiosity so readers will even look some of them up. So the lack of a bibliography in the artifact itself is intentional.

So what I will do for this bibliography in the Written Statement is to show “behind the scenes” what reading I personally have done, and which in turn has informed the writing of this book. You will see in the actual artifact, that these aren’t being listed in endnotes or footnotes or quotes. And some of the quotes I do use are song lyrics or things that are pop culture tidbits and not included in this bibliography. So for the purpose of this Written Statement, this general bibliography, while not explicitly accounted for in the artifact itself, delineates the reading I did in preparation for this project. You will see that some books are from emerging-church studies and some are about mission and ecclesiology.


Rainer, Thom S. “*Seven Sins of Dying Churches*.” Outreach Magazine 5, no. 1 (January/February 2006).


ADVENTURES
IN
CHURCHLAND

DISCOVERING THE BEAUTIFUL MESS JESUS LOVES

DAN KIMBALL
Adventures in Churchland

Discovering the Beautiful Mess Jesus Loves

Dan Kimball
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**THIS IS WHERE THE ARTIFACT ENDS THAT IS TURNED IN AND BELOW IS NOT INCLUDED IN ARTIFACT BUT IS IN THE BOOK**

PART TWO: FROM CHURCHLAND TO GRACELAND

11. Escaping Churchland and Bad Music
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POST:

“Do You Like Jesus But Not the Church?”
**Introduction: I love the church, despite its weirdness and messiness**

I would never have guessed I would be saying that I love the church and even the “organized church.” I would never have imagined I would be dedicating my life to serving in local churches and working with church leaders. Growing up outside the church, I thought the church was comprised of somewhat goofy and odd people, who didn’t think too much for themselves. They had their thinking dictated to them by a literal view of the Bible and from their church leaders. So I felt some Christians were harmless, sincere and nice, but naïve to believe in the dogma they did. On the other hand, I experienced other types of Christians and churches as deliberately judgmental, anti-gay, male-chauvinist, Bible literalists—arrogant to think their form of organized religion was the only right one and all others were wrong.

So, for the most part, I stayed away from the church and Christians.

In fact, if you are not a Christian or you are a Christian who has left the organized church and want nothing to do with it, I can totally relate to you. You’ll read in the chapters ahead some stories of what I will call “Churchland” (the evangelical church world), where I was judged, saw crazy things, saw a major intellectual disconnect between biblical scholarship and culture, and even saw on occasion much of what I would call evil being done in the name of Jesus.

**Liking Jesus, but not liking Christianity or the church**

You see, at the same time that I was seeing the often distasteful realities of Churchland, I was quite torn. The reason I was torn was that although the church
and what I had observed of Christianity and the church was not very appealing or compelling.

But Jesus was.

The more I read and learned about Jesus, the more I became intrigued, fascinated, drawn to his teaching, wanting to even be like him and follow him. The more I learned about how Jesus loved people, how he looked out for the marginalized and the poor, how he pointed out hypocrisy in religious leaders, how he painted a portrait of what it meant to believe in God that made sense. How he died on a cross for the sins of people ("sin" is a word which means when we go against God’s guidance for life as described in the Scriptures and teachings of Jesus)\(^\text{12}\). Jesus taught how we are loved by God and how we can be totally restored and forgiven and given a purpose and mission on this earth to love others as Jesus would want us to.

As I learned about Jesus and was so drawn to him, I was so torn. A problem arose, because the church didn’t feel much like Jesus that I was learning about.

And the problem also was that I discovered how Jesus spoke about the church as being very important\(^\text{13}\). And the Scriptures even speak about Jesus being the head of the church\(^\text{14}\). And that the church is the representative metaphorical “body” of Jesus here on earth.\(^\text{15}\) And that And that Jesus loves the church and

\(^{12}\) Genesis 3, Romans 3:23; Romans 5:12; Romans 6:23; 1 John 3:4.
\(^{13}\) Matthew16:18.
\(^{14}\) Colossians 1:18.
\(^{15}\) Colossians 1:24; 1 Corinthians 12:27.
metaphorically the church is seen as his bride in the Scriptures. But I didn’t like what I had observed of the church. I liked what I was learning about Jesus but not the church. The church was quite messy.

**There is Beauty in the Mess**

So this tension of being drawn to Jesus, but not connecting to or wanting to be part of a church caused me to begin and continue being on the adventure of trying to understand this thing called “church”. And as I learned and will explain more in this book, that the Scriptures teach that for those who follow Jesus, we are meant to be part of a local church community. But I will explain in the chapters ahead, that I learned that the church is definitely messy. I didn’t want to be in these messes and the way church functions. The church has done (and does) weird and sometimes hurtful things. But what I kept realizing is that despite the messiness, Jesus loves the church. Jesus loves the church, because the church is made up of people. And people are messy. So whether it is a huge, gigantic megachurch – it will be messy. Whether is it a small little house church, it is will messy. It is messy because we are messy. But because we are messy, it does not give us freedom to then indulge in continuing making a mess of things in the church. It does not then give us permission to not change when we recognize we are creating a mess which may misrepresent Jesus. We need to be making great effort to be cleaning up the messes we make and have had made.

**Jesus chose ordinary messy people to begin the church**

Jesus didn’t choose perfect people or superstars to start the church 2,000 years ago. He chose a rather rag tag group of 12 individuals who made many mis-

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16 Ephesians 5:22-23; Revelation 21:9-10.
takes. He chose ordinary messy people\(^\text{17}\). But what you see in their lives, is as they made mistakes, as they made messes – they did whatever they could to clean up the mess. They sought for the church to be the kind of community and church that Jesus wanted. He chose ordinary messy people to do extraordinary things. But it was not easy then and it is not easy today, because people are messy, whether 2,000 years ago or today.

But that is what is beautiful as despite that, Jesus still chose us to be the church. He uses imperfect people, misfits, the non-popular and the popular, the rich and the poor. The Scriptures teach we are all one together as we follow Jesus\(^\text{18}\). And as we strive by the strength God gives to be the kind of church that Jesus wants us to be, I believe it is possible. Not a perfect church, but a humble, saying we are sorry, caring about the needs of others before our own, desperately asking God to help us be what He wants us to be types of churches. Churches who ask for forgiveness as we blow it and also forgive others as they do the same. The beauty is the grace of God that was provided to us through Jesus and his teaching and what he did on the cross as he took our mess on him\(^\text{19}\). So with this attitude of humility and servanthood, churches then do whatever possible to clean up the messes we make. That is why there is beauty in the mess, as Jesus chose messy people to represent him and be on mission in this world for him And we now we serve Jesus but serving others as Jesus would want us to – and we can make the change and create the future church.

\(^{17}\) Luke 6:12.  
\(^{18}\) Galatians 3:28.  
\(^{19}\) 1 Corinthians 15:1-3; Isaiah 53:4-6; 10-12; John 1:29; 1 Peter 3:18-19.
I had no idea about all this and all I knew is that from all I observed of the church, I didn’t want any part of it. I saw mainly the messes. But now, I really do believe in the church and have hope for the church or I wouldn’t be writing this book. I currently am on staff at a church. I regularly speak at church leadership conferences. In fact, this book stemmed from another book I directly wrote for church leaders called “They Like Jesus But Not The Church”\textsuperscript{20}. In it I covered a lot of the reasons people don’t like “church” or “Christianity” today. But the message about how Christianity and the church is not connecting to people doesn’t just stop with church leaders. There are many of us who have observed or had weird or even hurtful experiences with the church and Christianity. So I ended up writing a book that has the message of hope for the church despite these messes that happen. And also directly exploring the uncomfortable questions about the church being known as being judgmental, arrogantly thinking they are right and all other religions and faiths wrong, anti-gay or homophobic, chauvinistic, fundamentalists who take the whole Bible literally and looking at some of the strange and bizarre sounding things in the Bible. I believe we shouldn’t avoid the tough questions.

So I wrote a new book addressing these to the average person, not just church leaders. There were so many things to cover in it, and to cover the questions and topics in it adequately it was too long for on book. So that book became two books and the one you are now reading is the first one of the two. This one covers a lot more personal story and adventure in it. Where the next one is more

\textsuperscript{20} Dan Kimball, \textit{They Like Jesus But Not The Church: Insights From Emerging Generations} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).
about diving into some uncomfortable questions and theology. That one is called “Do You Like Jesus, But Not The Church?; Exploring the Uncomfortable Questions About Christianity and the Church” (see last pages of this book for more details on that one).

I do hope that this journey into “Churchland” you will be entering as you read this book will encourage, disturb, challenge, make you mad, make you joyful and most of all inspire you to view the church and your role in it as Jesus would. I have learned that as a follower of Jesus, that I need the church. And I believe the church needs us. God has gifted each of us to bring something unique to the church and the mission Jesus has us on.

So as someone who never, ever, ever would have imagined himself part of a church or in leadership of a church or writing a book about the church – let’s take a look at this beautiful mess we are in together.
Note: there are over XXX (let’s put the actual number when we are done editing).

Bible verses referred to, quoted or mentioned in this book and you can find the reference to look them up in the footnotes on the pages mentioned.

PART 1:

CHURCHLAND:

THE MUSICAL
Chapter 1: Welcome to Churchland

“You may ask yourself, well how did I get here?....
You may ask yourself, am I right or am I wrong?....
You may say to yourself, my God, what have I done?”

-Talking Heads, from the song ‘Once In A Lifetime’

Creeping along the floor on my hands and knees, I tried to hide myself behind a choir dressed in bed sheets and blankets.

*My God, how did I end up here?*

Standing in front of me on the stage were around fifty choir members performing a part-opera, part-Neil-Diamond-sounding song to around four hundred people in the church sanctuary. It was the church’s annual Christmas musical. I had been designated a shepherd in this musical, and we were all dressed in what was supposed to resemble New Testament styled clothing made from bed sheets, blankets and other fabrics a group of women from the church had sewn together.

Less than two years earlier, I was living in London playing drums in a punk and rockabilly band. And now I was wearing a brown bed sheet in this somewhat miserable church musical, hiding behind a choir on my hands and knees out of embarrassment. *How did I end up here?*

**Bedsheets, Blankets and Bad Music**

My shepherd costume was made from a chocolate brown bed sheet and wrapped with a belt made of thick rope we bought at the hardware supply store. I also

\[21\] Lyrics from the song “Once in a Lifetime” is on the album *Remain In Light* by Talking Heads (Sire Records, 1980).
had a scarf to wear on my head with a thin gold rope headband to tie it into place, but I had taken it off as soon as I ducked down and hid during the very first song of the musical. I felt so incredibly silly wearing it. It looked more like something you would buy at K-Mart for a child’s pirate Halloween costume, than something a shepherd in Bethlehem would be caught wearing. So it was off my head and crumpled into a ball in my hands as I hid, crouching behind the choir.

I wasn’t quite a willing volunteer for this musical. I was in my mid-twenties at the time and was somewhat pressured to be in it, against my better instincts. I wasn’t raised in a church, so these Christmas musicals were new experiences for me. Later, I’ll explain how I ended up at this church to begin with, but the reason I was in the choir and dressed up like a Bethlehem shepherd was because I was just starting to help as a leader in the youth ministry of the church. The pastor of the church thought it would be good for the teenagers to see me in the choir and in this musical, so he’d asked me to be in it.

Eager to do whatever it took to help out in the ministry to teenagers, I had hesitantly agreed—though, I never quite understood how me being in a Christmas musical helped teenagers. When the rehearsals started, I began getting nervous. The more I listened to the actual music the choir was singing, the more uncomfortable I felt getting involved with the whole thing. The closer it got to the actual performance, the more mortified I was, and a sinking feeling of dread was settling in. At one point, I even asked the pastor if I could get out of the musical, but he continued to insist it was good for the teenagers that I stay in the musical as an example.
Mary singing Celine Dion songs to baby Jesus

Now, in fairness to the people involved, the choir actually did a good job performing the songs that had been selected for them. The songs were simply typical contemporary evangelical choir music of the time. But to me, being fairly new in the church world, they sounded something like a confusing mix of Neil Diamond and Josh Groban love ballads (only not nearly as good as those). I believe the hope was that the musical would feature dramatic sounding songs from Broadway musicals like Phantom of the Opera or Wicked. But they didn’t. These songs felt like Karaoke versions of Broadway fare, with Christian lyrics thrown in. So, it’s hard to even categorize the contemporary evangelical choir music used in this particular musical. It sort of stands in its own category beyond description. In fact, as Mary looked down at the baby Jesus, she broke into an imitation Barbara Streisand/Celine Dion kind of a song. (If you have ever seen this type of Christmas or Easter musical at a church, you can probably identify with what I’m saying here.)

I do remember there were a few very talented singers in the choir, but they were stuck singing the evangelical choir songs written for this musical. My grandmother in New Jersey would probably have liked the music, and it would have brought her to tears (in a good way). But it was far from what I personally felt was good music. In fact, the music of this musical was against the fabric of everything I personally believed good music to be. It was like kryptonite to me. To say that it made me weak and dizzy just listening to it isn’t much of an exaggeration. I know music is subjective, but unless you were living in a retirement home, this was seriously bad, contrived and weird music.
And yet, it wasn’t just the music that caused me to duck down and hide behind the choir. It was also the costumes, the acting, the choreography. As songs were sung, everyone in the choir was supposed to be overly expressive. We were supposed to extend our hands upward all together at the dramatic moments of the songs and the endings. We were supposed to look frightened at some points or happy and joyous at other times, and everyone did their best to do this dramatic acting and moving about the stage as they sang.

I know the efforts of this choir were very sincere, but we weren’t actors. As a matter of fact, most of the people in the choir were older. So, to me, it looked like a group of middle-aged aunts and uncles (grandmas and grandpas, even) who ate too much Jell-O and drank too much iced tea at a church picnic then broke out into strange dramatic singing, moving their arms around wildly from the caffeine and the sugar rush.

**White plastic garbage bag angels and Jesus stuck in my head**

Truly, it went even further beyond the music and the choreography, which is why I ducked down and hid when the musical started. Besides the majority of the costumes for the choir being robes made from bed sheets and blankets, there were also angels in this musical wearing white plastic robes. When the lights hit the angels, they would even shine a bit. (Which I think was the point.) But, to me, they looked like they were wearing oversized white kitchen garbage bags with their heads and arms popping out of strategically placed holes.

In the Easter musical this same church put on the next year (I was not in that musical), they had Jesus appearing, just risen from the grave, in a very similar shiny
white plastic outfit. To this day, that image of Jesus in the shiny white plastic kitchen garbage bag is ingrained in my head every time Easter comes around.

Again, the people of this church were wonderful, and they had great motives. They were good people, and the musical was very meaningful to some. But I could not imagine seriously inviting any of my non-churchgoing friends to this. (Unless it was a total goof for them, involving a couple of drinks and a desire for truly bizarre entertainment.) I think, overall, the whole musical almost felt like a parody of an elementary school Christmas pageant.

There’s a fine line between a bad musical and a musical that would be bad, if it weren’t for the fact that it was being put on by elementary-aged kids. When you see a children’s play, you can enjoy it being bad, even goofy. It’s expected for the most part, being a kids’ play and all. But when something is supposed to be good, even professional-looking, and stars adults instead, it can be really bad and hokey. It is a whole different thing. This was a whole different thing.

The confusion of a misfit shepherd

So what pushed me over the edge, what led me to duck down and hide on my hands and knees behind the choir on the actual night of the performance, was that as we walked onto the stage I looked out and saw all the people in the audience. This was not just a rehearsal anymore, there were a couple hundred people now looking up at us. As the music began and we were singing the opening number, something snapped in me. I panicked. At that moment the feeling of overwhelming truth hit me: Embarrassing music. Embarrassing costumes. Embarrassing props. Embarrassing acting.
My vividly pronounced thoughts of sheer horror were: *What in the world am I doing up here? What would one of my friends who doesn’t go to this church think if they saw me right now? What if someone I work with sees me up here and thinks I like this music? Oh, my God*—and I really meant the prayer of “Oh, my God”—*how did I end up here dressed in this chocolate brown bed sheet*?

So right as the choir began singing the opening song, I ducked down … and hid.

**The clash of punk meeting evangelical pop**

The incredible irony of all this, was that less than two years earlier I had been living in London playing in a punk and rockabilly band. Our band had broken up and we’d moved back to the US before I ended up at this church, but music was a major part of my life at that point and still is. This music I loved, punk and rockabilly, generally didn’t align with contemporary pop music at the time—and certainly had nothing in common with the music being performed on our church stage.

Rockabilly was born in the early 1950’s and went against the grain of the safe, popular music of the day. It was the experimental fusing of the rhythm and blues sound (what was happening on Beale Street in Memphis) with a country-western twist. Sam Phillips, who ran Sun Studio in Memphis, discovered and recorded classic rockabilly musicians like Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash and Jerry Lee Lewis. Other musicians and bands like The Johnny Burnette Trio, Little Richard, Gene Vincent, Bo Diddley, Eddie Cochran and Chuck Berry are musical heroes to me from this time period and genre, because they were innovative musically, visually and fashion-wise in their culture.
Similarly, punk music was a rebellion against the commercial mainstream music of the 1970’s. Punk was stripping down what had become a bloated beast of disco and arena rock to a raw garage band roots sound of music. Bands like The Clash, The Ramones and The Sex Pistols broke new musical ground, which shocked some but resonated with others of that culture and in that time period.

This was the music I totally resonated with.

I also loved the fashion and artistic expression of these musical genres. Both rockabilly and punk pioneered different expressions of fashion with clothing and hair styles. When you read biographies of these bands you find that their aesthetic was not just random. Two members of The Clash attended art school in England before forming the band. The Ramones and The Sex Pistols had a thought-through approach to what they wore and their graphics and image. This was the musical scene that I loved, and the band I played drums in played a mix of this type of music.

So, being immersed in that musical world and then finding myself on stage representing the world of evangelical church choir musical music was quite a contradiction for me. Everything about this church musical would have been blasphemy in the names of Johnny Cash and The Clash. I can say very confidently that it would have been utterly unthinkable to me in even the tiniest microscopic way that I’d be playing London pubs and clubs, drumming in a punk band one day and wearing a bed sheet in an evangelical church musical less than two years later—albeit ducked down behind the choir for fear of actually being seen.

So, the moment of rational thinking finally broke through and clicked in my head just as the church musical began: How did I get here?
I couldn’t just run off the stage, because everyone would see me. It was an older church building with stairs going up from the front and no side stage areas, so I was truly stuck. As I stared out into the crowd during that first song and they were all looking up at us, I practically began to hyperventilate, I felt so trapped. The blood was rushing to my head. Since I was in the last row of the choir, my only option was to duck, to drop down to my knees and actually hide behind the standing choir. When some of the choir moved from the back to the front of the stage, I had to crawl across the floor on my hands and knees like a frightened little monkey and position myself in a different spot in order to remain hidden. And I did stay hidden. For the entire musical.

Although it was all over with in about an hour, it felt like three or four to me, crouched down, hiding and crawling around behind the choir. The ending finally came with the entire choir putting their arms high up in the air, in unison as they sang the final dramatic note. The lights went out. The people applauded. It was finally over. As the choir moved off stage, I simply stood up and walked, as though I’d been with them the whole time.

I walked off stage and straight out the side door of the church building to my car, still wearing the brown sheet over my clothing, and drove home. I didn’t go to the reception afterwards or stay to talk to people who attended. I went home completely freaked out that I’d somehow allowed myself to go as far as I did with the whole thing.

And I have never sung in a church musical again.
Chapter 2: A Misfit Christian learning Music Lessons

“Why am I such a misfit?
I am not just a nit wit!
....Why don’t I fit in?”

-lyrics from “We’re A Couple of Misfits” from the Christmas classic movie ‘Rudolph the Red–Nosed Reindeer’

There is the classic Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer stop-motion animation Christmas movie that came out in 1964 which has a song about misfits. The story is about how Christmas is being celebrated and being prepared for in the North Pole. But Rudolph and Hermey the elf don’t feel like they fit in how Christmas is being orchestrated there. And they ran away from the whole thing because they felt like misfits. Well, I wasn’t in the North Pole, but I was in a Churchland musical and can say that I felt very much like Hermey and Rudolph in this celebration of Christmas. And as I journeyed on into Churchland, the feeling of being a Christian misfit in didn’t end with this musical but it continued on in very significant ways. But as I will explain later in this book, I believe like there was in the Rudolph movie, it turns out they weren’t the only misfits. There was a whole Island

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Of Misfits out there that they discovered. I ended up realizing I wasn’t alone either. You may very well be a misfit Christian in Churchland too.

Back to the musical and my misfit experience with it dressed up in a bed sheet and hiding on my hands and knees behind the choir. I do know now that not all church musicals are as bad or embarrassing as the one I described in the previous chapter. In fact, there are some church musicals that are extremely professional, creative, and the music used is not at all like what I described. But I think more of these musicals lean toward the embarrassing side than many church people may realize. I say this with hesitancy, as the people who put on these church musicals are very good-hearted people. The ones I worked with were truly loving people.

These people are putting on church musicals because of their love for God. Their motives are pure and wonderful as they just want to tell the biblical story of the birth of Jesus at Christmas and the story of the resurrection at Easter. And using musicals like the one I was in is just what many churches do, year after year, without even thinking about it. It’s Christmastime, so you put on a Christmas musical. It’s Easter, so you put on an Easter musical.

But there are many things about church and Christianity that are embarrassing—things that some Christians and the church may not recognize as such. We never have to be embarrassed about Jesus, but we sometimes can be quite embarrassed about what Christians have turned “church” and “Christianity” into.

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The whole musical experience was quite humiliating for me, but it came and went, and it became somewhat of a metaphor for my entry as a misfit into the organized church. I honestly almost didn’t make it. Many times I wanted to run from the church and Christianity. It was something I never expected to be part of. But I learned some lessons from the strange church musical experience.

1) Those in the church and choir loved the style of the songs and the musical. The difficult and perplexing part for me as I processed the bed sheets and the Neil Diamond-like music, was that everyone else in the choir was really excited about it. During the rehearsals several would be saying, “Dan, isn’t this going to be a great musical?” “This is such a wonderful song!” And I would nod in agreement, as I didn’t want to disagree. *Maybe they’re right*, I would think to myself.

I was just trying to fit into this new church community and my role of helping out in the youth ministry. *Maybe this is music that Jesus would like if he were walking around today*, I thought, and perhaps the other choir members knew better than me. But when the performance time came and the first note was sung, I knew I couldn’t fake going along with it anymore.

Thankfully, I know a lot has changed in the Christian music scene since this time period. So there is a lot better Christian music out there today than there was back then. But I can say pretty assuredly, that I wasn’t crazy and the music in this musical was truly weird music. It was not something peers of mine and friends I worked with would have liked. At least with the friends I was hanging
out with outside of Churchland, it would not have drawn them to the story of Christ’s birth, it would have had the opposite effect.

So for those within the evangelical Christian subculture of this church, this music and this musical was exciting, and it was good. As I said, my grandmother probably would have loved it. It might have even made her interested in Jesus as a result. But that’s my grandma. And I can say that for me and for my friends who were not part of the church, it would be uncomfortably embarrassing to watch, let alone be a part of.

But the part that sticks in my head to this day, is that just because a group within the church culture may understand and like something, does not mean those outside that church culture will. How many churches and Christians think what we’re doing is great, only when looked at from the outside, it isn’t? The problem is that since we talk to each other all the time and all have the same viewpoint, we don’t usually get around to discovering the outside perspective.

2) To someone on the outside the church, the musical could have represented very weird and confusing expressions of the church and Christianity.

These types of musicals happily happen each year in many churches. But this inner world of Churchland was not my land, and it wasn’t my friends’ land either. Stepping into this musical was stepping into an entirely different subculture.

I’m not talking about the obviousness of stepping into a New Testament culture representing the times, the clothing styles and life of Jesus. Most of us would feel out of place in first century Bethlehem. I’m talking about people stepping into this particular expression of church and Jesus, which involved weird
music, bed sheets, plastic angel outfits and poorly imitated Celine Dion-style music.

This musical and this culture of Churchland was what I was supposed to invite my non-churchgoing friends to? So they could understand the Christmas story of Jesus and identify with the church community and would want to come back and be a part?

This would not represent church well—and one of the pastors coming out at the end to do a wrap up wearing his somewhat goofy sparkling red and green Christmas tree sweater didn’t help the matter much.

[SIDE BOX: Churchland: n. the evangelical Christian subculture and all that goes with it including music, language, codes of approval and values.]

I imagine some of you may be thinking I’m being too particular and opinionated about petty things of style, but these seemingly petty things of the musical did project a message. I would not want my friends who weren’t churchgoers to experience them as any representation of the faith I had recently become part of.

Now, in fairness, the people in the choir were people I would have loved to introduce my friends to (most of them). But the music they sang and the costumes and the whole rest of it was not something I would ever have wanted to my friends to see. My friends would have only seen the outside projection of what the choir was doing in the musical, they would not have known the hearts of the people. The assumption would have been that the people singing this very weird music were very weird people and that church was also very weird.
But what I was actually most worried about went beyond the costumes and the music.

3) The musical wasn’t quite an accurate biblical story, but no one in the church questioned it because the church leaders endorsed it.

My discomfort went beyond the plastic dress code for angels. I believed the story being told sent confusing messages about church and Christianity. I wasn’t raised in the church and it wasn’t until my college years that I started even reading a Bible. But I had read the Christmas story enough from the Bible itself by this time to know the story of Jesus portrayed in the musical wasn’t quite accurate.

It felt like the Christmas story was being painted into a Disney fairytale. It was nice, and gave you emotional feelings from the music and the crescendos of the voices, just like you get when Snow White awakens from a deep sleep and the Prince kisses her. But reading the actual accounts from the New Testament, proves it wasn’t quite like that. In Churchland it seems we tend to “Disneyland” Bible stories, which ends up not teaching accurately, but so many people never look into it as they accept the Disneyland version of the story.

Having Mary and Joseph breaking immediately into a joyful and choreographed sentimental duet at the announcement of the birth of Jesus was an interesting departure from reality, not to mention the nonchalant way Mary, Joseph and their families took the incredibly bizarre news of Mary being pregnant while still a virgin. In the biblical narrative Mary actually did sing later on. But it wasn’t an instant response as soon as the announcement was given by the angel and Mary and Joseph celebrated as shown in the musical.
If we’re being historically and biblically accurate to Mary’s culture, she could have been stoned to death for being pregnant with someone else’s child while promised to Joseph. Her reputation and even her life could have been at stake. It must have been extremely scary at first as she and Joseph and their friends and families wrestled with this news. There must have been intense emotional wrestling with the reality of her pregnancy. Imagine Joseph’s initial reaction and horrible embarrassment and sense of betrayal he felt until he was spoken to by an angel to be told the truth of what happened. It must have been filled with so much angst, embarrassment, questions, fright and totally disrupting normal life with great intensity.

But that wasn’t shown at all in the musical.

Nor was the whole concept of the Kingdom of God and the whole understanding of how living in the shadow of Herod and the Roman government of that time was a major part of the Christmas story. And the horrific story which takes place after the birth of Herod the King ordering the slaughter of male infants and children under the age of two in Bethlehem\(^3\). This is all part of the Christmas story but it is so easy to get captured by only the nostalgic images of the star shining down on a manger on a winter Christmas night with angels singing. I am not trying to be a downer about Christmas. It was the miraculous night our Savior was born and truly joy to the world!\(^4\) I just think we don’t often tell the whole story and focus on the parts we like the most, which is then ignoring the whole of the biblical narrative. In the church I am part of on Christmas Eve we by no means go

\(^3\) Matthew 2:16.
into the story of Herod slaughtering the children. We focus on the joy of the Savior’s birth. So I am not suggesting in our musicals we then are adding that! But I wonder how many Christians understand what that story meant and Herod’s part in the Christmas story itself? And understand the whole of the story, not just one specific night of the story?

I understand it was just a musical and not a Bible study, but it felt like the actual story of Jesus birth had been sanitized and was being taught at a only a somewhat minimal and shallow level. In the unsanitized version, it was likely a cave that Jesus was born in, under a home, a place where the animals were stored. And, in this version, Jesus was probably laid in a dirty stone feeding trough, which was the manger.

But the baby in the musical didn’t cry, and he lay angelic-like in a perfectly clean and freshly built wooden manger. In fact, the manger and baby were lit with special colored lighting gels shining down on them, so that the Christ child emanated the “magical glow” of Christmas Eve.

I suppose the special lighting on the baby was to represent the star followed by the three kings, wearing crowns and bringing gifts to Jesus in the manger. But that misrepresents the biblical story too. When you read the Bible, you find that Jesus was not visited by these special guests until around two years later. In fact, the Bible actually says Jesus was in a house when they visited him and presented the gifts, not at the birthplace, in the manger. And the “Three Kings” represented in the musical weren’t even kings according to the Bible. They were *Magi*. Magi were non-Jewish religious astrologers who, from astronomical obser-

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5 Matthew 2:9-10.
vations, had inferred the birth of a great Jewish king. They came to Bethlehem to see the child king they believed was being born. The Magi may have been from Arabia, Babylon or somewhere else—we’re uncertain.

In fact, it’s likely there weren’t even three of them, like we always see it portrayed. The idea that there were “three kings” visiting Jesus in the manger came from a Christmas carol _We Three Kings_ written around 1860, by a pastor in Pennsylvania. From that Christmas carol came these images of three Kings that so many now think of as fact. And even the star itself, which is always how we think of the Christmas Eve portrait on Christmas cards and in this musical is not mentioned in the Bible as even being visible that night. The star—or whatever it was that guided the Magi—doesn’t show up until two years later when the Magi visited Jesus when he was a child in a house, not a babe in the manger on Christmas Eve.

Even the date we use today, December 25, was not actually the day of Jesus’ birth. It’s likely that Jesus was born in the Spring, not on December 25. Shepherds, in all likelihood, weren’t out in the fields during winter months, so many scholars think it was the Spring when this happened. December 25 was a date selected in the Third Century by church leaders of that time to counter-balance a holiday celebrating the birthdays of the various pagan gods. The Persian god Mithra, the Greek god Dionysus and Egyptian god Osiris had birthday celebrations that happened on December 25—all tied into the Winter Solstice. The church at that time felt designating an actual birth date for Jesus would help

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steer attention away from the pagan gods on December 25. Since no one knew the date of Jesus’ actual birth, this was simply a convenient and strategic designation.

I can totally see artistic license used when creating a musical to represent a historical event. But the troubling part was that I didn’t find too many people who knew artistic license had been taken. Most in the church thought there were actually three kings visiting Jesus at his birth in the manger, and that the star was above the manger on Christmas Eve. I even talked to an elder in this church (one the highest levels of leaders) who truly thought Jesus was actually born on December 25.

I know this musical was not meant to be an expository Bible study. It was a church Christmas musical. These things are trivial (more or less) with the basic message of Jesus being born as Savior to the world. I also fully understand that musicals are creative expressions. Portraying something differently than it happened was not endangering the ultimate message of Jesus. But even so, I wish the facts of the Christmas narrative were laid out more correctly.

And the bigger question to me was, if the musical was teaching this not-quite-accurate birth of Jesus story (perceived as fact by many in the audience), then what else could the church be teaching that wasn’t accurate or true? What else was being taught in church that wasn’t accurate, but was accepted by the people of Churchland because it was taught from the leaders or from a musical? And why didn’t people in the church ask more questions or realize the story in the musical wasn’t in full alignment with the Bible story? Why don’t we more accurately study and portray what is in the Bible? The tension, the difficulty and even
the horror stories within it. There are beautiful wondrous stories of course throughout the entire Bible. But we often do Disneyland-the-Bible. We create nice little Noah and the Ark cartoons, toys and videos telling that story. When our daughters were toddlers someone gave them a cute little plastic toy ark with animals. The little plastic Noah looked like a happy little Santa Claus type of figure. Yet, as we recreate the story of Noah and the Ark, we don’t generally include the part about how many families and children were drowned and killed as a result of the flood\(^7\). Or how Noah got drunk and passed out naked in his tent after the ark landed.\(^8\) I spoke about this recently in the church I am part of and joked how maybe in these toy sets of Noah and the Ark we need to include a small bottle to put in his hand and removable clothing for the tent scene after. (Of course I am kidding and would not want our daughters to have that new and improved Noah and the Ark toy set!) They will learn the whole story in time. But it is interesting how in Churchland we do often avoid some of the difficult stories and questions. And some of these are the exact things about the Bible getting criticized today as well by the rise of the new atheists and others. I will be addressing this very topic in the “Do You Like Jesus But Not The Church? follow up to this book\(^9\). We often avoid the difficult parts of the Bible and we can Disneyland the Bible. And the weirdest part for me entering into Churchland was how I didn’t hear too often any questions about the more difficult issues of the Bible. The focus was generally on

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\(^7\) Genesis 7:4.  
\(^8\) Genesis 9:20-21.  
\(^9\) Dan Kimball, Do You Like Jesus But Not The Church? Exploring the Difficult Questions about Christianity and the Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) see the web site xxx.xxxxxxx.com for further info. and back pages of this book.
the clean and helpful parts and often ignoring the difficult and not so clean and tidy parts.

4) I didn’t realize how easy it was to get sucked into this strange Churchland. During the time of the musical itself, I had these kinds of questions. But to question and press some things—whether about musical style or the Bible story—may have caused the choir leader to think I was causing trouble or that I was questioning the church. Or, worse, questioning the story of the birth of Jesus, since this musical represented the biblical story. And no one else questioned these things, that I was aware of. So it was easy to keep quiet and not stir things up, and I felt all alone in my questions.

Because there truly was community happening—and most of us were more concerned with social activities and meeting others—the questions I had and uncomfortable feelings about the musical got easily pushed to the side. We all were busy in our lives. Some with jobs, some with families—the day-to-day pace of life consumed us. We figured the leaders all knew what to do and everyone pretty much went along with the flow. It was so easy to just be excited about the energy and momentum happening in the church. And because I was making new friends in the church, I didn’t have to do much “outside of the church looking in at the church” thinking. It was so easy to just be part of this subcultural bubble I call Churchland which was quite safe and cozy.

Until the night of the musical.
It wasn’t until I was jolted back, the night of the performance, that I began thinking about a lot of things—things beyond musical style and costumes. I began thinking more about what church really is. About what church leaders teach about theology. About the danger of getting inwardly focused as a Christian and losing any connection with how other people perceive Christians and the church. As I began to think about these things, some very uncomfortable questions arose.

And that’s just from a church musical.

**The Adventures of Christian Misfits**

I tell this story, as in so many ways it represents a major part of my entry into the land of church. I had gotten lost in Churchland and had a wake-up call at that musical. As you will soon read, I had some crazy experiences trying to figure out what “church” was. I was a misfit in this new world I was entering. Many of the experiences I had almost made me drop out and never want to be part of a church again. I easily could have lost trust in any type of “organized” church. I could have easily given up.

But I ended up staying in the very church that put on that musical.

In fact, that church ironically ended up being a major, major joy in my life. That church gave me the chance to serve in ministry, which eventually led to me being on staff at a church. So God used that church to shape me in many wonderful ways in understanding what it means to follow Jesus. (Despite the music.)

But the adventure of sorting out what “church” was and was meant to be was not easy. I imagine there are many misfit Christians like I was who have had experiences which were not so pleasant with the church or Christianity. There is
so much incredibly weird stuff with Christianity and church to sort through. There are many people today who understandably want nothing at all to do with church or Christianity as it represents “organized religion” to them. There are many who don’t trust church leaders for a whole variety of understandable reasons. There are many who feel the church and Christianity are only for the dogmatic and close-minded among us. They feel that true spirituality shouldn’t be about doctrines but about love. And they haven’t seen love in many Christians churches but mainly fear and division. There are many who feel church is not a safe place to ask questions, especially if the questions are possibly challenging what a church is teaching. There are many who have experienced judgment from the church and been wounded. The truth is, there are some really bizarre things that have happened in the church throughout history.

And it’s often tough to admit you’re a “Christian” these days, because there are many embarrassing things out there done by Christians. Like when you go to a concert or a sporting event and outside the stadium there’s a “Christian” street preacher holding up a big sign with lists of sins and flames on it yelling out as people pass. Or the scandals that make the news every time a Christian leader causes embarrassment with something they’ve done or things they’ve said. Or the way the church has too often twisted the Bible into a political and agenda-driven religion. Or how we feel when we hear people say Christians don’t really know their Bibles and that there is “evidence” it’s really mythical and based on other versions of ancient stories and faiths. Or the discomfort that stirs inside when you hear strong voices claiming religion and the church have been causes of hatred.
and wars in the world throughout history. Or how about the uneasy feeling you have when you read Bible verses that say women “must be silent” in church, and you begin to wonder if the Bible is chauvinistic. Or what about how you don’t quite know how to react when you hear someone talk about how arrogant it is for Christians to think they hold the truth and everyone else and every other world faith is wrong. After all, is it even possible that Jesus is the only way to God and everyone else in our culture today is entirely wrong? Or is it true that the church is hateful and judgmental? Or homophobic and antigay?

So if you are a Christian, it’s likely you feel embarrassed about some of these things, and these are much more serious than a simple church musical.

**The church Jesus started is a beautiful church**

The hope I have in all this, is that I learned lessons from that church musical. As bad it is was and as embarrassing as it was, it taught me to never forget the danger of getting caught up in the bubble of Churchland. It’s far too easy to do that as a Christian. And for those who aren’t Christians, I fully understand how weird the church can come across to you. It’s accurate that sometimes the church has done horrible things. But I can say that more often than not, the church isn’t as crazy as we appear. As I will share later, it is the loudest voices and extremes that often paint the church a certain way, and I believe there are enough Christians who are tired of it and want to change it that we can change it. And I also believe that all those other things do not represent the church Jesus spoke of or what the New Testament taught that church should be like.
The church that Jesus started was not about creating a Christian subculture consumed with its own music, language, exclusivity, self-preservation and inward focus. It was about creating communities of people who are in the world and serving the world in Jesus name, in love and truth. It’s so very easy for those of us who are Christians to slowly get sucked into the Christian bubble, even though we don’t think it’s happening to us. I know I didn’t. In our churches there are plenty of social activities to go to and we stay quite busy. And every Easter or Christmas we have our church musicals to go to.

Through time we slowly can become citizens of Churchland. Churchland is the somewhat comfortable, inward-focused subculture and world we have this tendency to create with other Christians. Churchland is where we can hide from the embarrassments of extreme Christians who give us a bad name. And Churchland is a place where we can usually avoid thinking too much about these uncomfortable questions. In Churchland we can settle for a thirty minute sermon on a very complex problem and then not question the preacher (or the sermon) too much after that, since no one else we hang out with does. The pastor who gave the sermon seems to have confidence in what he or she said, so we don’t have to think much more about it. Our lives are busy, we have our own problems. And since we have Christian friends, we just let life go on and somewhat ignore how our “musical” is coming across to the world around us.

**A hope for a church and Christianity beyond Churchland**

I know my hope is to discover that there are more and more of us Christians who aren’t satisfied with how the musical is coming across. We know that
the church and Christianity is much more than the often repeated negative stereotypes we see in our culture. There are many of us tired of hiding down behind a choir in embarrassment over how the musical in Churchland is coming across. We’re tired of church and Christianity being known as a judgmental, homophobic, chauvinist, fundamentalist and organized religion that puts out bad music. And many Christians want to change that.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, I’ll be diving into some theological issues such as how we view the Bible and fundamentalism, the church and chauvinism, sexuality, pluralism, hell, and world religions in the book “Do You Like Jesus, But Not The Church?: Exploring Uncomfortable Questions About Christianity and the Church”. However, the book you’re holding was written as a hopeful look at the beautiful way the church was and is supposed to be, despite the messiness. And why the church needs us to help change the ways it has gone astray.

This book also looks at the perceptions of church that confuse people outside it. I will go into some of my personal journey into Churchland and the things that almost made me want nothing to do with the church or Christianity: issues like the church judging others (a huge criticism today) and the church being organized religion, and the subculture Christians create as they separate from the world. So after I share some of my personal entry into the church, I will then address some of the critical issues surrounding the church.

In this book we will look at the difference between being a judgmental Christian (which is not in line with Jesus’ teaching) and judging like Jesus. We’ll
look at the difference between organized religion and a faith that organizes itself for mission. We’ll also explore the important distinction between going to church and being the church.

I’m writing this book in hopes of being one of many voices who are proclaiming that there is hope in the church, and that we can be part of the change in making the church align with a biblical understanding of church. I’m writing this book to give hope to the misfits out there who may not fit in most churches. I am writing this for those who may not trust or understand the church or Christians, to perhaps gain some further insight into the often strange world of evangelical Churchland.

I will share some of my personal entry into Churchland in the next couple of chapters, and I think it’s important, because our backgrounds shape our thinking. I don’t necessarily even like writing about my own story, but perhaps you will be able to relate to some of it. And why I probably wouldn’t like Christians if I wasn’t one.

Let me explain.
Chapter 3: I probably wouldn’t like Christians if I wasn’t one

“Christians are hard to tolerate, I don’t know how Jesus does it.”

--Bono

Although I’m a Christian, quite honestly, if I wasn’t one I don’t think I probably would like Christians. That might seem like a contradictory and odd thing to say. But the reason I say it is because if I hadn’t been part of some wonderful churches and experienced Christians who lived the way I believe Jesus taught his followers to live, most of my judgments and perceptions of Christians and the world of churches would only be from the outside.

My entry into the evangelical Christian world was like I stepped into a weird musical complete with all types of strange characters and scenes. Like in a musical, my adventures in Churchland were filled with all types of odd Christian personalities popping up in different scenes, which were humorous, confusing, and even frightening at times. The whole thing seemed like something I couldn’t relate to, and I couldn’t imagine it’s what Jesus would give approval to.

I didn’t set out to not like Christians, but the ones I generally encountered were certainly not ones I could identify with and I wasn’t draw to their message either. So I can say, ironically, that I probably wouldn’t like Christians if I didn’t end up becoming one.

My first encounter with an evangelical Christian in Paramus Park Mall

Every one of us has a story we speak and live from—or write from in my case. Our story shapes everything about us. My story I shared in the first chapter about me ending up in that Christmas musical shaped my thinking. Our back-
grounds do create our unique stories and perspectives. In fact, I always try and read about an author’s background when I read a book. Even when I see a movie, I enjoy finding out who the screenwriter is and what her background might be, what other screenplays she has written, so I can appreciate the context of what she wrote all the more. So I hope that by sharing some of my story and the characters I met in the odd Churchland musical, you will then be able to more understand the context from which this book was birthed and what you’ll be reading.

My story is that I grew up not regularly attending any church. I was born and raised New Jersey, and New Jersey was a wonderfully weird place to grow up in. I grew up somewhat near where they filmed the HBO television series The Sopranos. I had the New Jersey soundtrack heritage of Bruce Springsteen and Bon Jovi. I grew up right near the towns where John Travolta and Tom Cruise went high school in northeastern New Jersey, near New York City. It is a suburban town where the caricatures of Seinfeld’s New Yorkers met Sylvester Stallone’s Rocky, who in turn met the characters of Saturday Night Fever. Those fictional situations and fictional people were actually very close to the reality of those I grew up with and around.

Growing up in New Jersey, I didn’t think too seriously about religion or God or Jesus. I did have a few church experiences when my parents would take us to a church, drop us off and then pick us up. But it wasn’t until I had my first exposure with an evangelical Christian that I first was confronted into thinking about Jesus. It happened at Paramus Park shopping mall in Paramus, New Jersey when I was an 8th grader. My friend Ralph and I were hanging out at the mall, as
junior highers do. We were trying to see if we could find any high school girls to
talk to since we’d soon be freshmen. I recall thinking that if we wore our rock band KISS and Led Zeppelin t-shirts that perhaps a high school girl would see us and be impressed and talk with us. It was our junior high fantasy to meet a high school girl, so to the mall we went.

While we were hanging out, absolutely not a single female of any age whatsoever gave us a glance. So while we stood around awkwardly trying to look cool standing near the waterfall that was inside the mall, a guy who was in his mid-twenties walked up to us out of the blue. He sort of had this hippy kind of a look. His hair was a little past shoulder length, and he was wearing a tan fringe suede jacket, like he was Daniel Boone.

He abruptly walked up to us and without even saying hello, the first thing he said was “Do you know Jesus?”

It caught us quite off guard because that was a very odd question to start a conversation with, especially from a Daniel Boone-like stranger. But at least talking to someone made us feel like we weren’t such failures in securing any female attention, so we began talking to this fellow. In hindsight, I now understand he was “evangelizing” us, but at the time I had no idea what he was doing or any idea of what his motives were.

Asking us if we “knew Jesus”, was really an incredibly weird question. We had absolutely no idea how to answer that and sort of squirmed uncomfortably, not saying anything in response, but just standing there in silence, looking at him blankly. I did know that Jesus had something to do with God, and was called
“God’s son” and that he had something to do with Easter a long time ago. But he asked if we knew Jesus like we might possibly be friends with Jesus, as though he lived in Paramus and I might be able to tell this guy where to find him. But asking us if we knew Jesus was like someone asking me if I knew George Washington or another historical figure from the past.

As Ralph and I continued to waffle and not respond to the “Do you know Jesus?” question, he then asked us: “Do you know if you are going to heaven or hell?” So, from our perspective, first he’s hitting us with a question that felt like he wanted directions to where Jesus lived in Paramus and then he was asking about our deaths and where we’d go when we died. We’d only met this man moments earlier. We were 8th graders in a shopping mall, dealing with identity and self-esteem issues, blemishes, puberty and coming into adolescence. We were thinking about meeting girls. We were not really pondering whether or not we were going to hell or heaven at that point in our lives.

**You’re going to be thrown in the lake of fire, so you better pray with me**

When we couldn’t muster an answer to either his “Do you know Jesus?” or his “Do you know if you are going to heaven or hell?” questions, he then took the opportunity to pull out a Bible—a little Bible that had been tucked in his backpack—and he then turned to some pages and pointed out verses he had underlined in colored pencil. I think now they were probably passages from the book of Revelation, because the verses he read were about being thrown into a lake of fire if your name wasn’t in some book. He read about how we’d be tormented for all eternity. He would read a line from the Bible, pause, and then look up at us
straight in our eyes as if to connect us with the seriousness of what he was saying. Then he would continue to read several passages about hell, fire, the devil, demons and eternal damnation. Now, as 8th graders, an adult telling us these things in such a very serious manner was literally freaking us out. Hearing this stuff from him, in this way, was terrifying.

We became fearfully fixated on every word he was saying as he continued to read Bible verses which were all quite horrifying. I cannot remember all he read or shared about, except he kept saying that Jesus died, and because he died then we could all avoid hell. He finally got to a point where he stopped and then asked: “Do you want to pray, so you don’t get thrown into the lake of fire?”

We didn’t have to think too much.

We were both were just petrified enough to not want to be thrown into this fiery lake that he was reading about. As 8th graders, we weren’t questioning the validity of what he was saying. He was an adult, and we had just heard this grown man tell us all these scary things that would happen to us if we didn’t do as he asked.

Looking back on this now as a father and as an adult, it’s really freaky to think we did this with a total stranger. But this man led us out into the parking lot of Paramus Park mall where we found a little grassy parking median. He asked us to kneel down in the grass with him, and then we repeated some words he told us to say after him. We prayed that day what I now know as the classic Sinners Prayer used by evangelists—the go-to prayer, if you will, for anyone wanting to explain how to pray to become a Christian. But at the time, all my junior high
mind was thinking was: “I don’t want to go to the lake of fire. I don’t want to go to that lake of fire. Please don’t send me to that lake of fire.”

As we knelt down to pray in that grass, one thing I remember thinking was that I didn’t care if anyone saw me. I was very self-conscience of myself—as any junior higher would be—but for the few moments we were kneeling down in public in the middle of the afternoon, it just felt like something I was supposed to do. It oddly felt right saying that prayer. I still don’t know why it felt right, but I wasn’t embarrassed to be out there in public kneeling down and praying. So for a few fleeting moments, I just figured having people see me kneeling in the grass and praying was nothing compared to going into the lake of fire he’d just described. So we repeated the words that he told us to pray.

You’re now saved and not going to hell – here’s a sticker and goodbye

After we were done, it was a little awkward.

Okay, maybe more than a little awkward. Our eyes were shut for several minutes during the prayer, so opening them up and then seeing it was broad daylight with shoppers still walking all around us was a weird thing. We got up from our kneeling positions, and the man then said something about us now being “saved” and he shook our hands quite strongly. He gave us a little sticker that said something like “I found Jesus.” Then he said a pretty quick goodbye and dashed off into the parking lot, sort of like some kind of superhero who quickly disappears after a rescue. He left us standing there in the grass wondering what we just did, holding onto our “I found Jesus” stickers.
Ralph and I then walked back into the mall and still found no girls to do the 8th grade flirt thing with, so we headed home. We didn’t say a single word about what we’d just done. I think we both felt it was so strange, we didn’t even know how to put words to it or even what to think about what we’d just done. It would have felt almost like a strange dream if it weren’t for the “I found Jesus” stickers we were each still holding.

In fact, the only time Ralph and I ever talked about what happened was the very next morning at school. I awkwardly asked him what he thought about what we had done the day before in the grassy median. He sheepishly answered, “I don’t know.” And that was that.

Although we never talked about it further, I continued to have an unsettling feeling when I thought about why an adult stranger dressed like Daniel Boone would walk up to kids who were 13 or 14 years old, read Bible verses to them, and tell them they were going to burn in hell. I assume he was driven by a sincere motive of not wanting my friend and me to go there, but it was quite a weird thing if you think about it.

{{ BOX: Adventure observation: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” – Psalms 111:10.}}

In the Hebrew Bible, in the book of Psalms and also Proverbs there are several passages that speak about the fear of God being a good thing. Not a cringing, scary fear like in a zombie or vampire horror or slasher film and you are scared with a monster chasing you and wanting to kill you. But it is a holy fear. A realization that God is real and there is no one or nothing as big, incredible, awe-
some, or amazing as God. And the realization that we are humans and God is God and the Creator creates a holy fear – a holy reverence of God. A holy reverence for recognizing that this life is not in our control and one day we all will die and as the saying goes “meet our Maker”. And from this, there is a reverent holy fear.

But this holy reverence actually does cause us to seek God all the more and seek “wisdom” and “knowledge” as couple of Scriptural passage says\textsuperscript{31}. I didn’t necessarily think having someone scare me about hell as my way of learning about Jesus was the best approach and one I don’t use now. But what it did was to give me enough jolt of “holy fear” and “reverence” to begin thinking about as I got older and entered into my college years. And I believe this holy reverence for God that was implanted in me, did cause me to seek wisdom and knowledge. So I believe that although the scare tactics used was not explained very well nor was the love, grace and peace that Jesus spoke of mentioned. It did implant a holy fear which like the passages say – caused me to want to seek wisdom and knowledge later on. }

**Christians = Shiny Happy People Holding Hands**

My next serious encounter with evangelical Christians came during my college years at Colorado State University. In the back of my mind, I was always wondering about that prayer I said as a junior high student. I had a respect for God and knew Jesus was somehow connected to God, but that was really about all I still understood or knew. I tried unsuccessfully to read a Bible a few times. But it didn’t really make any difference in my life and I never really equated God and Jesus with the prayer I said with the man who scared me about hell. Through my

\textsuperscript{31} Psalms 111:10; Job 28:28; Proverbs 9:10; Proverbs 14: 27; Proverbs 23:17-18
high school years and into college, I never had any type of bottom-out experience and my life was going well overall. I was having fun, had lots of friends and got into a punk-rockabilly band in college, so music became a major part of my life.

Yet throughout that time I would often wonder late at night, when I was about to go to sleep, about the prayer I had said as a junior higher. What did that prayer mean? What did it mean to be “saved”? Who is God? Can I know Him personally or is God just an abstract concept? What did we do back then when we prayed with that Daniel Boone looking guy? Did I just do that to avoid hell? Is Christianity more than just avoiding hell, whatever that even is? In my not-to-deep ponderings about it, I would often think about church and Christianity and wonder if Christianity was just the religion of suburban America. What if I was born in India? Would I be a Muslim or a Hindu? What if I was born in China? Would I be Buddhist?

I was becoming increasingly aware in my college years of the various world faiths, and that Christianity was not by any means the only religion out there. I began thinking about these things more and more. No one was prompting me to think about them. I didn’t have Christian friends who were trying to persuade me to consider these things. I just felt that it was almost impossible not to think about whether or not God was real, what Christianity was, and what was religion, and why were there so many of them around the world.

I read in the school newspaper about a meeting right on campus where a lot of Christian college students went on Wednesday nights. So, in my exploration of Christianity, I thought I would give this meeting a try. I had absolutely no ex-
pectations of what it would be like, as I’d never been to a meeting of this type before. I went one night to the campus classroom where the group met, feeling a little nervous about it. I didn’t tell any of my friends I was going, I just went on my own. As I got near the doorway to the classroom, I could hear music being played and clapping sounds. I cautiously peeked in the doors, into the rear of the large classroom and distinctly remember seeing a wide sea of pastel colors. I am not exaggerating, as it seemed almost everyone there was wearing white, pink, light blue, or aqua green. This was in the 1980’s, and I look back on this meeting thinking that these Christians must have all been into the television show *Miami Vice*, because on that television show the main characters always wore light aqua blue and pinks. As I emotionally reeled back from the visual fashion shock of seeing the flood of pastels, the music was the next sensory jolt I had to deal with. The music they were playing was unknown to me, but it consisted of very peppy songs with everyone clapping and singing along. I had never seen such a thing. I had been to a lot of concerts, but not where everyone was smiling and clapping this intensely and singing all together.

The speaker got up (wearing a pink golf shirt of course) and was also incredibly happy and smiling as he talked. As I listened, I noticed he used a lot of Christian lingo and rhetoric, which I didn’t understand, but I could tell everyone else did, as they responded with shouts and clapping to certain part of his message. As I stood in the very back and scanned the room and saw the clapping happy people, all I knew was that there was no possible way I could relate to this
group, this meeting, this type of music, the clapping and singing, the pastels, and the cheery disposition everyone seemed to have.

At the time, I was in a band and totally into the rockabilly and punk music scene. I even dressed in all black, and this pastel sea of giddiness seemed like the antithesis of everything I was personally about back then. Now, I know these types of things are so incredibly surface and trite and that we shouldn’t make judgments about people like this, but the fact is … I did. I wasn’t trying to look past the outside and see the true inner reality of what was happening, I just know I visited this Christian meeting and it was pretty whacky looking and whacky feeling to me. Whoever these Christians were was enough to make me want to run out of that place. I stood in the back leaning against the wall for about fifteen or twenty minutes, both horrified and morbidly curious at the same time. I felt like an intruder observing some strange tribal rite that I wasn’t supposed to see. Someone finally did notice me leaning against the rear wall and began walking over to me, I’m assuming to say hello and maybe to invite me to come in closer, but when I saw him coming I just bolted out the doors.

The lyrics of the REM song “Shiny Happy People Holding Hands” summarizes my experience:

Shiny happy people holding hands
Shiny happy people laughing

There’s no time to cry
Happy, happy
Put it in your heart
Where tomorrow shines
Gold and silver shine

32 From the song Shiny Happy People album, Out of Time by REM, lyrics and music by Berry/Buck/Mills/Stipe (Warner Brothers Records, 1991).
That song truly reflects what this group of Christians seemed like to me: somewhat harmless, odd, pretty goofy, and not in touch with culture (or to some degree poor imitators of culture). But, if they minded their business, then no harm was done to others. They seemed very “nice” from the brief exposure I had to them, and they didn’t seem to bother anyone. So my impression was that Christians were kind of a happy, goofy, smiling, singing, clapping sort of people.

**Christians = whispering people doing strange rituals on orange carpets**

I was still consistently wondering what I did when I prayed that prayer with the man in the shopping mall as a junior higher, but I felt I wasn’t going to find the answers I was looking for with the shiny-happy-people. So I began looking for some books that talked about what Christianity was, what Christians believed, and especially I began looking into the origins of the Bible. I figured that whatever Christians believed had to come from the Bible, so my primary interest (naturally) was looking into where the Bible came from.

For some reason, I had a growing sense that I should try and find a church to help me in this search. Somewhere that I could ask questions. I was living in a dormitory on campus and there was a church right across the street from my dorm. So once again, out of curiosity, I thought I would give another Christian meeting a try to see what it would be like. This time a friend of mine named Randy came with me that I had met at school. We walked into the church building and instantly it felt very much the opposite of the shiny-happy-people experience. It was truly a “church” building with stained glass, a pulpit and fancy looking re-
igious symbols around the room. When you walked in, there was organ music
playing, and to this day just hearing an organ immediately puts me in a strange
state of mind. I don’t know why, but organ music feels somewhat funeral par-
lorish to me. Or like Andre Lloyd Webber’s *Phantom of the Opera*. So we walked
down the middle of the aisle and took our seat in one of the pews. Now, pews are
odd things too, as I don’t know too many places apart from bleachers in gyms or
at football games where you still sit squished in rows all on the same bench. But
we sat down in the pew and waited as people sat next to us and the room grew
fuller.

Unlike the mood of the college campus meeting, people at this gathering
were very solemn and serious. Whispering to one another was the loudest anyone
would talk. I actually still remember the carpet of this building, as I had time to
look down at it while waiting. The carpet in this room was an orange-red color,
and they must have recently cleaned it, as it had fairly strong chemical odor. Be-
tween the carpet color and odor and the sound of the organ I was feeling a bit
nauseous being in that room.

And then it began.

With no warning, the organ stopped for a moment and out of a side door
up at the front came a man wearing a robe. I had seen religious leaders on televi-
sion wearing robes, so I wasn’t too surprised by that part, though I had never
looked at one closely before. It was a white robe with some sort of green colored
scarf draping down over his shoulders. There were symbols on the scarf draped
over his shoulders, but I didn’t know what those symbols were. I now believe they
were the “chi-ro” symbol which is formed by superimposing the first two letters in the Greek spelling of the word Christ. But to me at that time not knowing that, it looked like a secret symbol of some secret society. The outfit and robe was very nicely color coordinated, though it looked odd and I was wondering why they wear those robes in the daytime. Robes seem like they are to be worn in the morning when you wake up, not during the day. The only person I can think of who wears a robe in the day is either Hugh Hefner or a courtroom judge. The arms of the robe got wider closer to his hands. So as he walked in and spread his arms out to do some sort of formal greeting, the robe arms looked like wings. He became almost superhero looking, like he was about to fly up in the air with those wings and the secret superhero logo which was on his green and gold stripe-looking scarf draping over his shoulder.

After he welcomed people, he had everyone read from a book that was stuck behind the pews. The reading alternated back and forth from him to those in the pews, and all with monotone voices. It seemed to me like the kind of chanting I remembered hearing in a horror movie about some sort of witch coven. Randy and I didn’t do it, but we watched others as they did. The organ player started up again, and people sang an unknown song or two, during which we just stood there again looking down into the pages of the book that had the lyrics. It was less uncomfortable looking down into the book. (In fact, the hope was that if we kept our faces in the books, people wouldn’t notice as much that we weren’t singing.)

The man in the robe gave a talk of some sort, which felt more like a dramatic reading or acting to me. He used various voice reflections, and the words he
used weren’t ones we use in everyday language. He had a pretty formalized method of saying everything. And then, without warning or any explanation of what was next (or at least I don’t recall any explanation), people began going forward, up the aisle to the front, to kneel down on the low bench that went across the whole front stage. You could tell they knew what they were doing, as they went up row by row, like they’d been doing this for years. The man in the robe held up a big silver goblet into the air and began saying some words as he raised a hand up to highlight he was holding the goblet. At first I thought he was going to do some sort of magic trick and pull something out of the goblet. But then I realized he was saying some sort of memorized and formal prayer. Then I thought he was actually praying to the goblet, since he was staring at it like he was speaking directly to it. He then whispered some words to the person kneeling down on the far right and he handed the person the cup. I couldn’t tell what they were doing after he gave the person the cup, as the kneeling bodies were blocking the view to those of us still in the pews.

But then it came time for our row to go upfront. Randy and I looked at each other a little panicked because we were stuck. The problem was that all the people in each pew went at one time. You couldn’t let someone pass you because it was too tight between the rows. So we had to go with the flow and get up and go up front with our row, or we’d really stand out. I was definitely curious what was happening up there, so we walked silently to the front and knelted down on this padded step thing, taking our place in the row.
The man in the robe whispered some words to the person way on my right and gave the person the cup. This person dipped a little tiny cracker of some sort in it and ate it. The person then passed the cup to the person to their left and whispered words to that person who repeated the same thing. It went down the row and then it was my turn and the woman next to me said something about “This is blood and it is for you” and something about “flesh.” So, I went through the actions I saw the others do, not knowing what I was doing, but then I was supposed to repeat the words to Randy, who was next to me, and pass him the cup. The problem was, I couldn’t make sense of exactly what the lady said to me when she passed me the cup. So I took the cup and passed it Randy and didn’t say anything. I just gave him eye contact and sort of shrugged and he took the cup. When he was done, he then took the cup and hesitated for a moment as he was going to pass it to the man to his left. But he knew he was supposed to say some words, and since I didn’t say anything to him he was stumped. So he looked the person in the eye, and with great confidence he handed him the cup, saying: “Here is the cup of wonder.”

When he said “the cup of wonder”—which was not even close to the words he was supposed to say—the awkward tension of it all burst out in me, and I laughed about as loud as anyone could laugh. And I then began to intensely giggle because I knew it was terrible to be laughing kneeling up at this altar. Here we were in a very solemn moment, kneeling down at this altar, and I was giggling intensely and could not stop. As I did, Randy then began giggling. Everyone kneeling in the row looked over, and the man in the robe stared at us with a questioning
look. I felt terrible and as I tried to control my giggling but couldn’t. My eyes watered and the giggle wouldn’t stop, no matter how hard I tried to hold it in. I remember the feeling of the railing that we were kneeling up against was actually shaking back and forth because we both were giggling so intensely.

All I know is that I quickly got up and practically ran down the middle aisle, out of the room and out the back. I didn’t even look over to Randy before I ran out or say anything to him. I just knew I had to get out of there. But, as it turned out, he was right behind me. We both kept laughing after we made it outdoors, and began walking back to our dorm. We knew it was wrong, and I felt so bad. But at the same time it was such a weird experience, we were almost glad it happened and relieved to have gotten out of there.

Now today, reflecting back on that, I feel absolutely terrible about it. I can’t imagine if I was helping serve communion in our church and two college students burst out laughing in front of me and ran out of the room. Communion is the sacred and holy time of remembering what Jesus did on the cross and the juice in the cup represents his blood and the bread his body. So what a tragic thing that we didn’t understand that and by no means it was a time to be laughing. But then again, we didn’t know what the heck was going on. I would hope that I’d have explained to them what they were doing before they came up front, and that I’d have allowed those who didn’t want to come up for communion to not come up at all. I would hope I’d have instructed them that it was okay to let others out of your pew and that you could just sit back down if you didn’t want to participate. I hope
that I would’ve explained more about what they were doing, instead of assuming
that everyone would know.

I can also now respect tradition and why certain church leaders may wear
robes and speak in a certain format and with different wording. But to a 19 year
old who never saw that before and wasn’t a churchgoer, it really did feel like the
robe was a strange superhero outfit designed for flight up into the clouds by a man
who used the voice of a Shakespearian actor as he talked to a magical cup held
high in the air.

These experiences with the shiny-happy-people and the whispering-
orange-carpet-people were harmless overall. It sure didn’t make me want to get to
know other Christians in these groups, since they seemed so incredibly different
than me. I didn’t sense too much creativity from the limited exposure I had with
them. But they still seemed harmless, and non intrusive and probably very nice.
But I soon discovered that they aren’t the only kind of Christians there were out
there. Little by little, I started becoming more aware that not all Christians left
you alone, and not all seemed too happy, peppy or shiny either.

Soon, I met my first mean and judgmental Christians.
Chapter 4: I see mean people

“I love the idea of the teachings of Jesus Christ and the beautiful stories... But the reality is that organized religion doesn’t seem to work. It turns people into hateful lemmings and it’s not really compassionate.”

– Elton John

“Repent! God’s wrath is coming against you!”

“Judgment is near!”

These were words I could hear being shouted in courtyard outside the Colorado State University library. At first I couldn’t see anyone, but I followed the loud voice I did see a crowd and above their heads was a man standing on a planter shouting. He looked pretty normal, was about 30 years old and dressed like everyone else. But he was yelling and pointing at people while holding a Bible. I was with a girl as walking out of the library after studying and we slowed down to see what was going on. I didn’t even know what the word “Repent” actually meant. I’m guessing a lot of others didn’t either. But he was yelling the word a lot.

The whole scene was definitely so cartoon-like with this total caricature of a street preacher and everything you would imagine one to be. But it was so over-the-top that it felt almost humorous at first, as if this guy was just acting out what a street preacher was supposed to be like. Like he was intentionally acting out a part in the musical of Churchland. But it wasn’t humorous when he began pointing his finger at people while yelling, and it wasn’t funny when he pointed his finger directly at the girl I was walking with and shouted: “Whore!”

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33 *The Observer*, Sunday, November 12, 2006, [http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2006/nov/12/popandrock](http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2006/nov/12/popandrock) (accessed August 9, 2009).
He then continued pointing his finger at others and calling out various things like “drunkard,” “immoral” etc. We walked away rather quickly, as he had lost our attention and it definitely wasn’t funny anymore.

He didn’t even know the girl I was with or any of these people he was pointing at and accusing of such serious things. And there he was, with a Bible in his other hand. So, to the dozens of students who walked by him, he was a living, breathing representation of what a “Christian” was. Because of my experiences with evangelizing Daniel Boone, the shiny-happy-people and the whispering-orange-carpet-people, I knew by that time, that most Christians did not stand on planter walls and yell out “whore” to total strangers. But even so, it was not very comforting that an alleged “Christian” was acting like this. And I was glad that the girl I was walking with didn’t realize that I was seriously exploring what it meant to be a Christian.

You sure didn’t see the local Buddhists or Hindus going around doing that. Over the next couple of years I went to the university, this same guy would come back every couple of months. It turned out he traveled to campuses just to preach. The last time I saw him was during the winter, and he was outside preaching—doing his same pointing and accusing thing—and a couple of guys ran up behind him in the middle of it and smashed a ton of snow over his head. It only stopped him for a moment, and then he kept right on going.

As I understood it, there were the shiny-happy-people Christians or the whispering-orange-carpet-people Christians, who both seemed harmless, but I began noticing that not all Christians were like them. I also began encountering other
Christians on campus who would walk up to me while studying or walking to a class. They would ask me to take a survey and ask me what I felt were very leading and somewhat confrontational questions. Questions like if I believed there was one God or not, which immediately puts anyone outside Churchland on the defense. Or questions like whether or not I believed in absolute truth. Or if I knew where I was going when I died. I wondered why Christians were consumed with death. I was only nineteen, I wasn’t planning on dying any time soon. But these strangers walking up to me reminded me of the guy in Paramus Park shopping mall, only they were more sophisticated in their approach and knew how to ask leading questions.

For one, I didn’t really appreciate that they would interrupt me and what I was doing, when I wasn’t bothering them. It also felt very awkward to immediately be asked some very personal questions, when I didn’t even know these people. When I would talk to them, their speeches quite honestly felt like rehearsed scripts, as I heard the same clichés repeated over and over again. It got to the point that when I would see them coming, I would actually begin avoiding them, as I didn’t want to be forced into conversation. I remember seeing some of the people in this particular group protesting a controversial movie that was being shown on campus once. So I began to notice that there was a type of Christians who were pretty aggressive and not quite the Shiny Happy type.

At this same time, being more and more sensitive and aware of Christians and thinking about Christianity, I would sometimes scan the radio and hear a Christian radio show and leave it on to listen. Incredibly, more often than not, the sermons
would consistently talk about how bad the world was becoming and how we needed to be protected from evil and defeat evil. By “evil” the radio preachers generally meant Hollywood, homosexuals, those of other religions, those who believed differently than they did, and anyone or anything else they felt was corrupting the world. The more I listened, the more I heard a lot of war rhetoric about being in a battle. These radio Christians were definitely out to prove other religions wrong, so there was a lot of negativity coming from the airwaves as I scanned the stations, a lot of focus on what Christians should avoid and not do and about bad things happening in the world.

Christianity – a religion of wars and battles, the anti-Christ, 666, and crusades

Again, from an outside perspective, it just always seemed that the Christians I saw and met were either at one extreme or the other. Either it was a “we’re all together and we’re peppy and happy and singing songs” or “we better crusade against the evils of the world.” As I would read about Christians putting on “crusades” and using the lingo of “spiritual battle,” the immediate imagery that came to my mind was the Crusades of the Middle Ages.

One time I was staying at a girlfriend’s dad’s house, and in the bedroom I found a book on the end-of-the-world times. I started reading it when I went to bed, and ended up staying up almost the whole night reading it. It had mapped out future battles, which were going to happen in Israel. There were actual charts depicting timelines of when Jesus was going to return to earth and join in a battle. I had no idea that Jesus was coming back to earth, and found the maps and battles
and all types of war images of the anti-Christ, and the 666 number of the beast to be incredibly mind-blowing. There were even maps of how it might be Russia and China involved in these battles and how it was all predicted in the Bible.

I actually stole the book from my girlfriend’s dad’s house (and still feel guilty about it). But it was so incredible, I had to read more about this whole thing. And truthfully, it did feel really, really weird, to discover that Christians were so very caught up in seeing Jesus as a war figure coming into a future battle and killing people and destroying armies.

The intervention to try and keep me from becoming too Christian

Because of all this confusion, I began buying even more books on what Christians believe and the origin of the Bible. I passionately wanted to know why Christians believed the Bible was from God, since that’s where all their talk about hell and judgment was coming from. I didn’t go to any church meetings, but I started developing a little library of Christian books in my room that I kept on my cinder block and wood plank shelves. Trying to read it without really knowing how to, the Bible seemed like a very complex book. I couldn’t make sense of the names of the books or why the books were in the order they were. So I scanned it a lot and as I stopped in certain places I did find myself being drawn to the New Testament books that were specifically telling about the birth, life and death of Jesus. I really felt a connection to Jesus’ words and teaching. There was a lot about Jesus’ teaching I didn’t understand, but his words were haunting. The way he cared for people was incredible, and I couldn’t help but enjoy reading about the times he challenged the religious leaders of his day.
So I was drawn to Jesus, but the Bible was a mystery.

I began buying even more books to help me understand the Bible, but as my books were stacking up, they didn’t go unnoticed. My friends and roommates in college saw that I was getting these books and every now and then casually asked me what was going on and why I was reading them. The funny thing about this, is that I believe they were actually concerned about me. I remember one friend saying: “You’re not going to become one of those Christians, are you?” They had the same impression of Christians that I did, so to see one of their friends being drawn to Christianity was reason enough for concern.

One specific time I came home and a couple of my friends were sitting in the living room. It was uncomfortably quiet when I walked in. It felt like one of those times when you knew people were talking about you and then quieted down when you walked in. I sat down and fairly quickly one of my friends began asking me about the books I had in my room. And then one graciously said “We’re getting worried about you and all those Christian books you are reading.”

One very good friend, out of deep concern, explained how Christians have no creativity because the church won’t let them be creative but just keeps everyone homogenous under their grip of control and desire for uniformity. She feared I would lose my creativity and be brainwashed if I keep reading this Christian literature. Although it wasn’t, it felt as though this was one of those interventions people have when someone is addicted to drugs or alcohol. And their family and friends gather to confront them about it out of care for the person.
The discussion went on and I listened to concerns and reasons and warnings, which were born out of care for me. They did not want me to become one of those “Christians.” As I listened, they interestingly would normally describe understandable portraits of Christians as either being the angry, homophobic, fundamentalist types or the more mindless, anti-intellectual, can’t-think-for-themselves, happy and goofy types.

To be honest, although I didn’t say it at the time to them, it was somewhat a gut-wrenching experience. I remember it to this day because deep inside I kept wondering: “What if they are right?” “Could this be true and I will lose my creativity if I become a Christian?” “Will I need to toss out my logic and rational thinking and have to be taking the whole Bible literally?” But from what I was reading in the Bible, Jesus wasn’t like that. So although it was just a couple of minute discussion, it was quite a gut-wrenching moment that I have never forgot when you have people close to you concerned about you becoming a Christian. And with valid reasons.

**Reading the Bible but not finding what I read in what I saw in Christianity**

It was a strange thing – because as I reflected on my own experiences I’d had with Christians up to that point, I didn’t blame my friends for their concern. I probably would have done the same thing. I know I would not have wanted one of my friends to become like those types of Christians that I had experienced. However, I did uncomfortably wonder about how I would truly be able to answer some of the questions they raised. If I took this seriously and kept reading the Bible, would I become one of those finger-pointing fundamentalists? Would I become
one of the non-creative, homogeneous types that didn’t think for themselves, like my friends were describing?

Would I soon be going into a group and be singing pep-rally type of songs and clapping along happily if I followed Jesus? Would I have to be like the man in the superhero robe who prayed to a silver goblet or sit in a whispery room of organ music lovers? Would I become a Christian who wanted to Jesus to come back to earth to get into military battles in the Middle East, while (according to what I was reading) the Christians would have all been “raptured” up into heaven, just watching the battle safely while millions of people would be suffering and getting killed down here?

It was pretty confusing to make sense of it all. I know I didn’t want to become like that, so what were my options? It seemed that in the Christian world, these were only the sub-groups of Christians that I had experienced. It was quite frustrating. Ironically, the more I read the Bible, the less I was drawn to the various Christians I’d met up to that point. But the Jesus I was learning about, this was someone I was drawn to. In a way, Jesus was becoming part of my life and thinking that I couldn’t shake. Something was going on, but the tension developing was mentally and emotionally tearing at me. There was no possible way I wanted to take even one step down the path of something that could lead to the type of Christianity I had experienced.

So, I honestly don’t know what I would have ended up doing with my search for what Christianity and being a Christian was about, if it weren’t for what happened next. After having people I cared about look me in the eyes and question
me out of concern, I wasn’t taking any steps toward Christianity lightly. It’s likely I would’ve abandoned further interest in ever going to a church again, but then something changed that made me rethink things, and entirely changed the course of my life and thinking about Christians and Christianity. It wasn’t a book that I read or a charismatic speaker or big Christian concert of any sort.

It was meeting an elderly 83 year old man in England.
Chapter 5: Ovaltine, the Bible and Elderly Ladies Fighting in a Smelly Basement

Ironically, in a culture which seems to scream out that that to be relevant and have a impact today we must be hip, we must be fashionable and young, the person who radically transformed my image of Christianity and the church from negative to positive was anything but. He was eighty-three years old when I met him. He was a positive character in the musical of Churchland that made a huge difference in my life. He couldn’t tell you the name of a single contemporary musical band and couldn’t name any of the latest movies or television shows or any of the up and coming celebrities in pop culture. But despite all that, it was eighty-three year old Stuart Allen who was the one from whom I first discovered that not all Christians were what I had previously experienced: the finger-pointing, right-winged, dogmatic, anti-intellectual fundamentalist types of Christians or (on the other end of the spectrum) the homogenous, singing, smiling, shiny, happy, soppy, holding hands type of Christians.
I met Stuart while I was living in London, England, after I graduated from Colorado State University. I was the drummer in a rockabilly-punk band during college and we all moved to London together. We were all good friends and thought we might as well have an adventure and head to London, as that’s where many bands we loved and were influenced by were from. I stuffed my silver sparkle Ludwig drum set in a large television set box and we headed over. We had no idea where we’d live, but it was an incredibly fun time because of the whole sense of not knowing what would happen next. While living there, I made a personal commitment to read the Bible from cover to cover on my own. I figured that I should try and read the whole thing, so I went and bought a tiny little brown Bible from a bookstore in London. It was small enough that I could fit it in my jacket or the back pocket of my jeans, and I began taking it absolutely everywhere I went. Every time our band played somewhere I had a gym bag in which I’d throw my drumsticks, a towel, my hair gel, a couple cans of beer and my little brown Bible. I’d read it while on the train or the bus going around London—every moment I had, I’d slip in some reading. I would keep that little Bible by my bed, and often fell asleep with it right next to my head.

I worked all types of temp jobs, from working at a large bookstore on Charing Cross Road to doing dishes in an incredibly hot and steamy cafeteria kitchen of an office building and coming home exhausted, my pores filled like a sauna in dishwashing soap steam. I also worked in the famous Parliament building, down in the basement, where I was on call to bring up a dozen gallons of milk or twenty
loaves of bread or whatever they needed in the kitchen as meals and tea time were prepped.

Often I’d be walking the halls of this very opulent historical building with government leaders all around while I pushed my little cart of snacks, wearing Converse sneakers and my Clash t-shirt under the green apron they gave me, my Bible tucked into my pocket. Wherever it was I was working, I developed the pattern I kept. When it was my lunch hour I would go sit in a nearby café or in a park and use the time to study and read that little brown Bible.

Truthfully, I was having a hard time understanding a lot of the often strange stories, and some of the violence I read about in the Bible was quite confusing. I’d take a little red pencil and mark a red dot on the page next to the specific Bible verses I had questions about, and that little brown Bible was getting a lot of red marks, as I was developing all kinds of questions. I marked in my Bible when John the Baptist was eating insects, because it sounded crazy. I marked how God seemed to approve of killing people in the Old Testament. I marked strange sayings of Jesus I couldn’t make sense of. And of course I had so many questions about the end times and some of the horrific scenes portrayed. It was making me quite uncomfortable, as I didn’t know what to think of some of the strange things I was reading.

And the amount of red dots in my little brown Bible grew.

**Ovaltine and the Bible changed my life**

One of the temp jobs I had was in the banking district of London in an insurance agency. I would hand-stuff hundreds and hundreds of envelopes for their
mailers. This was not one of my favorite jobs, as I worked alone in a room and it almost drove me insane, it was so incredibly tedious. So I always looked forward to the lunch breaks where I would leave and go to a bowling green nearby and have lunch watching the lawn bowlers and reading my Bible. I’d never seen lawn bowlers before so it was quite fascinating.

Each day walking to the bowling green, I would walk by a tiny little brick church building crammed in between two larger buildings. It was small and I didn’t pay much attention to it since it was normally all closed up. But this one day, outside of the doors of the church on the sidewalk was a sandwich board sign. Hand-scrawled on a piece of white paper was something like: “Bible Study today at Noon – All Welcome!”

I remember that I stood there for a moment. It was just past noon. I had my Bible in my pocket, and I was curious enough to peek in to see what this Bible study might be like. I cracked open one of the very old wooden doors and stretched my neck around the door to look in as the light from outside formed a beam going into what was a dark room. There I found an elderly man sitting in his chair with two other elderly people, one man and one woman. As the door opened, they looked up at me somewhat startled. I could tell they were totally surprised to see me, like they’d been sitting in there for a century waiting for someone to read their sign on the street and come in, and finally someone had accepted the invitation and opened the door.
They had a circle of about five chairs set up right by the entryway, and as I was cautiously peeking in, the leader gave me a warm hello in his English accent. “Here for the study?” he asked.

My instinct was to just back out, let the door shut behind me, and bolt away from there. It was such a tiny group. The room was somewhat dark in a creepy dungeon sort of way, and these were three elderly people. But the way he said “Here for the study?” with such kindness in his eyes—and joy that someone was actually considering coming in—made me feel so bad for them that I sheepishly said yes. The man smiled and waved for me to sit in the chair next to him.

I made my way into the circle and sat down. Without asking me if I wanted any, the old man began pouring a glass of something from his thermos and handed it to me. “Here’s some Ovaltine!” he said.

I didn’t know what to say, as I hadn’t drank Ovaltine since I was a child. I was maybe expecting him to say “here’s a tea” or “here’s a coffee,” but wasn’t ever thinking I’d be getting chocolate Ovaltine. So, I took the glass and said thank you and without thinking about it, just drank the whole thing quickly in one shot, as I was kind of nervous sitting there. Stuart intently watched me drink the Ovaltine and seemed to be pretty pleased I drank it down so enthusiastically. He smiled in approval as I finished it and as soon as I handed him the glass back, he said, “Have some more!” And proceeded to pour me a second glass.

I got a little nervous for a few moments, as I suddenly began thinking what if this is some weird cult comprised of elderly people and they just made me drink some poison or something? Would I then pass out from what they put in the Olva-
tine and wake up in some strange room without my kidney or find myself being tied up for an ancient Druid ritual? But it wasn’t a weird cult. It was some wonderful elderly followers of Jesus simply sharing what they liked to drink, which happened to be Olvatine.

I ended up sitting in that Bible study the entire lunch hour with those three elderly people. It was a meeting that changed my life. Or, perhaps I should say it was a meeting that changed the course of my life in terms of how I viewed Christians and the Bible. The meeting was so incredibly refreshing. They were talking about the Bible, but as they looked up passages, they would talk about the specific cultural context of when each letter or book was written and to whom it was written and why. They didn’t just read the Bible and then jump to try to instantly bring out 3 application points for the day. They were first very careful in discussing the background, the history, and why each part of the Bible was written. They even had a map they pulled out when discussing the different cities and places mentioned. I hadn’t seen this type of study before, and it seemed so incredibly rich and so much more meaningful than some of what I had previously experienced or read about.

**Questioning things in the Bible was seen as positive not negative**

I had a ton of questions about almost everything they talked about which they let me ask. Not once did I feel silly for asking a question and not once did they come across demeaning to me for my lack of biblical knowledge. I quickly learned that one of their favorite passages from the Bible (which ended up becoming a favorite of mine as well) was the New Testament verse that talks about a
city called Berea, which was in what is modern day Greece. This Bible verse, Acts 17:11, tells us: “The Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians [another city in Greece], for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”

These people commended asking questions and checking out what someone said for themselves, and God even called it “noble.” I had never, ever gotten that impression before from the Christians I had met up to that point. It was more like “here’s what we say is true, take it or leave it, and don’t question it.” So hearing that it was good to ask questions, was so wonderfully refreshing and it showed me that there was no subversive anti-intelligence brainwashing happening in that room.

This Bible study was teaching people to think about what they read, to learn, and to embrace and enjoy the freedom to questions things. It showed me that there really were some who didn’t just read the Bible at a shallow level and jump to conclusions based on our contemporary lens of reading it. It showed me that there were some who took the time to look at how the specific culture, people and time period all made an important difference in how one read the various parts of the Bible.

This was definitely a conservative church theologically, but even though they were conservative, they focused on digging into the Scriptures in a humble, loving and gracious way. They spoke of sin, repentance, judgment, hell—it was by no means just the happy and positive things in the Bible they liked to discuss and

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34 Acts 17:11.
teach. And it turned out that Stuart was an extremely intelligent man, who went to Oxford University and studied classical music and ancient languages.

Since they encouraged questions, I was able to start asking about some of the Bible verses I had marked with the red dots. I was able to ask Stuart all about the parts of the Bible that mentioned the “lake of fire” and about the anti-Christ and other things I had been reading about. He was able to answer me in ways that explained the culture of the time the Bible was written, the imagery and symbolism that the Bible sometimes uses.

He showed me that there is such a thing as “judgment” and even a hell, but he intelligently explained how metaphors and descriptions were often used to communicate a reality. He began teaching me basics of biblical hermeneutics (which is the art of Bible study). He began teaching me genres of the Bible such as poetry, history, prophecy and how to view the Bible by looking into how it was written. When he didn’t know a sure answer to something I was asking or if he felt there were different ways of looking at something in the Bible, he would tell me that some things we just won’t know in this life. He said, “God knows what he meant, but sometimes we don’t fully understand what he meant.” And Stuart didn’t say it as a cop out. He had actually studied diligently and found there were some mysteries in the Bible that are hard to figure out.

I began attending that weekly lunch time Bible study, and every week I greatly looked forward to my Ovaltine and good discussion based on some Bible passages. I eventually started going to the church meeting they had on Sundays, which was attended by maybe 15 or 20 other people, almost all elderly. I found
out when I started going to the Sunday church meetings that Stuart was also the organ player and led the music for this tiny church. He would lead in a few hymns, get up from the organ and very slowly make his way from the organ to the pulpit where he would then teach. I always found it amusing, as there was this gap of total silence during the time it would take for him to get up off the organ seat and then—in baby-like steps because he was elderly—very slowly make his way to the front of the stage to begin the sermon.

These little church services were the most non-production oriented gatherings—no flash, no charismatic speaker or pop worship band. Just an elderly man doing his best to play organ and then preach a sermon with all the strength he had to give. His voice wasn’t too strong, and I had to strain to both hear and follow what he was saying. But in this tiny elderly church, is where my heart started realizing that maybe being a Christian wasn’t all that bad. Maybe not all Christians were like the ones I had experienced back in college or the ones who hold up signs about hell and the lake of fire as you walk into concerts.

**A group of elderly, loving, caring, non-judgmental Jesus loving theologians**

I can say that at that time, I was totally immersed in the London music scene. I was usually dressed in all black, my hair in quite a high pompadour cut, sometimes even Mohawk looking, and I was typically wearing various items of clothing that were not a match at all to the garb and style of those in the church. I also would be out all Saturday night—pretty much doing the whole band scenario and all that goes with it—and sometimes barely stumbled in to make it to Sunday
morning church because of what I was doing and how late I was up the night before.

But not once did any of them ever say something negative about my dress, or ask why I was in a rockabilly and punk band, or question that I was hanging out in pubs till the wee hours. Even after months of going there and them getting to know me, they didn’t ever make one comment about those things negatively. They asked me about the band, and about what I did, but I never sensed them frowning down on the fact I was in pubs and playing in a band.

What they did say was how beautiful God was to create music of all kinds, and Stuart in particular was passionate about art and music. He didn’t discourage creativity, he was encouraging it and shared how God is creative and being made in His image, we reflect that creativity. We talked about the history of art and all types of musical genres through history. He even took me once to Royal Albert Hall to see Handel’s Messiah performed, so I could be exposed to a different genre of music I hadn’t been exposed to before. So instead of stifling creativity, these wonderful people encouraged me in it.

Maybe my friends at college who were concerned about me becoming a Christian, wouldn’t have been as concerned if they’d been able to meet this group of Christians who encouraged interest in the arts and creativity.

**Elderly ladies fighting in a smelly and musty church basement**

Over the next several months, I was adopted by this tiny group of elderly Londoners as a surrogate grandson. After the Sunday worship meeting, we’d all go down into the musty and smelly basement of the church and have lunch to-
gether. I didn’t have to bring lunch as the wonderfully loving white-haired ladies would bring me sandwiches and cookies. It would sometimes get a little feisty, as they would argue with each other over whose sandwich I would eat that day. I loved it as I would get fed each Sunday. I would sit down at the table while several plates slid in front of me with the lunches they’d made me. Most of the time, I would go home with a brown paper bag filled with several extra lunches. So, Sunday after Sunday, sitting in the musty and smelly basement listening to elderly ladies argue about whose sandwich I would eat is where I experienced Christian community for the first time. It was where I was able to ask questions without being seen as either silly for asking them or under suspicion. I was able to be loved and accepted, even though I was very different from them, and they didn’t once try to change my exterior or ask me to conform to their music or style. They cared about my heart and my understanding of Jesus.

This whole scene was the beautiful and rather eccentric blending of a young Guinness-drinking, punk-rockabilly musician from northern New Jersey with a mix of elderly, quaint and mature, tea-sipping, scholarly English saints, sitting in this little musty basement of this tiny church in the banking district of London, discovering what it meant to follow Jesus. And Jesus was our common bond. I believe it was truly God who brought me into their path, as my life would never be the same after that.

{{box: Adventure observation: “...God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?” Romans 2:4}} In the adventure of seeking out truth and God, if someone would have been judging me or trying to change my external
appearance. Or focusing on my lifestyle and trying to change that instead of first simply loving me and showing me God’s kindness – I probably never would have stayed in that little church. It seems the church can focus on the wrong things sometimes, and it truly was learning about God’s kindness, His mercy, His grace, and His compassion which then caused me to desire to change (with His help) in the areas of my life that weren’t I alignment with Scripture. But a lesson and observation is to be a constant source of God’s kindness in people. There are far too many sources of being torn down, picked apart, beat up emotionally, angry people venting or criticizing – that perhaps if we were more instruments of God’s kindness that people would want to then know God more and “repentance” means changing our direction and our ways to align with God’s instead of our own. I thank God that Stuart Allen was expressing God’s kindness and I was learning about that which led to me taking steps of change in my day to life.}

The loudest voices shape how we view things – yet the loudest voices aren’t representing the whole

I share all this because I wonder often what track my life would have gone on, if I hadn’t met Stuart and the wonderful people of this very tiny and very unhip church. If I hadn’t had the opportunity to meet loving, thinking and caring Christians like this, I would perhaps have been making judgments of the church and Christians from my overall negative experiences like I shared in the last chapter. I would have made conclusions about Christians and the church based on what I’d see on television when certain types of more flamboyant Christian lead-
ers were selected for interviews on CNN or had their own television or radio shows that I occasionally saw or heard. I would have only met and seen the shiny-happy-people Christians. Or the more aggressive Christians who go out to public places and hold up those cartoon-like signs with flames about hell and judgment. Those are the pieces I would have most likely used to frame my overall viewpoint of Christians and the church.

It seems that it is often the loudest voices (and the ones with the biggest signs) who shape how many of us have understood Christians and the church. Yet there are many Christians like Stuart Allen and the wonderful people of that tiny church, who aren’t like the other types, and who, by their nature, remain more hidden and not as visible.

My experience was from outside the church looking in. But I also have talked to a lot of people (and I do mean a lot) who were part of a church growing up, but left eventually from disillusionment. Some felt their churches were not safe places to ask questions, especially questions that did not align with the specific church’s theological beliefs. Questions were viewed as threats that landed you under suspicion by church leaders. Others felt their churches were so controlled by the leaders that church felt more to them like a business run by a CEO than a loving Jesus-focused community. Some left because of too many awkward encounters with other Christians who inappropriately tried to force or persuade them of their particular beliefs. Some left because they sensed that Christians can be hateful towards those who don’t agree with them on political issues or have made lifestyle choices they don’t approve of.
That is why I completely understand how so many people feel the way they do when they say, “I like Jesus, but not the church or Christians.” I did say that, and I would still be saying that if I hadn’t met other Christians in a special church who broke that stereotype for me. I know that there will be a diversity of people reading this book: some Christian, some not. Whether you are a Christian, or not a Christian, or are a churchgoer, or you have given up on the church, or wherever you may currently be, I want to tell you that I have such optimism that when Jesus started the church, it was meant to be something beautiful and it still can be.

When people follow Jesus and are called “Christians”35 – they can be wonderful, winsome, positive, caring, kind, loving, intelligent, compassionate representatives of what Jesus desired His followers to be like. But there are so many questions to be asked. So many impressions and experiences with Christians and the church, which for me (for a time) only reinforced why I wanted to stay away from Christians and the church.

** Asking the uncomfortable questions is a good thing

But, as I learned, there are reasonable answers to many of the questions I had. I met Stuart, and he allowed me to ask the questions, and he helped me learn to not just accept shallow answers, but to study and wrestle with the harder questions I had. Was Christianity simply the religion of the suburban America I grew up in? What if I was born in India? What about other religious writings that also claimed to be divinely inspired and truth? What made the Bible right and other “holy scriptures” wrong? Why were there so many Christians who said they fol-

allowed Jesus, but their personalities and attitudes made me want to run from Christianity and church, not be drawn to it? Was the church really homophobic and hateful towards the gay community? And wasn’t the church simply a form of organized religion—the same kind that Jesus went against?

I had so many, many, many questions.

There was no possible way that I wanted to be part of a religious faith that at least seemed from the outside to produce people types I was not able to connect with. I felt like they couldn’t have been much of a deep-thinking people in order to believe what I thought they believed. And Christianity was more of a dogmatic, close-minded, organized religion that I really felt was more cult-like or for those with weaknesses who just needed something to believe in.

But through time and really studying what the Bible did or didn’t say and being in an environment that encouraged questions, I was able to make more sense of the very things I had questions about. I could spend hours and hours talking about the things that Stuart Allen allowed me to ask, how he would open up the Bible to show me, and how he never made me feel silly for asking. Questions are good. God approves and encourages questions. But that isn’t the norm in many churches. So I’m thankful I had a person and a church who didn’t discourage my questioning but encouraged it. I’m thankful I experienced a church community that accepted me despite what I was doing at the time and what I believed at the time. The people of this church showed a punk, rockabilly, once-prayed-a-prayer-with-a-Daniel-Boonie-looking-guy-but-still-agnostic–leaning-towards-

36 Acts 17:11.
Jesus (but thinking Christians and the church were absolutely nutty, mean, happy-clappy people and wanted nothing to do with them) love and acceptance and truth.

So, there is a lot of confusion to be explored and cleared up right now. It is quite a mess really in the whole church and the Churchland subculture today, as there are many confusing messages, images and questions out there. I know I had specific questions to wrestle with and explore if I was going to seriously consider being both a Christian and part of a church. Some of the questions and most confusing impressions of church and Christianity that I hear are ones we will be exploring in this book about judgmentalism, organized religion, what is “church” and many others that are in the “Do You Like Jesus But Not The Church?” book. But as I discovered, just because certain things are thought about Christians or the church, doesn’t mean they are actually true.

When you search beyond some of the general stereotypes—or perhaps some very real and sad encounters with Christians who aren’t good ones (and I had many)—you may discover there is beauty under the surface mess. But Christians and the church have always had strange things thought about them. Some are true. Some are not true. Back in ancient Rome, Christians were thought to be incestuous, atheist, cannibalistic sorcerers.

I probably would have thought these things too back then and let me explain why.
Chapter 6: Cannibals and Creepy Pastors

""You Christians are the worst breed ever to affect the world. You deserve every punishment you can get! Nobody likes you. It would be better if you and your Jesus had never been born. We hear that you are all cannibals—you eat the flesh of your children in your sacred meetings"

- Caecilius in Rome, AD230

Let me jump ahead several years from my time in London when I first was entering into serving on staff at a church. As I will explain later, I ended up moving back to the United States and volunteered at a church. And eventually they even asked me to come on the church staff. It was after I had become a “pastor” there when what I will describe here happened and was another day that has stuck in my memory as something never to forget. It happened in the gym.

I don’t go to the gym very often. I am now seriously trying to get in a routine that has me in the gym on a regular basis. I believe God wants us to be good stewards of our bodies and live healthy lives. But I find going to a gym somewhat intimidating, as it is very awkward for me, not being an athlete in there. The athletic world is very foreign to me. I’m not used to being in gym locker rooms. I’m not used to totally naked men boldly walking around and talking to one another without any reservation whatsoever. Whether they are in shape or they are very out of shape, old or young. I know for athletes this is all normal. But for me, as an

introvert, this locker room experience causes me to go find the most private corner in which to change and get out of there as quickly as possible.

I appreciate sports. I do think of sports as bowling and shooting pool. After all, a bowling ball is 14 to 16 pounds which certainly outweighs a football or basketball. So I see both pool and bowling as very legitimate expressions of athletics. But you don’t have to go into locker rooms for those.

When I walk into a gym, it also seems that everyone there (but me) naturally and gracefully uses the equipment like it was second nature. Even gym fashion intimidates me, as I scan the room and people are wearing coordinated gym outfits. They seem to know what type of sweats to wear and what shoes look right with their whole gym outfit. Even the more gruff muscle guys seem to have a thought through fashion coordination. I bet they don’t admit it, but it seems like they have carefully scanned the weight lifters fashion catalogue. So not only do they know how to use the gym equipment, which I struggle with. But they know exactly the correct things to wear or not wear while they are going through their workouts.

I usually come sheepishly walking out to the gym and equipment area wearing my black Converse sneakers, a Ramones t-shirt and the sweats that I also wear for pajamas at night. Sometimes I forget to bring extra socks (you know, white ones), so I wear black socks—which I actually don’t think looks that bad, even though everyone else wears white socks.

The mirrors that a lot of gyms have around the room make it all the more difficult. When I watch myself in the mirror, I feel like I look so horribly unnatu
ral compared to everyone else, and then I feel as though everyone else knows how unnatural look too. But despite the awkwardness of the whole thing and the mirrors, I do venture in, as I know it is important for us to take care of ourselves, especially in church leadership. Too often you see a church leader teaching on the evils of the world to avoid, but they have consumed so many Big Macs and Whoppers that they are neglecting the care of their own bodies and the evils we do to it.

“Pastors are creepy”

One time I went back to the gym after not being there for a while, and they had new equipment. It was these hydraulic weights and a young girl around 22 year old or so who worked there went about showing me how to use the new equipment. We began talking and our discussion quickly went to music. Music is one of my passions, so I’m able to quickly get into conversations about bands, much like other people might do with sports teams. People who are into certain sports or teams can easily jump into conversations with total strangers about who is on what team, how a specific player is doing or how a game went. It’s the same for me and music, where I find myself pretty easily engaging in conversations about bands and music.

So, as we talked about the a couple of bands we both liked such as The Smiths, Morrissey and The Cure we got to the last machine. As I was thanking her for showing me how to use the machines, she asked what I did for a living. I shared that I worked on staff at a church and was a pastor. As I said that, she physically recoiled. She took several steps backwards as if to distance herself in
case she might catch something. As she stepped backwards, she even bumped into the machine we were last at.

She looked right at me with a “you’re joking, aren’t you” sort of look and said, “No, you’re not!”

I had to say, “Yes, I am!”

She repeated back to me, “No, you’re not!”

This wasn’t going anywhere as she didn’t believe me. So I asked her “Why don’t you think I’m a pastor?”

Without a blink, she blurted out: “Pastors are creepy!”

Pastors are creepy? That wasn’t quite what I was expecting to hear. I then probed her a bit and asked, “What do you think pastors are like?” And as fast as she was able to say “Pastors are creepy” she began to rattle off how she sees pastors on CNN panels often cutting down and arguing with other pastors who are different than they are. She even described them as having “pinched, angry faces” as they speak. She shared how she hears on the news about pastors or church leaders who taught one thing but then got caught doing the very thing they were teaching against. She also spoke of seeing the occasional money or sex scandal that comes up time to time with someone who is a leader in a church. She also mentioned seeing pastors interviewed on television who are protesting something, and she shared about watching Christian networks where flamboyant television pastors talk about how when you give them money, God will bless you. So—for a whole bunch of valid reasons, based on her observations—she had concluded that pastors were creepy.
But then I asked her, “Do you know any pastors personally?”

To which, she paused for a moment and then said, “No. I’ve never met any. Just you.”

Were her observations true about the “creepy pastors” she saw? Yes, there are some creepy pastors. But most pastors aren’t. Some of what she observed may not be fully understood if one is peering into Churchland and the Christian sub-culture from the outside—it may just look plain weird. I remember full well my experience of observing the shiny-happy-people Christians and assuming most younger Christians were all like them. Or the orange-carpet-whispering Christians. Or the angry ones pointing out sins in people, or the Christians consumed with end times battles and wishing the Apocalypse would come.

In fact, I wouldn’t have known anything different until I finally met Stuart and that wonderful small church, full of people who weren’t like the various extremes I observed or encountered before I met them.

It dawned on me that for this young 22 year old girl, the only pastors she’d seen were the ones on television. So of course her viewpoint was understandable. On television news you normally see church leaders when one of them gets in trouble and makes the news. Or on talk shows and panels, often the specific church leaders are brought in just because they have extreme views on something and it makes good debate. I can say that by no means every pastor on television is “creepy.” But I can say from the limited exposure I’ve had to the ones who broadcast on television that some are the more flamboyant types. And they often do make emotional pleas for money, as they need money to keep their television
programs on the air. So it is understandable why this 22 year old girl had the conclusions she did if that was all she’d been exposed to.

I know there are creepy pastors. I know there are creepy Christians. There are creepy churches. That’s a fact. But the good and hopeful news is that most Christians, pastors and churches aren’t creepy.

For a long time, I simply misunderstood some of them. I had some very poor and weird experiences with some Christians and churches, but as I explored beyond the surface, I found that some of my impressions weren’t accurate for the whole. I had bits and pieces and partial experiences of church and Christianity. These were very real and very negative experiences overall. But I didn’t explore the whole of Christianity and the church. So my conclusions were based on more isolated incidences than a full exploration.

**Christians were once known as incestuous, atheist, cannibalistic sorcerers**

Perceptions of Christians being negative or strange isn’t new. Depending on the culture and time period, Christians and the church have been seen in different ways. When we look at early church history, we find that ancient Christians and early church leaders were sometimes misunderstood. Outsiders in the first few hundred years of the early church held misperceptions and made very strong accusations about Christians. For example some of them were:

*The church practices cannibalism:* Rumors got out that the early church “drank blood and ate flesh” and were thought to be cannibals. When Christians gathered, they followed the teachings of Jesus when he told his followers to remember his body that was on the cross by eating some bread and remember his blood that was
shed by drinking some wine or juice.\textsuperscript{38} This is communion. However, without understanding the meaning of the ritual, it would be easy for those at that time in history to assume Christians were cannibals, when they heard these early church-goers “drank blood and ate flesh.

\textbf{The church practices incest: } As the early church was birthed, Christians called other Christians “brother” or “sister” because of the strong family metaphor that followers of Jesus were taught\textsuperscript{39}. Because people would hear married Christians calling each other “brother” and “sister”, it implied to those not familiar with this new custom that they were biological brothers and sisters who were married. So it looked like incest to outsiders.

\textbf{The church is comprised of atheists: } Imagine in the early years of the church being birthed and how it was surrounded by Greek/Roman society and their plethora of gods and goddesses. They would create statues of these gods and goddesses, and put them in places of worship. Because the early Christians didn’t worship a physical statue, as most Greek and Roman religions would, they were thought of as atheists. The lack of an idol was confusing, and led to Christians being called atheists in Rome.

\textbf{The church practices sorcery and magic: }

Christians were thought to be people who practiced “mischievous superstition” and that “their minds are perverted”. Christians were thought to practice “sorcery,

\textsuperscript{38} Matthew 26:26-28.  
\textsuperscript{39} Galatians 6:10.
with rites, spells, and magical formulas, amulets, and artifacts.”

Because they did have rituals such as the Lord’s Supper and baptism, they were accused of dabbling with spells and magic incantations.

**Explanations were needed to clear up the confusion**

In various time periods of church history, Christians had to explain what they believed and why. Marcus Minucius Felix was the author of the 2nd century document mentioned in the beginning of the chapter who wrote about a man named Caecilius in Rome, who was a non-Christian giving his perspective on Christians. Marcus Minucius Felix wrote about the changing of understanding one had from misunderstanding Christians and believing false things about them to understanding them better and more accurately. He wrote back in the 2nd century:

“For we were once the same as you; blind and ignorant, our opinions were once the same as yours. We believed that the Christians worshiped monsters, ate the flesh of infants, and practiced incest at their feasts. We did not understand that these tales were always being spread...without examination or proof.”

Today we aren’t dealing with perceptions of Christians being incestuous, atheist, cannibalistic sorcerers. But there are a lot of understandably confusing and strange impressions of Christianity and the church. These are the ones I had to really look at as I explored the possibility of becoming a Christian. I was drawn to what I understood of Jesus, but had very mixed feelings about what I experienced of His followers and churches. I had very strange encounters with some of the

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41 Ibid.
characters I discovered in Churchland. But I needed to really explore deeper what
the Bible actually said about church and Christianity, and not simply go on the
occasional experiences and encounters I had.

Like Marcus Minucius Felix wrote in the 2nd century, he provoked his
readers to think about whether their impressions or beliefs about what it mean to
be a Christians or part of a church was true or not – I had to do the same with the
questions I had. I’m sure that most of you reading this have your set of questions
and experiences with the church and Christians.

For me and others I’ve talked to, one gets certain impressions when peer-
ing into Churchland of Christians being judgmental, homophobic, oppressing
women, arrogantly feeling they are right and all other religions wrong. One can
get the impressions that Christians are biblical literalists, fundamentalists and
non-thinkers. One can also get the impression that church is simply organized re-
ligion, that the church is about power—falsely promising people health or wealth
if they give money to the church. Again, these may be more than just impressions
but actual experiences people have had.

I didn’t grow up in a church, but perhaps some of you reading this book
did. For you, your story is different. But you may have other reasons for question-
ing the church and what has become known as “Christianity”. Far too often I’ve
heard sad stories of those who grew up in the church feeling like it was a business
or a program being run, rather than a spiritual family. So they became disillu-
sioned. I’ll share some stories of how “organized” church really messed me up to
some degree after I entered that world, but that will come later. I’ve also heard
stories of those who didn’t feel they were able to ask questions in their church context. Or when they did, they felt like they were under suspicion and it wasn’t safe. So more disillusionment sank in.

But, despite the experiences some of us may have had or hear about, I believe there is hope of a different understanding of Christianity and the church. I thank God that I didn’t give up (although I almost did) and that I did meet that group of elderly Christians in that church in London. It was there that I learned that asking questions is a good thing to do. And thinking about the Bible and not simply accepting teaching blindly is also a good thing. And I learned that church could be family—not simply a business or a big program to be put on Sundays. So thankfully, at the right time in my life, I had the encouragement to question, doubt, challenge, explore and it was seen as positive. I truly believe God knew it was what I needed at that specific time, and so it wasn’t just chance or fate that I ended up meeting Stuart Allen and that little elderly church.

They taught me that although I may have had bad experiences with Christians and the church, it didn’t mean I should give up on the church. If it weren’t for them, if I had let my experiences or impressions of church and Christianity shape my future reality of what I would do, I would have missed out on so much.

Through them I learned that challenging the status quo is ironically something Jesus taught about. He was the challenger of the religious systems and organizations that developed in His day. So it is actually a very Jesus thing to do to question what a church is doing or what a leader teaches. It is a very Jesus thing to do to ask uncomfortable questions.

42 Matthew 6:8.
Jesus said “You have heard….. but I tell you…..”

Questions usually come up when you look into the crazy world of Church-land, and I want to get behind the scenes and explore what really happens “back-stage,” so to speak. Is what we see on the outside of Christianity really what Jesus and the teaching of the Bible are saying on the inside, behind the scenes?

We’ll look at some specific perceptions of the church today, the ones that generally keep us from trusting the church and wanting to be part of one. We will look at each of these perceptions of the church and see what Jesus said about these things, because Jesus loves the church. In this book we will look at a few such as the church being judgmental and organized religion. And in the “Do You Like Jesus But Not The Church?” we will look a bunch of other major ones such as the church being chauvinistic, arrogantly thinking they are right and all over religions wrong, being anti-gay, the craziness of some of the passages which seems to paint God as an angry, wrathful, genocide ordering God, and the question of if we have to close our minds to science in order to take the Bible seriously. So these questions are important ones I had to personally study and think through and will be covered in this book and the other one.

But because a Christian acts a certain way or a church acts a certain way does not mean it is what Jesus would endorse. In fact, according to the Bible, there are times when he is not too happy with how the church represents him. If you look in the New Testament in the Book of Revelation we do see Jesus giving
opinions of various churches, some good and some not too good\textsuperscript{43}. There is one church he even says he would spit out of his mouth. 

Although Jesus directly confronted churches that were not representing him well, he didn’t give up on the church. He was someone who was trying to clear up misperceptions that people in His day had. The religious leaders painted a certain picture of what it meant to be a worshiper of God, but Jesus corrected them. In fact, he more than corrected them and often pretty much publicly slammed them in his uniquely Jesus way. It’s these incidents that made me want to know Jesus more as I read about him. 

In the New Testament, Jesus puts things in an interesting way multiple times when he was teaching the people around him. He often says: “You have heard… but I tell you…”\textsuperscript{44} Jesus was about truth. Jesus was about clearing up misperceptions and calling out truth. 

\textbf{Jesus said:}

\begin{itemize}
  \item “You have heard…..”
  \item “...but I tell you..”
\end{itemize}

You may have heard that being a Christian today means being narrow-minded and the church is filled with fundamentalists who take the entire Bible lit-

\textsuperscript{43} Revelation 2:1-3:21.
\textsuperscript{44} Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, etc.
erally. Or you may have heard that church is a very judgmental place. Whatever your perceptions may be, it’s good to ask some important questions.

When we hear about or experience odd characters and scenes from the Churchland musical, we need to ask ourselves if what we’re seeing is truly what it looks like to follow Christ or is truly the church according to what Jesus said. In the early church, those on the outside had perceptions of Christians being cannibals, atheists, sorcerers and practicing incest, so Christians had to clear up what was accurate and what wasn’t, even back then. Jesus, in his day, was also clearing up the misperceptions that the religious leaders inaccurately painted—misperceptions that caused people to be confused and suffer as a result, until Jesus explained the truth.

This clearing of misperceptions is what I believe we need to do today. The perceptions of today might not have been the ones 25 years ago or 50 years ago. Or 2,000 years ago as we learned about the perceptions those outside the church had about the early church. I am going to look at the teachings Jesus and the New Testament to try to imagine what he would say about the current state of church and Christianity. Especially in some of the confusing issues and uncomfortable questions. In fact, I believe if he was talking to us today, he might use the same type of corrective expression he used in the stories of the New Testament:

“You have heard that the church is…”

“...but I tell you that the church is....”
Of course, we don’t have Jesus physically sitting next to us to tell us how he would specifically answer these questions. But we do have his teachings to read, as recorded in the Scriptures. We have plenty of places in the Bible which talk about what “church” should be like or not like. We have plenty of guidance God gave us to follow and plenty about what the lives of those who follow Jesus should be like.

We’ll look at a couple of questions about Christians and the church

For me, asking questions was very serious and was a critical part of my faith journey. It involved more than just asking questions born of curiosity or questions seeking knowledge of theology. These were questions that were determining whether or not I would pursue my interest in Christianity and Jesus. I had friends concerned about me. I was concerned about me. I was concerned about what I was discovering Christians and the church to be like. I was drawn to Jesus, but the church experiences and encounters with certain characters in the Churchland musical had kept me away. There were moments when I would be laying in bed at night feeling I was going partially insane wondering what was true and what wasn’t. I didn’t have the options of shallow answers.

Although there are many questions and perceptions in our world today about the church and Christianity, I’m going to write next about two of the ones that seem to come up a lot: judgment and the problem of organized religion. Depending on where you live, what part of the country or world you are in, you may or may not experience them to the same degree. Or, depending on your back-
ground and personal story, you may not even notice these things. But they are out there. These are some of the very uncomfortable questions I believe are important to explore. If you are in the world today, you have to be thinking about these things.

(If you are a Christian and you aren’t thinking about these things, I would like to challenge you a bit in the last couple chapters of this book. You may be immersed in the Christian bubble or Christian subculture or Churchland—which is not where I believe we need to be.)

But for now, let’s explore some of the uncomfortable things we often discover in the adventure that is Churchland.
Chapter 7: Is the church supposed to be judgmental?

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged”
Jesus

After a really wonderful year in England and being part of that tiny little elderly church, I moved back to the United States and ended up in California. The bass player in our band got a job in San Jose, and a girlfriend of mine at the time was going to a university in the area. So somewhat randomly we all moved to Northern California. I had absolutely no idea what to do in terms of trying to find a church, but I just instinctively knew I now needed to be part of one. I couldn't imagine not being part of a church community after my wonderful experience with Stuart Allen and the Ovaltine-drinking, elderly-ladies-fighting-in-the-basement church. They made such an impact in my life and showed me the importance of Christian community. It seemed only natural that if I was following Jesus, I would want to continue to be part of a local church with others on the same journey. It felt like once I experienced and understood the beauty of being part of a local church, I could no longer exist as a follower of Jesus alone, without being part of one. It no longer made sense not to be part of a local church as a Christian.

So, not having any idea of how to go about and find a local church, I turned to the phone book. I will tell the full story about that confusing experience later on, but it was through a phone book that I found a church community to be part of and entered my next adventure in the land of churches.

Matthew 7:1.
Drumming love ballads to Jesus

This new church discovered through the phone book was quite a large church filled with people of all ages. That was a big shift in and of itself for me, after being in the tiny little elderly church where I was the only one in my twenties and the only one without all gray hair (or blue, if we’re referring to those who died their gray unsuccessfully. I will likely be a blue haired senior citizen one day as I certainly enjoy hair color experiments). But in this new church, I pretty quickly found a way to get involved, as they needed a drummer for the worship band. Music and drumming was a very easy way for me to help out. Unlike the church in England which sang all older hymns with an organ, this church sang contemporary Christian worship music, so they needed a drummer. For those who don’t know, the worship music that is sung on Sundays in contemporary churches is very different than more traditional churches who use organs and choirs. (It’s also different than the music used in church musicals, for the record.)

The songs that this church sang on Sundays reminded me a lot of the songs that the shiny-happy-people-holding-hands group that I encountered in college sang. The songs felt like television commercial-jingles but with lyrics about Jesus. There was a lot of repeating the same thing over and over again like children’s songs often do. I couldn’t personally connect with these songs, as stylistically they were very different than the type of music I normally listened to. There were the more peppy upbeat jingle ones, but then there were the songs that felt to me like adult-pop romantic love ballad ones, were written about a boyfriend or girlfriend, only the lyrics were instead written to Jesus. I never thought of Jesus as
someone you would sing soft-rock love ballads to. But the people of the church were into it and seemed to really love this music. And it was a way for me to get involved drumming.

I developed a friendship with one of the pastors of the church who was the music leader and on staff at the church. He eventually asked me to help out in the youth ministry of the church. When he asked me about that, I was quite overwhelmed and humbled that they would even think of me helping out. After all, my past and history was anything but church-like. I had never once even stepped foot in a youth ministry before. So I felt very, very inadequate to try and help out. I remember almost crying when he first asked me, as I was emotionally overwhelmed that I would even be considered to do this. To think they believed in me enough to ask me to help out was an incredible, incredible honor.

So I said yes.

I was both quite excited and quite scared. I remember seriously praying and thanking God over and over that I was asked to do it. Could God really use me to help youth in this church? I never imagined I would be asked to actually have leadership like that in a church. I was a drummer in a rockabilly and punk band who had been doing everything that most people in bands do—in other words I was not a typical church leader. My background was not a role model for teenagers by any means. So I was quite nervous, but in a good way, and I was also determined not to let down the pastor who asked me to do it. I was feeling really good and planning on doing whatever I could to help teach and lead the teenagers
of this church. However, in the midst of all my excitement, something happened that I wasn’t at all expecting and threw me for quite a loop: I got judged.

And it felt terrible.

**The lousy feeling of being judged from the outside**

After the announcement was made that I would help lead the youth ministry of this church, one of the other main pastors pulled me aside on a Sunday. He said he was glad I was starting to help out in the youth ministry, he then told me he wanted to meet with me to give me some tips about working with youth. I was thrilled he wanted to meet and was all excited as we arranged a time to do so. I looked up to the pastors of this church and for one to ask me to meet with him made me feel all the more honored. We arranged for me to meet him in his office.

The church offices were funny to me, as they were all set up exactly the same. They each had these very large dark mahogany desks. The rooms were also all arranged in the same layout, with the desk facing towards the door. Behind these momma-sized desks, there were very tall bookshelves filled with books. So as one met with a pastor at this church, you would sit a couple feet away from him, with the momma desk between you and the almost symbolic visual of the vast amount of books behind the pastor. The whole setup had the potential to make one feel a little intimidated, especially me. I don’t think it was intentional, but the setup communicated a definite sense of role distinction between the pastor and the one coming into the office. It sort of looked and felt like the offices you might see on TV, watching a scene where a powerful lawyer meets with a nervous client.
On the afternoon of our meeting, I got there and the pastor smiled and greeted me warmly. Then I took a seat in front of his desk, and he got up and walked over to the door and shut it. He made a quick comment with how happy he was that I was helping out with the youth.

And then it happened.

He came back around to his seat across the big-momma desk and started the conversation by saying, “Okay, here are some things you need to do if you’re going to work with youth here at the church. First, you really need to get a hair-cut.”

I sat there fairly stunned, not knowing what to say in response. This was not what I was expecting at all to hear. Not whatsoever. I was thinking maybe he would talk about the dynamics of teaching teenagers the Bible. Or about some leadership skill I needed to learn. So I sat there and didn’t say a word. I didn’t know what to say.

He then smiled again. (He had a very broad and toothy smile, which is fixated in my mind from this meeting.) He then said, “Here. This one is on me.” And he pulled out of his wallet a twenty dollar bill. With one sweeping motion of his arm, he slid the bill across the wide desk and it stopped right in front of me like a hockey puck hitting its goal.

Again, I sat there not knowing what to think or say as there was no way I was expecting this. Going into a meeting to learn some ideas about youth ministry and being told I needed a haircut was probably the very last thing I ever would have thought he was going to say.
My hair was pretty much like it is today which is somewhat of a pompadour cut. For those that don’t know what a pompadour is, it’s a haircut that is short on the sides and back but stands higher than the usual men’s haircut on top. I had grown my hair out in my college years with a high pompadour, as it was a hairstyle many people in the 50’s music scene I liked wore—people like Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash. Many of my musical heroes from rockabilly and punk bands wore their hair high in some form of a pompadour. So I copied them and that style. It was simply a creative expression that was attached to certain musical genres that I like, and I never imagined I would be asked to cut it off if I was going to serve in ministry in the church.

So I sat and listened as he explained to me that my haircut was not a “normal” haircut, and that church leaders needed to pay attention to these things. He said it could give wrong impressions to youth or people in the church. He shared how he’d already heard from someone in the church who was concerned with my appearance when she heard I was going to work with the youth of the church. He explained how this woman felt my hair and clothing style wouldn’t be a good example of what a Christian leader should be, and he agreed that having a different hairstyle could be sending “incorrect” messages to the church.

Everything in my body, mind and soul ached as he was saying those words to me. I had a feeling of embarrassment and wondered how many others in the church also felt like that. I was already feeling sensitive that perhaps my background as a punk and rockabilly musician was a negative thing, even though I had changed the lifestyle I was living. But I felt foolish as I heard this new infor-
mation. I was being told that I might be displeasing to God for having a different kind of haircut, and I so badly wanted to please God. And it was such an honor to be asked to serve in the church that I felt if it was what someone had to do to serve with youth, then it was what I’d have to do. I certainly didn’t understand it, but my heart was only wanting to be useful and help out with the youth.

It did not, however, end with the hair.

The pastor then pointed down to my shoes. I was wearing Doc Martins, which had a bright yellow stitching between the soul and the leather of the shoe. He said, “You may want to take a black Sharpie and color those stitches black. They are pretty flamboyant.”

*Flamboyant?*

I had never even really paid attention to the color of the stitches on my shoes before. But this was a main pastor in the church, and I was sitting there not knowing anything different. I was trusting him, and if this was what it meant to help out with the youth, then I guessed it was what I was supposed to do.

But I can say I felt totally judged and pretty terrible. I didn’t realize the outward appearance of someone’s haircut would be important. My heart seemed right. My motives seemed pure. But, basically, I’d just been informed that Christians in this church would make judgments about me because of my haircut and the stitching on my shoes. This was not about my heart or my faith or my desire to work with the youth. It was about judgments. About outer appearances and supposed messages sent by a certain style. But even after the hair and shoes, it didn’t
end. He said, “I’d like to help with your clothing too. You need to change how you dress, as people expect leaders to dress appropriately.”

At the time, I was generally wearing vintage clothing (and still do). I appreciate and wear shirts from the 1950’s that have certain patterns and style. Vintage clothing shopping was quite a fun thing my friends and I used to do. But he made me aware that wearing vintage styles of clothing was not appropriate for working with youth either.

Again, he just wanted to help and he told me, “I have some clothes I can give you for Sundays. Why don’t you come over to our house and I’ll show you some tips on how to dress.”

So, I left that office that day with my head down. I took his twenty dollars and went to the barber and off came the hair. I remember sitting in the barber’s chair watching in the mirror as my pompadour got cut off and thinking about Stuart Allen in London.

He never told me I had to get my haircut.

He never said anything about the clothing I wore.

But then again, I never served with youth, so maybe that was why. So I did it. I got a “normal” haircut. And a few days later I went to this pastor’s house to get some clothing tips for Sundays. He brought out a bunch of his button-up shirts, golf shirts, slacks, and even a few suits and ties. He had me try on a couple—showed me the right ties to wear and how to match colors.
I was trying on these clothes and looking at myself in these drab suits, golf shirts and slacks and was thinking: “Oh God, … is this really how you want me to dress? God, … is this what you really want me to do?”

**Puffy gray khakis and preferred haircuts make not the person who loves Jesus**

There was one pair of grayish khaki slacks, which were quite puffy with very big pleats in the front. These were not normal pleats, but ones that seemed to puff out several inches each and were very odd looking. I was in horror looking at myself wearing these very puffy slacks. What made it worse was that when I walked out of the room I’d been changing my clothes in and showed him how the gray puffy khakis looked, his whole face lit up and he said, “You look great in those! Those would be great for when you teach youth on Sunday.”

My heart totally sank.

But again, I was willing to do whatever it might take to be able to properly serve with youth at the church. So I nodded with a half smile and dismally uttered an okay and thank you.

So there I was getting a new wardrobe to fit into church culture, yet I was feeling such a tension wondering was this really what it took to be able to serve with youth? *Do Christians really make judgments like this and pay attention to what you dress like? Do I really have to wear extremely puffy pleated khakis not to be judged?* I had never even worn khakis. And oh my goodness, these were very weird pants the way they poofed out. I felt like I was slipping on some for-
eign uniform, or like I was going to be acting in a play and this was the costume for the part.

I have to stop here and say that the pastor doing all this was very genuine. He wasn’t a mean or crazy person. He was very gentle and loving. I know he truly cared about me and wanted me to be successful in youth ministry. He was just doing his best to coach me in how he felt a youth leader should dress and look around people and parents on Sundays. He was doing his best to frame how Christians in the church would judge me in a positive light.

I almost didn’t want to share this story, because this man was so sincere in his motives to help me. This was not a malicious or cruel thing he was doing. But all the same, it was letting me know, without him directly saying it, that Christians are judgmental. There was a specific expectation of what someone working with youth should look like and dress like. So how I normally looked and dressed was not appropriate to them and he was letting me know about it.

It had nothing to do with my heart. There is nothing in the Bible which said how a youth worker is supposed to wear his or her hair or dress. It had nothing to do with teachings of Jesus. It was about personal preferences and self-made judgments from Christians about what someone should look like to be proper.

I was judged and it felt terrible.

I left his house with an armful of neatly stacked shirts, slacks, ties and a suit or two. I was still reeling in horror from the incredibly puffy gray khakis he’d said were “just the right ones” for teaching youth on Sundays. I was driving along
and practically sweating with anxiety about what had just happened and thinking of myself the next Sunday wearing these clothes.

As I was driving, I had a flashback from a couple years earlier, one of my friends in college telling me: “We’re concerned if you become a Christian you’ll lose your creativity. You’ll become homogenous.”

I thought, “Oh God, no, no no … this can’t be right! What if my friends saw me wearing these puffy gray pants? Oh Jesus, do you really want me to wear those puffy gray khakis?”

It is difficult to communicate this in writing, but all I can say is that as I was crying out to God—practically in tears as I silently prayed—I felt this incredible wave of emotion come over me. It was a wave of confidence that what my haircut was like and what kind of clothing I wore was not what God cared about. From my gut, everything in me knew that Jesus did not care about what I or anyone else in church was wearing on the outside. He cared what was happening on the inside of us.46

I then turned and pulled my 1966 Mustang onto the highway and knew right where I was going to go. I drove directly to the Goodwill store as fast as I could. I got out of my car and carried that lump of clothes and dumped it on the counter for them to have. I almost didn’t even give them the puffy gray khakis and was going to throw them in the dumpster—as I dreaded that anyone would ever be cursed with having to wear them. But I realized maybe somewhere out there, someone would like them. Not because they were forced to, but because

46 Matthew 23:25.
they liked them. So not to deprive a puffy-gray-khaki-lover that might want them, I left them there too.

The higher the hair the closer to God

It was odd that this pastor never asked me why I wasn’t wearing the clothes he gave me. I was so incredibly nervous that he was going to ask me that next Sunday or the Sunday after. But he never did. I did get the haircut, so maybe he was happy enough about that. And he left the church about six months later, so I never had to answer the question of why I never wore the clothes.

I eventually grew my hair back to a pompadour cut and haven’t changed it since. I often get asked why I still wear a pompadour haircut and why I keep it so high. For one, it is because I still love the music and the style of that time period, the 1950s. I also like the freedom of creative expression. I know we all have differing opinions on hairstyles, which should be a fun thing, allowing diversity and creativity. Who is to say what is “normal” anyway, when it comes down to haircuts and style? Styles are always changing, so why not be creative and show individuality with your hair?

In many ways, however, the reason I have kept my haircut the way it is, is that it’s also a reminder to me that God doesn’t care about how you wear your hair or about the outside appearance. God doesn’t judge people from the outside. People do. But God does not. God cares about the inside, and being a Christian has nothing to do with one’s hair or clothing. So if you ever ask me why I have my hair like I do, I will tell you it is about creative expression, rockabilly and punk music. But it also is a reminder to myself that I should never judge someone

\[\text{\footnote{47 1 Samuel 16:7.}}\]
by mere appearance or in a way that Jesus would not want us to. And a reminder of how many people do get incorrectly judged in this world.

Looking at the outside appearance is not “Christianity” – it’s imposing judgment about things that have nothing to do with the teachings of Jesus. Looking at the outside appearance is about personal preference and opinion. It’s about enforcing rules or a certain way of thinking, and it has nothing to do with looking at the inner heart of someone. It’s making judgments based on what is external, and I can say from even just that one experience of being judged that it is a lousy, lousy feeling I can vividly remember to this day.

**Are Christians supposed to judge people?**

Having someone tell me that Christians in a church would judge me because of my haircut is not that terrible when put in perspective with what some others have experienced from Christians. There are many incredibly sad stories of people feeling judged and greatly wounded by the church or by Christians. I once heard the pastor of a large church make a total character generalization and judgment about people who have tattoos. I have watched on television when Christian leaders make strong judgments about people with whom they disagree politically.

In fact, I have a friend who was raised in a church, but left the church never to return when he was a teenager for this very reason. He felt the pastor used the pulpit to proclaim judgment on politicians and people of a political party he disagreed with.

I recently typed in “preacher” and did an online image search and it was fascinating. Over and over and over again the images of church leaders preaching had something in common. So many of the images had the pastor standing with their fin-
ger pointing as they spoke. A finger pointing usually with great expression as they hold their Bible and speak. Now from all I sense from looking at these images is that “finger pointing” is not a pleasant thing. Finger pointing usually is about pointing out wrongs and about judgment and blame. I was speaking to a group of pastors just two weeks ago and showed them all these images. I was showing them image after image of preachers with their finger pointing and then slipped in the classical image from the movie Saturday Night Fever with John Travolta wearing a white disco suit and finger pointed straight up in the air. I joked and suggested John Travolta and disco was the source of where all this finger pointing came from. But I think it was making a point (no pun) that the image we have as Christians are finger-pointing judgmental people. Christians criticize and judge people they don’t even know if they perhaps disagree about something. This can happen in conversations, sermons or on blogs and comments on the internet. It’s often about those who may believe something different or hold different values than they personally hold. So the attitude of judgment rises and it can wound and hurt its targets.

Which doesn’t feel very Jesus-like.

**Jesus said “do not judge”**

The irony in all this, is that Jesus had words to say about judging others. It very likely could be one of his most well known sayings. In the New Testament book of Matthew we read when Jesus makes a clear statement that says: “Do not judge.”

So why is it that as I entered Churchland I did feel judged? And for my haircut and clothing preferences of all things? Many people today see Christians as being

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48 Matthew 7:1.
judgmental, and my particular experience back then validates that opinion. It could be making judgments about clothing, music, political opinions, lifestyle choices—there are all types of ways I have heard of people feeling judged by the church. And when you’re judged, it does not feel good. Nor does it make you want to have anything to do with a church or Christianity. These people who judged me about my hair and my style of dress did not know me. They made conclusions about me without knowing me or talking to me. They didn’t know my musical background. They didn’t know my heart. They didn’t know about my passion for knowing Jesus. They only saw the outside and made judgments.

So why did Jesus say “do not judge,” and yet the church and Christians seem to be known for judging? If I was to make a conclusion from some experiences I had, including the forced haircut and puffy khakis, I certainly would have thought that this church was judgmental. So, for me, I had to look deeper behind the scenes of the strange musical of Churchland. I needed to explore what Jesus and the teachings of the Bible actually said about judging others if I was to seriously consider being part of this or any other church. There was no way I wanted to be part of a religion that would produce people who would end up going out and judging others. I couldn’t possibly imagine that Jesus would want his followers to be judgmental in this way.

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Chapter 9: Judging the way Jesus Taught Us to Judge

“Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly.”
- Jesus

I would estimate that quite possibly the most quoted verse by Jesus in our culture today is “Do not judge.” Beautiful, beautiful words that Jesus said. As I’ve already shared, I know personally how terrible it feels to be judged. I’m not alone in experiencing this. Christians have a terrible reputation in this regard. Studies show that an extremely high percentage of people today when they think of Christians, the first term they think of about them is judgmental. So this is a widespread perception of the citizens of Churchland.

“Those poor brainwashed children who are being trained to be judgmental”

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50 John 7:24.
51 Matthew 7:1.
I was sitting in a coffeehouse not too long ago and unintentionally overheard at the table next to me a very animated conversation between a guy and a girl who looked like college students. I kept hearing “those judgmental Christians…” … and “they are brainwashing their poor children”….. “evangelical crazy fanatics… these innocent kids will grow up to be judgmental…” So, I gave in and intentionally decided to righteously eavesdrop as a learning experience, as it was just too intriguing to not listen in on this loud conversation.

It turned out that the girl had neighbors who were Christians. Being neighbors, she got to know their children through time. But she was telling her friend that because their houses were so close, she could hear the parents talking in their backyard. She emotionally expressed how often she heard these parents complaining about the state of the world, and how judgmental their attitudes were about anyone who wasn’t a Christian. She learned that this couple homeschooled their children because they didn’t want them to be influenced by the evil “non-Christian” world.

The college age girl quite passionately told her friend about how she was concerned for these children. She truly liked them and was hoping that they wouldn’t grow up to be judgmental and negative like their parents. I didn’t say anything to these two college students as I listened to them, but I just sat there wishing—wishing I wouldn’t keep hearing the same thing over and over again about Christians. Wishing that Christians weren’t so often thought to be a judgmental people, because I know that the teachings of Jesus say the opposite should be true.
About a week later I was in a supermarket and saw the same girl from the coffee house waiting in line by herself at the checkout stand. I was so incredibly tempted to walk over to her and put my hand on her shoulder. I would then look up into the air and pretend I was receiving a message from God and say to her: “Fear not, the neighbor children you’re concerned about won’t grow up to be judgmental. Jesus says he will take care of them.”

But I didn’t. (Although I kind of wish I had, just to freak her out and see how she would have responded.)

**Does following Jesus mean you become a negative, judgmental person?**

What I actually would want to tell this girl who was concerned that these children might grow up to be judgmental is that Christians are not *supposed* to be judgmental in this way. There are, for sure, some judgmental Christians out there. But just because one is a Christian, doesn’t mean he or she will grow up to be judgmental.

I know this is unfortunately not what a lot of people believe about Christians. I once talked to a young mom who told me she was keeping her six year old daughter away from churches because she didn’t want her to be influenced by negative and judgmental people. Instead she was teaching her daughter Buddhism because she felt Buddhists were more loving, kind and non-judgmental than Christians were. This is an incredibly difficult and very ironic thing to hear, because being judgmental is something that Jesus strongly spoke up against.

**Looking at what Jesus said about judging other people**
In the very well known passage that gets often quoted with Jesus saying “do not judge,” he was speaking to religious leaders who were judging others based on their own opinions and out of self-righteous attitudes. Jesus was obviously not very happy with this. This group of religious leaders had been taking what God revealed in the Scriptures as truth and guidance – and had been known to be adding on their own additional rules and preferences. Because they were leaders in that time period, it was easy for them to not be questioned.

To the people who saw them as spiritual leaders, they could force their way of thinking and opinions. They could make people feel shamed. Misunderstood. Like their character and essence was being judged. Maybe you’ve had this happen, when you felt like someone drew conclusions about your deepest person, without even knowing you, or your motives or heart.

Jesus said some strong and even comical words to make his point about judgmental people. When you read his statement about judging in its full context, you read this:

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in someone else’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the other person’s eye.”

- Matthew 7:1-5

Jesus was speaking about the judgmental religious leaders. He said they should first examine themselves, before thinking they had the right to be pointing out

53 Matthew 7:1.
what they considered faults and problems in others. I incredibly love this about Jesus. He has this amazing approach of going to the heart of things and even does it in a humorous way here.

He paints how incredibly silly it would be for someone who was walking around with an actual large wooden plank stuck in his eye to be telling others in a self-righteous way that they had tiny specks of sawdust in their eyes and needed to get them out. Jesus shows how easy it is for people to feel a sense of religious superiority over others and feel a responsibility to correct and control them. We should be humbly realizing that we all have our own “planks” to be dealing with. This should then change our attitudes and our posture as we think at all about making judgments on another person. Jesus is saying that when we are tempted to pass judgment, our very first response and thoughts should be “what planks do I have in my own eye?” That should be our first response.

When we come to terms with our own faults, our own mistakes and our own inadequacies, something happens. We don’t have the same sense of rushing into to condemn or base someone’s worth or actions on our own opinions. Jesus instructed people to first do some self-evaluation. Then you will be a in place to speak to someone else about whatever it is we feel is not right. But what a difference it makes, when we honestly do self-reflection first as Jesus said to do. Jesus said to judge others like we would personally want to be judged. All I know is that if I am being judged, I want whoever is judging to know the full story. I want them to listen to my take on things and how I ended up being in the situation or doing whatever it is I am being judged for. I want them to hear my heart first. I
would want them to have sympathy, empathy and compassion. This is how I would want to be judged. But we don’t always do this. It is so easy to come to conclusions about people and make judgments without knowing the full story.

**How easy it is to judge other people**

A couple years after I became a youth leader in that church, the high school group eventually grew to several hundred teenagers coming to our meetings every week from all walks of life. It was a really exciting time seeing so many new high schoolers coming into the group who had never have been part of a church before.

There was one teenager who came in, however, that I had trouble with. He was the one causing disruptions in meetings by making jokes, causing others to not pay attention when I was trying to teach. He would actually throw things at me when I was up there speaking sometimes. He’d bring in his skateboard and often get up and begin skating in the back of the room during serious moments of the meeting. He quickly became the teenager that I avoided.

I found that I paid attention to the teenagers who were more attentive and respectful to what we were trying to do. Honestly, I remember wishing sometimes that he wouldn’t even be there, as he caused so much hassle to running the meetings. After all, there were a couple hundred other teenagers who weren’t disruptive and didn’t show a lack of respect.

I would say that I had pretty much written this guy off and figured he was a troublemaker. I didn’t want to invest time in him. I made judgments about him and concluded things about his character and his life and treated him accordingly,
but what a lesson I was about to learn on how easy it is to horribly misjudge someone.

One afternoon I was walking in a section of town near the beach and saw this same teenager sitting alone on a bench. My first thoughts were “oh no….” figuring he would make some wise comment or say something “not helpful” as I walked by. But then I saw his head was down, and you could tell something was wrong. As I got closer, I spoke to him and he looked up. Then I saw he was crying. I sat down next to him, and he began explaining how his dad was arrested and put back into jail … again. He told me that his father was always in and out of jail, and each time he then had to go sleep on the couch of an aunt who really didn’t want him. And after he heard the news of his dad being arrested again, he came down to the beach, because he didn’t know where else to go.

Now, I sat there feeling doubly horrible.

First, I felt horribly sad for this teenager, thinking of what he was going through and how his dad had been in and out of jail for a long time. I can’t imagine what that must have been like for him emotionally processing it all as a young teenager. And then I felt horrible about myself. I had subtly made judgments about this teenager and his actions.

Yes, he was disrespectful when I was teaching. And yes, he would throw things at me when I spoke. But I only observed him from the outside actions and never took the time to really know him and his heart and his life. Now, sitting next to him and hearing his story, I understood him not as this teenager who was
just a troublemaker, but as a teenager who was reacting to the horribly sad situation he was growing up in.

As he told me his story, my heart felt such an incredible heaviness of sadness and guilt. I learned a very big and frightening lesson that day. How easy it is to become another guilty citizen of Churchland, even as someone who once felt Christians were incredibly weird, shiny-holding-hand people and didn’t take them seriously. Even as someone who was once served communion by a man in a weird robe and had to run out of the church because he was laughing so hard from the whole strange experience. Even as someone who knew what it felt like to be judged by Christians for my outer appearance, without really being known.

For me to then subtly get into a place of making judgments on someone else for not connecting with the church culture I was now in … It certainly wasn’t intentional, but I went from being the one judged to being the one who was judgmental. I will never forget that. It shocked me quite honestly in a deep way, about how easy it was to do. It was a shameful lesson I will never forget.

Now, there are a lot of reasons we may become judgmental. It could be that we never stop to realize how far we get brought into a certain subculture and then assume everyone else should be like we are. Or it could be that we see the outside actions of someone and never stop to listen to what she is really feeling or going through, which could explain why the person is doing what she’s doing. It could be we aren’t very happy people, so judging others makes us feel better about ourselves. It could be out of insecurity that we subconsciously judge someone else for the very thing we don’t like about ourselves.
The irony for Christians is that we should be the least judgmental people on the planet. We’ve been forgiven by grace and what Jesus did on the cross, we’re wiped clean of our mistakes and any ways we’ve done wrong to others. And, metaphorically, we then should be the ones humbly dragging our personal eye “planks” to Jesus and begging God to help us see others like God sees them.

What I know is that I know myself. I know the things I’ve done to hurt others. I know the lies I’ve told in my life. I know the selfish motivations that I’ve had in my life. I know the people I have sadly hurt. That’s why when I was originally asked to be a youth leader, I was overwhelmed with humility and joy—that someone would believe in me enough, despite my past, to bring me into a place of serving youth. I felt accepted and given hope. But then how easily that was crushed, when someone made a judgment about my character and about who I am in my essence—based solely on outer appearance.

**Did Jesus say never to judge someone?**

Now as much as I have focused on how we shouldn’t judge someone, interestingly Jesus did speak about ways that we should judge someone. Jesus said there *is* a correct way of judging others. Jesus himself made some sharp judgments about what he knew was right and wrong. In fact, only a few passages from where Jesus said the well known phrase of ‘do not judge” he also then let people know there are “wolves in sheep’s clothing” among us. Jesus even called certain hurtful and harmful people “pigs” and dogs. He was strong in his judgment

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54 Colossians 1:20; 2:14; 1 Peter 2:24-25.  
55 Matthew 7:15.  
56 Matthew 7:6.
and words when he saw how people who claimed they were religious and following God, would hurt and wound people.

Far too often Christians make judgment based on personal preference or whether or not one fits in with their concept (not the Bible’s concept) of how a Christian is supposed to conform to the specific subculture of a church or denomination. Christians have sometimes spent more effort and worry on getting people to conform to their created Christian subculture and preferences than encouraging people to become more like Jesus. Much like when I was judged by my hair cut and clothing style. I was judged by my outer appearance and not by my heart or by my story or who I was as a follower of Jesus. That is why Jesus warned those religious leaders to “stop judging by mere appearance and make a right judgment,” he was saying there is a time and right way to make a judgment, but not in the way this group was doing it. He was saying that yes there is a time to judge others. But not in the way they were doing it.

So much of Christian judgment is based out of opinion than Scripture

In this case, Jesus was being confronted by religious leaders about healing a man on the Sabbath, which was a special day of rest for them. They felt that since they’d been commanded in the law of Moses to “rest” on the Sabbath, it meant one shouldn’t heal a person on the Sabbath. The problem is that no where in the Scriptures does it say you shouldn’t heal someone on the Sabbath if they are in physical pain or trouble. This group became legalists and cared more about following their own rules than caring and loving others. Jesus was stating that they were judging the situation by outer appearance rather than what was really
going on. It was not based out of Scripture that they were judging Jesus, it as based on their own forms of legalism they develop and self-developed rules about what is right or wrong. So Jesus confronted their judgmental attitude.

So how we judge, who it is we are judging, and the motive behind it makes all the difference. This type of judging another is not about having a sense of moral superiority over another. It isn’t about making judgments about people’s motives or their essence when you don’t even know them. It isn’t about making judgments by appearance. It isn’t about things of personal preference or what you think someone should be like because they are different than you. Jesus is speaking about those who were publicly claiming to follow God and the Scriptures, but instead, with great religious hypocrisy, were making personal judgments about people.

That is why we constantly have to be referring to the whole of Scripture for any judgment that happens. It is far too easy to allow our own thoughts and opinions of what we feel is right or wrong judge others than to use the guidelines of Scripture. We can so easily make a judgment from the outside or by appearance which Jesus teaches is absolutely wrong to do. But even with the guidelines of Scripture, we have to remember Jesus’ words about what to do. To first examine ourselves and remove the plank from our own eye. If only we did this, then think of how our attitudes towards others would soften. How we would have empathy and not just judgment. That we would be a lot less quick to rush to judgment, as we would be reminded of Jesus when he said to judge others as we would want to be judged.
So the answer to the question, did Jesus say we should then judge other people, the answer is yes. And also no.

**The church has had it backwards in how we judge people.**

Here’s something we don’t hear about too often in churches. The church is not supposed to judge people outside the church. Only God is the judge of those outside the church. But, we are supposed to judge ourselves. I think we have had it backwards. Let me explain this.

In the New Testament it has the inspired letters from Paul the Apostle who was helping launch and oversee new churches. One of the churches was a church in the city of Corinth, which was a city in what modern day Greece now is. Paul loved this church. He cared for this church and the context of what he is saying is as a church leader who helped start this church and loves the church, he has a great concern. It was found out that a son had taken his father’s wife as a sexual lover. The letter Paul wrote states in 1 Corinthians chapter 5:

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father’s wife.”

We don’t know all the details of this, but that church did. Paul uses the words “Sexual immorality” to describe it. The original Greek word used by Paul is the word ‘porneia’ which was translated into English as “sexual immorality”. Basically, the term meant a term used for any and every type of forbidden sexual intercourse according the God’s guidance in Scripture. Which would have been this included this situation with a man having sexual relationship with his father’s wife outside of the context of marriage.

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57 1 Corinthians 5:1.
Now this was not a rumor or speculation like in modern day tabloids about someone hooking up with someone else. Remember that in those times these were house churches. Small communities where people did know each other deeply. So when this happened, it was not a secret nor gossip. Paul would not have raised it up if it was not accurate and also something clearly going against Scriptural teaching and God’s guidance\textsuperscript{58}. This was not judging by mere appearance. This was a fact happening.

So in this case, here was un-Jesus like living happening in the church. It didn’t represent Jesus. In fact it was even somewhat mocking of Christians, as they were then not acting on what they believed and therefore they were blatant proud hypocrites flaunting their hypocrisy to the world around them. And the weird thing as the church allowed it to continue. But Paul called out the church here and challenged them to address the issue and he even used the word “judgment” in what should be happening with this couple who was blatantly committing sin (going outside of God’s guidance and standards)\textsuperscript{59}.

The problem here is that the church knew that there was major hypocrisy going on, but they just let it go. This wasn’t someone who told a lie or two and then hurt someone, and later apologized. Or someone who got drunk one night and did some dumb things. Or someone who had an addiction and they slipped back into it for a while, but felt horrible when they did and asked for help. This was a Christian couple who knew what they were doing was wrong and kept on doing it as a pattern. They willingly continued in displeasing God and misrepren-

\textsuperscript{58} Leviticus18:8; Acts 15:20, 29; Acts 21:25.
\textsuperscript{59} 1 Corinthians 5:3.
senting Jesus. So Paul then makes some very strong statements about if they refuse to change their actions and continue to willingly and delightfully go against God’s guidance that they should not be allowed to continue participating in the “fellowship” (which means the community) and activity of the church. Wowee! That sounds horribly harsh…and quite judgmental! But let’s look at this deeper.

I recently taught this very passage in the church I am part of. I am a visual learner so I tried to write out some diagrams on a white board as I taught this to describe this the best I can. I explained that when someone makes a decision to follow Jesus, we then are self-determining to then align our life, our actions, our attitudes, our values with the teachings of Jesus and whole of the Bible. When we enter into a relationship with God through Jesus, we are then trusting in Jesus and that he died for us, and took our sin, our mess, on the cross. Jesus paid for our messes and sins. I drew on the board a circle made of little crosses. I then drew dots all over the board and then drew some inside the circle of crosses representing those who chose to put faith in Jesus, trust in what he did on the cross and then begin to align their lives with his teachings. When we put faith in Jesus we also become part of the “church” which is a community. A world-wide church which is all Christians everywhere. But also we exist in local church communities. And in these local church communities, we exist as a mini-family.

60 1 Corinthians 5:2.
Paul then describes to the Corinthian church that to allow sin to be accepted and even grow in the church is like allowing a disease or something corrupt to grow. Paul uses the metaphor of yeast (or leaven) with them when he wrote to them “Don’t you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?”⁶¹ In that culture they understood his metaphor well. What yeast does when it permeates dough, is it makes the whole batch of dough rise. So Paul is arguing that if you allow someone to live in hypocrisy and keep doing this without any consequence and as it permeates the church, it will then impact the whole church. He is arguing that the whole church is impacted.

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⁶¹ 1 Corinthians 5:6.
And guess what? It does get impacted. When I was teaching this in our church, I then drew on the board an infection that begins when we allow hypocrisy to fester. Remember the girl I shared about at the gym who said “pastors are creepy”? It was because as she looked in a little to the world of church through what media reports and when scandals in churches hit the news. She saw when “leaven” impacted a whole church and hypocrisy was not caught or let go. You hear people who aren’t Christians say things about the church being judgmental, negative, arrogant against other faiths, anti-gay etc. Well, when Christians are those things – those opinions are totally correct. We let the messes in church go “unjudged” and eventually bigger messes happen.

(this diagram should say something more like “Instead of judging outside the church, we turn our attention to cleaning up some of the messes within the church”)
I then drew a indicate sin growing (Paul used the metaphor of yeast in his letter) and how it then corrupts and hurts others in the church if it is allowed to grow. And then I said how as Christians, we so easily can think it is not our business to address when gossip, slander, gluttony, sexual immorality, ignoring the poor and needy, pride, legalism and all types of things get into the church. We can feel “Well, the person is a Christian and they are forgiven, so grace covers it by what Jesus did on the cross”. Which is true! But, if we take advantage of the cross and intentionally allow hypocrisy and sin to exist and continue, we are then taking advantage of Jesus and what he died for. We come to church meetings on Sundays and sing “Thank you Jesus for what you did on the cross and dying for my sin” but then we totally intentionally continue to sin and even endorse sin to continue during the week. Paul said this is not good an unhealthy to the church and had strong words to say about it.

Every church is different, and many churches have this in place - but what if a church had systems in place to where the “pastor” or leader wasn’t in such a high position of authority to where they could be challenged in a good way of

something felt fishy? Of course we can have all the systems in place to lovingly be addressing hypocrisy, and someone can somehow keep things secret and not allow others to help them. But what if this holding each other accountable in a healthy way for Christians was the normative? So that before whatever the hypocrisy was and before the scandal hit the news and everyone heard about it and people tremendously hurt – that leader could have been rightly judged from within before things got too far and the hypocrisy caught early on? Not just with leaders, but within the whole church. What if the church took these words seriously. Not in a witch-hunting way of let’s catch someone if they go over the speed limit 5 miles an hour.

But what if we so wanted to represent Jesus well, and not tarnish his name and the whole church that we took hypocrisy seriously and set a culture of Christians holding each other more accountable to when we stray from the teachings of Jesus. Not stray from human opinions on things such as hair styles. But stray from when we find ourselves in continual patterns of greed. Or continual patterns of being in an addiction we can’t shake and it is hurting our families. Or when we are self-righteous finger-pointers and make judgments about those outside the church we have no right to? Or when we gossip and lie continually? Or when we go outside of God’s guidance sexually? Or if we aren’t kind? Or loving? Wouldn’t it be something if the church did more self-examination in this way and cleaned up some of our messes, before they turn into major spills that really make even a bigger mess?
We are to judge each other – but we are not to judge those outside the church

I think we have been doing the reverse in the whole judgment thing. Paul told the church to judge those with the goal of restoring them from the hypocrisy, not punishing them (big difference). But Paul makes the incredible reverse statement that the church should NOT judge those outside the church. He says “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?” If those outside the church haven’t put faith in Jesus and committed to following him and the teachings of Scripture, why would we then be holding them accountable to following Jesus and his teaching. So why would the church then point fingers at others to say how wrong they are, when they haven’t made the decision to follow Jesus? Think of it. How often does the church today point fingers at those outside the church? We make critical remarks and point, point, point at how un-Jesus like some people may be. But why should someone be Jesus-like, if they are choosing not to follow Jesus? Paul says leave that business to God about what is happening with those outside the church. They are none of your business, but that’s God’s business not ours in the church. But then he says you better pay attention to yourself and to be judging inside the church.64

And think of this irony. As we point fingers at the world and judge and that is what people outside the church hear and see. And then we in the church allow hypocrisy to continue and infect the church. Then what do people outside the church see? They see a bunch of non-Jesus acting Christians who live hypocritical

64 1 Corinthians 5:12.
lives. So why wouldn’t anyone outside the church, ever want to be become a Christian and part of the church if we point fingers at them and make judgments but allow corruption and hypocrisy within the church? Someone can then rightfully think “The church is then no different than the world, and in fact worse! Because the church is then known for against the very teachings of Jesus. At least if I am not a Christian, then I’m not following his teachings, so why even bother to try if the church doesn’t follow them as the church?”

When Paul was instructing the church to take what feels like severe action when someone doesn’t want to stop living in hypocrisy, we have to understand this is not referring to when someone gets drunk and does some dumb things and then feels terrible about it and sorry for what they did. Or if someone gossips about someone and then is sorry and asks for forgiveness. We all will do things like this at one level or another. We all are imperfect, broken, messy people. Now when we put faith tin Jesus and God then gives His Spirit to help us then follow Jesus, we are not alone in this. We have God’s help, as we will fail on our own strength. We all will make mistakes, we all will not live perfectly. But the differ-
ence is, that we recognize that and then we strive to change and not continue in patterns of what does not please God.

So the big difference is when someone does do something which is not in God’s guidance and asks for forgiveness and then asks God to help them change in the area they are struggling with. Contrasting to someone who learns what they are doing is not in God’s guidance for life, but they choose to continue in what they are doing. This would have been the case in the situation Paul was addressing in the church at Corinth.

Over time they simply are refusing to change and do what it is alignment with the Scriptures and ways of Jesus. So if I am a gossip or I continue to pay no attention to the poor or needy and don’t care about them, even when I gullily understand it is something Jesus cared about. Or I continue to gossip and hurt people and don’t see anything wrong with it. Or I continue to not care or have my heart broken for the poor and needy. Or I continue to judge people in ways that Jesus would not want me to. Then it is time for me to be judged! But we have to be very careful and prayerful in how we do this. And Jesus did not leave us alone and without instruction in what to do.

**How Jesus told us to judge each other**

I am assuming when you started reading this chapter you weren’t going to think I would be writing “Yes! Please do judge each other!” But we need each other to judge each other in the church. When we do it the way Jesus laid it out to. Let’s look at what he said:
“If a brother or sister sins, go and point out the fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.65

When Christians stray into ways of living or attitudes that don’t align with Jesus’ teachings, and we know it (or think we know it) Jesus gives us some guidelines about what to do. First, remember we are to first examine ourselves and check our own eyes for a plank. So our attitude and heart are right as we approach someone else. Jesus then says if someone may stray from his teachings, we are to first approach the person by themselves. No gossiping to others. No slander. We are to directly go and listen to the person, in care for the person—to see if the person might even be right. So often there’s more to a situation than we see while judging from the outside. Jesus makes it clear to lovingly approach the person on your own, and, often, it ends right there.

This is so critically important. We may think one thing about someone. But as we actually end up asking we may find out something different and their side of the story. This really happened in the church I was once part of where someone in the church was about an hour from the town we lived in. He went into a restaurant and he saw another man he recognized from our church who was sitting in a restaurant with an attractive younger woman. He knew this man’s wife and this young woman was not his wife. He saw them talking and the older man
reached out and held hands across the table with this younger woman. The person that saw this was dismayed. But he didn’t gossip and he didn’t start going around telling people about it. The reason I know if this story is that I heard it from the man he thought was having the affair.

But the fellow who saw this after a couple days of self-reflection approached the man he suspected having an affair on his wife. Or at least having a romantic dinner and holding hands with someone. It turned out that the young woman was his daughter and he had met her as she lived over in that town. It was merely a dad reaching out and hold his daughters hand in affection at one point in their conversation. So what the man observed obviously looked like Christian hypocrisy, but it turned out to simply be a father and daughter dinner. The man thanked him for asking about it (and he ended up telling me the story). But think what would have happened to the one person’s reputation if the Christian began telling other people in the church and spreading gossip? Think of his wife if she heard somehow rumors of this man having an affair? He may never have got his credibility back if it went too far in the gossip chain. But it was handled like Jesus instructed us to handle it and it turned out there was another side to this story. But in other cases, it might be true what is happening. And Jesus then gives us further instruction.

Jesus states if the person is resistant, and your concerns that this person has strayed from the teachings of Jesus are validated, you may then (and only then) talk to one or two others and bring them to meet with the person. This shows love and respect. This shows that you honor the other person and are not
just telling others to slander the person. You bring one or two other fellow Jesus followers to confirm that what you’re concerned about is true. If these people also confirm it and agree, and the person still denies things or argues that they aren’t displeasing God, you then raise the pressure. You bring it to the next level of community in the church, and ask them to get involved.

So this is a really amazing, healthy, loving process that Jesus taught us. It’s how he wants us to deal with one (even ourselves) who strays from what we believe and becomes hypocritical. It’s done in gentleness and love. I’ve been involved in church leadership for a long time, and 99% of the time, the person who may be hypocritical in some way always recognizes it and agrees to stop by the time one or two others come into the picture. We sometimes just develop a blind spot to what we’re doing that is not how we’re to live as followers of Jesus. So that’s why we need each other in the church to lovingly correct and restore one another.

In love.

**It is all about restoration, not about punishment**

**How Jesus taught us to judge other Christians**

What I love about the Bible is that it levels the ground in saying we’re all “sinners” - we all make mistakes and no one is perfect and no one is without fault. Because we all will gravitate towards some wrong patterns in our lives, we need each other to help us notice. That is the beauty of the church. Fellow sinners all in need of each other to help us walk in the ways of Jesus and represent him

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66 Romans 3:23.
well. We all need to know when our attitudes may be stinky, or when we drift into something that is not healthy and right or may hurt other people. When we notice that someone is doing something that God may not approve of, then it is a judgment we are making about what the person (or we) may be doing who is claiming to follow God. These are judgments which fully align with God’s teaching in Scripture for those who say they are followers of Jesus.

So if I’m choosing to gossip and hurt someone, the Scriptures are clear that is not something God approves of.⁶⁷ I’ve told my friends and those around me to never be afraid to tell me when I’m doing something that is improper or shows a poor attitude. I know I need people around me who will help me be the best person I can, so I don’t drift to a selfish perspective on everything. This is them reminding me of how I may have gone astray from those beliefs. This is fully biblical as seen in these words:

“Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens.”⁶⁸

But look at the way the Scriptures say this should be done here. It says that the goal of someone making a judgment and letting me know that I’m outside my belief system as a Christian is love. The goal is also to “restore” me both to my actual beliefs as taught in Scripture and to God.

The beautiful warning in this passage also informs us we should never think we’re morally better than anyone else as we too could be tempted to do the

⁶⁷ Ephesians 4:29; Proverbs 20:19; 2 Corinthians 12:20.
very same thing. This then entirely changes our posturing and how we even think of addressing things when another Christian is not in alignment with the teachings of Jesus.

Instead of judging someone with an attitude of moral superiority, it becomes caring for someone because we too are like the person. It causes us to be humble, gentle, not legalistic and very caring in our approach. We must also take time to know the person, hear from the person’s heart, try to understand the person. This ends any sense of moral superiority or smugness when we realize we too could be doing the very same things.

**If Christians don’t judge each other – then we don’t care about each other**

This chapter may be unsettling to some talking about Christian judging Christians. And I hope you are constantly reading that I am saying not to be judging by mere appearance or out of self-righteousness or out of personal opinion vs. the actual guidance of from Scripture. If we do that, it is when people can be devastated and hurt and wounded. This isn’t about going out to random people and making judgments. The biblical pattern is to hold those who are Christians accountable to how they follow Jesus – not those outside of the church.  

But if you are aware of someone who is in a hypocritical pattern of some sort and you let it go, then you probably don’t care about them as Jesus does. What I mean by that is that it is horribly awkward to talk to another Christian about the possibility of them continuing in hypocrisy in some way. They might not see it as hypocrisy, but if we say we are followers of Jesus but then live a part of our lives in a pattern of contradicting that – it is hypocrisy. And it is not easy to

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69 1 Corinthians 5:12-13.
get the courage to sometime talk to someone about it. But think of this. The person who comes to us and lovingly speaks to you (in the way Jesus instructed) about what may be a sin issue in your life, cares about you more than people who don’t come to you. They are better friends than ones who hide behind “do not judge” allow you to continue in what is damaging and unhealthy for you and for other people. They care about the church that represents Jesus so much that they will then go through the horribly awkward conversations that can happen when someone addresses what seems like inconsistency in a fellow Christians life.

But I thank God for the people who have done that for me. I am so grateful when a fellow Christian comes to me and asks me about an area of my life that may seem out of synch. I have given several friends total permission to ask me anything at any time and correct me when I am not acting in accordance to the teachings of Jesus and the Bible. And they do! When I can begin verging on gossip, they shut it down and tell me to stop. When I may develop a critical attitude towards something and it leaks out in my speech, they tell me what I am doing. I need to be regularly “judged”. And this is not about hair styles or bright colored stitching on shoes. This is when we are clearly breaking the guidance of Scripture in our lives as followers of Jesus.

**Understanding grace makes one naturally less judgmental**

The more we understand the grace of God and experience forgiveness for what we should have rightly been judged for, the more forgiving and less judgmental we should be towards others. If a Christian is judgmental, I can’t imagine they truly understand the grace of God and judgment we are each forgiven from.
Because as we do understand this, our hearts change. Instead of being judgmental, we become people who try to see others as God sees them. When Christians truly understand grace, instead of judging others, we will love others. We become a people overwhelmingly thankful to God in our posture towards everything and everyone.

I love reading this story that Jesus tells about two types of people. One was a religious leader who was very self-righteous and judgmental. The other someone whose heart was humbled. You can read how Jesus viewed each one:

“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

- Luke 18:9-14

What an incredible story and illustration Jesus gives here, for Christians who feel they are somehow more superior than those who are “sinners.” Jesus lets us know that this group might be surprised one day when they realize how God actually views their judgmental hearts. We need a lot more of the ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner’ type of Christians and less of the ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people” type.
Hope for the church and Christians to be the least judgmental of all people

That’s why I do have hope for the church and Christians. We do need each other and we can change the judgmental ways most know us for. If you’re a Christian reading this, you are needed to live out the truths of how we’re supposed love other people and not be judgmental in ways Jesus disapproves of. At the same time, we need not be afraid of talking to each other when we see someone we care about who claims to be a follower of Jesus not aligning themselves with the teachings of Jesus and the Scriptures they claim to believe in.

If you’re not a Christian reading this, I hope this gives some insight to why you may see hypocrisy sometimes (or a lot of time). We are messy human beings, so of course we who follow Jesus will mess up. But if we aren’t making effort to help each other follow Jesus and hold each other accountable and even “judge” each other the way Jesus taught us to judge each other. Then we can allow hypocrisy to thrive. And sadly that gets noticed. And sadly then Christians and the church are known as “judgmental” in ways that Jesus would never endorse.

So I have great hope and believe in the years to come, as we realize the seriousness of incorrect judging of others. And also realize the seriousness of correct judging of other Christians in the way that Jesus taught us. And that one day we who are Christians will be known less for being “judgmental” and more for the characteristics that the New Testament book of Galatians says we should be known: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, good-
ness.” You can continue reading similar passages in the book of Colossians, which describe how Christians should: “…clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”

Using the corrective teaching style of Jesus when he said, “You have heard …. but I tell you…..” allow me to write out what I dream and hope the church becomes …..

This isn’t easy, as Christians have wrongly done so much judging. But as we’ve said before, it’s usually the loudest voices who end up shaping the perception of others. Not the average and normal Christians. But I know this can be overcome.

**Hope beyond judgmentalism**

One Sunday evening I saw a young couple who was standing outside the doors hanging out as people were coming in for the evening worship gathering. It puzzled me, because I’d seen them earlier in the day in one of our morning worship gatherings and was wondering why they would be back. So I went up and asked what was going on, and they told me a story.

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70 Galatians 5:22-23.
71 Colossians 3:12.
They shared how that morning after the gathering they’d gone downtown to have lunch, and as they were there, they’d seen a small group of Christians holding large signs with flames and fiery red letters saying: “Repent. Judgment is coming,” Other signs listed various sins. This group stood on the street attracting attention as people walked by and they would shout out the usual clichés and sayings street preachers often do, calling those who pass by “sinners.”

This couple watched as people walking by both ignored them and were irritated by them. Most people went downtown just to shop or hang out for lunch, and here they were being confronted by signs about hell, being shouted at by the people holding them. My friends approached the group to find out where they were from, and it turned out they weren’t from our town at all. They simply felt they would drive to our downtown area from where they live to share what they called “the gospel.”

Now, I can say that both this couple and myself believe that one day God will judge everyone, just as the sign said. But to be standing downtown approaching total strangers and holding signs with flames on them only loses most people’s desire to even engage in dialogue about the message behind the signs. It only reinforces that Christians are judgmental, as the primary message of this group had been negative, void of the “good news” part of the gospel.

My friends gently tried to tell them that in our town there are a lot of churches who are very people-focused and trying to share the wonderful news about Jesus. They also shared with them that this particular approach wasn’t very helpful to the cause of Christ and work of these other churches, especially since
they didn’t even live in town and couldn’t even build relationships with the people they might actually talk to. As sincere and true as this couple’s words were to them, this group basically brushed them off and said they weren’t budging. This was the way to tell people about Jesus.

Now, if you knew this couple, you would know that they’re not aggressive or forceful. They are incredibly soft in their temperaments and even introverted. I’d never seen them worked up about something, but this had set them off and caused them to do something very out of character. They turned away from the group, went down to the art supply store on the same street and bought their own poster boards and thick markers. They went and created signs that said things like: “This isn’t all Jesus talked about” and “Jesus is about joy in this life too.” They ended up standing there right near the other group just to show people there was another message than the ones on this group’s signs, and an amazing thing happened as a result.

Unlike the other group whose signs about flames and judgment were basically ignored, people were actually stopping to look at these new signs and talk to this couple. People passing by could tell they were counteracting the other signs, and the couple told me how throughout the afternoon they talked with people about Jesus, church and Christianity as a result.

Because they stood out with a different approach and did not focus on judging people they didn’t even know, they provided a whole other message. They told me the reason they came back to the church gathering that night was because they’d talked to people about our church – and the people had shown i-
terest. So they wanted to be there to meet anyone from the afternoon who might come to our evening gathering.

Stories like this give me hope that church can be known more for being a positive and loving influence than a negative and judgmental one. It gives me hope that Christians who are judging others from their own opinions, subculture or from an attitude of superior morality can recognize their wrongdoing. Hope that Christians won’t be afraid to (in love) address other Christians who are being judgmental and disgracing the name of Jesus by their actions.

I long for the day when I hear the girl in the coffeehouse tell how she’s so impressed with how loving her Christian neighbors are. Or when I can hear that the mother concerned about her 6 year old daughter being poisoned by the negativity of Christianity will want to bring her into Christian circles because she knows they are loving and will be a good influence.

But this will take Christians breaking out of the Churchland subculture and regaining what we’ve lost in terms of defining what a Christian is or isn’t to the world around us.

{{ BOX: Adventure observation: “Stop judging by mere appearance but instead judge correctly.” – John 7:24 }}

I am so thankful that Stuart Allen and others did not judge me by my appearance and exterior things. If they did, I may have left the church and never returned. Being judged incorrectly is a horrible experience. And I feel so terrible thinking about those who have been judged incorrectly by the church. That is why we must take this seriously and stop incorrectly judging, but then at the same time star correctly judging. So that some messes can
be prevented before they happen and that people can be restored and brought into healthy walk with God. As I write here, I need judgment in my life. As weird as that sounds, but it is true. But judgment by loving people who care for me and want the best for me. Therefore, they will approach me when I may begin to go astray with something. It isn’t legalism when it done this way. It is love.)))

Chapter 9: Is The Church Supposed to be Organized Religion?

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with the teachings of Jesus, but I am suspicious of organized religion. “

- Madonna

The coffee was still pretty stinking hot that splashed out of the cup and right onto my hand. The reason it splashed was that my friend slammed both her hands down on the table we were sitting at and said intensely and with great emotion:

“Danny, don’t you understand? Christianity is organized religion! Religion is the opium of the masses!”

I’d been in a fairly heated discussion with a good friend of mine in college about Christianity. She’d been asking why I was showing interest in Christianity and beginning to read the Bible. Understandably, as I shared earlier, I had friends who felt Christianity was an organized religion and had expressed concern that I’d then become a homogenous, non-creative, non-thinking person—that Christianity and church meant mind-control and never thinking on your own again.

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My friend had mentioned how Christianity was an organized religion that caused wars, hatred and violence. She told me that day that Christians have rules taught to them in order have a relationship with God--rules that are enforced and restrictive. You had to pray a certain way, believe dogmatic doctrines, and conform to the political agenda and preferences of the church.

**Christianity known as the opium of the masses**

My friend had been passionately raising up actual examples of things she’d observed about the church and Christians to prove her points. I’d fumbled with some responses in the best way I could at that time to counter her arguments. But then she’d then come back with more actual stories and reasons why she felt the opposite.

Finally she had raised her voice out of both care and frustration, and slammed both hands down on the table with the force that caused our coffees to splash right out of their cups as she quoted the famous saying by Karl Marx.

“*Religion is the opium of the masses.*”

- Karl Marx (1818-1883)

I remember that moment vividly. One, because the coffee actually splashed on my hand and as I said before it was still pretty stinking hot. And secondly, because of the quote she used. She was quoting a well known saying by Karl Marx. Marx was a German philosopher, political economist, historian, political theorist, sociologist and revolutionary. His ideas are credited as the foundation of modern communism. One of his most well known quotes is this very one about religion, that it is the opium of the

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73 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher, 7 & 10 February, 1844, Paris).
masses. Another translation of what Marx said in German reads: “Religion is the opium of the people.”

With either version, he used opium as a descriptive word as it is a pain reducer, a mind-numbing drug, an addictive drug. Marx stated that organized religion was a way for people to avoid pain and have their minds numbed to the world around them. (Understandable thoughts.) And then it all leads to the point that organized Christianity is a way for people to not to have to think for themselves. They can check out, get numb, addicted and be easily controlled by church leaders. In this way the church could create organized environments where people would go through the motions of religion blindly, without questioning things.

**Getting dizzy looking in the phone book at all the “organized” church names**

After I had such a wonderful experience in the church in London, I knew it was important to find another church when I moved back to the States. It seemed natural that someone following Jesus and his teachings should be in community with others following him too. So not knowing where else to look, I turned to the phone book. As I looked in the yellow pages under “churches,” it was quite overwhelming. There wasn’t just one little church section, but a whole series of types of churches with very weird sounding names. Words like *Presbyterian* or *Episcopalian*—which, truthfully, sounded to me like various strains of viruses. I had no idea what these words meant or how to pronounce them. Some names had other country or state names as part of their names, which was also confusing. Like Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Did that mean this was a church in town for Lutherans who moved here
from Missouri? It was very confusing to someone who never knew anything about
churches or denominations before.

The church I was part of in England was called “Chapel of the Opened Book”. That was a pretty simple name to understand. It was easy to know that the “opened book” part of the name was the Bible. So it was a place you would meet at to open the “book” and learn. But looking at this long list of church names, it wasn’t easy to decipher what kind they all were.

If you look in the yellow pages or do a search on Google for churches, you’ll see a massive list. There are churches called Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Evangelical Free, Free Methodist (note that each time I saw the word “free” in a church name, I wondered if it was because the others charged an entry fee), United Methodist, Presbyterian Church in America, Presbyterian Church USA, Christian Reformed, United Reformed, Dutch Reformed, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, United American Baptist, Conservative Baptist, Southern Baptist, Reformed Baptist, Anabaptist, Seventh-Day Adventists, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, Church of God, Church of God In Christ, Assembly of God, Church of the Nazarene, Salvation Army, Foursquare Gospel, Plymouth Brethren, Mennonite, Quakers, Vineyard, Episcopalian, Anglican, Catholic, Calvary Chapels, non-denominational churches and the list goes on and on.

What made my phone book experience even weirder, was that some of the churches in the yellow page ads looked like they were trying to compete with one another, like businesses. There were little slogans like “We’re a church who accepts you as you are.” (Indicating other churches didn’t or that you must be pretty messed up
since they’ll take you “as you are”?) There were slogans saying that a church was “The friendliest church in town.” (Indicating others weren’t?) There were so many ads saying things with the word “relevant.” Relevant preaching, relevant music, etc.

I would see phrases in some of the ads like “we have a rockin’ band,” and I can only say from an outside perspective that it sounds fairly corny to say your band is “rockin’”. For a church band to have to point out they are “rockin’” means they really probably aren’t. This may sound overly critical, but these were honest observations of the yellow page ads to an outsider trying to find a church. It felt like the churches were competing with each other like businesses do.

After sorting through the giant list of names, I eventually found one that was not a denominational church or one with a confusing name, and I couldn’t help but wonder if the early church leaders would have ever guessed that in 2,000 years there would be all these divisions and different kinds of churches. If Paul the Apostle were alive today and went looking for a church in a phone book or using Google, what church would he select out of that giant list of different kinds of organized churches? Would Jesus be happy with all these organized churches?

The Church of “Simon Says”

I have a friend who was sharing with me why she isn’t part of a church, because she was another who felt it’s just organized religion. She said the last time she went into a church meeting it felt like a game of “Simon Says”. She explained that church leaders came out on the stage and told everyone to stand up, then sit down, clap your hands, repeat this, repeat that. She said she didn’t recall seeing any of this in the Bible, but the church had a way of being organized the
way they liked it and forced people there to do what they wanted, like in a “Simon Says” game. She felt she connected to God more when she would be out riding her mountain bike on trails than what she experienced in a forced “organized religion” experience.

I have another friend who shared with me that he felt churches organized themselves around politics. When he was a teenager he was in a church with his parents and he remembers how the pastor consistently brought up issues that were in current hot political debates. He also felt the pastor was trying to (more or less) play “Simon Says,” but in this case it was getting people to vote a certain way by the sermons he gave. He said that the pastor’s posture and attitude made him feel that if someone in the church disagreed with the political views that were being taught, the church wouldn’t accept the person. He felt that this church “organized” itself around a political party, although they didn’t come outright and say that – he felt that’s exactly what they did. This left a strong impression on my friend who hasn’t returned to a church since his teenager years. He says he experienced “organized religion” and doesn’t want to return.

**What is “organized religion”?**

It’s fairly common to think of Christianity as an organized religion. I recently posted on my blog asking people what they think of when they view church as “organized religion”\(^\text{74}\). I got answers posted and emailed to me such as:

- Organized religion is when church becomes controlling and doesn’t allow people to question or think for themselves.

• Organized religion in that sense doesn’t give birth to anything; its purpose is to assimilate existing organisms into an efficient, controlled, and predictable structure. The bureaucracy exists for itself and although its actions may benefit others, its primary purpose is to preserve and control itself.

• Organized religion is when church dictates what you do with God. They tell you how to pray, when to pray, how to sing, when to do this or that. If you question what the church does, then you’re a bad person. There is freedom in Christ, but the church boxes Jesus into an image of who and what they think He is rather than allow some freedom.

• The “church” (or other entity) existing for the point of furthering the organization itself (buildings, money, power, hierarchy, etc.) rather than creating a movement for the good of the world.

• Organized religion is when church turns into a machine replete with systems, structures, strategies, mission, vision, values, culture, procedures, goals, objectives, core beliefs, systematic theology, policies, checks and balances, staff manuals, due diligence, legal, financial and denominational oversight.... would you like me to continue? I know... I ran it.

The definitions that were given described the church as controlling how someone worships in church meetings and how they pray. Some of the definitions stated that “organized” happens when the church has systems of control to how one thinks about truth or theology—a feeling that the church wants you to conform to one specific way of thinking. Some responses included that the organized church is about systems of leadership control and power. I can relate to this, as when I visited those two Christian meeting in college they both definitely had organized restrictions and forced ways of doing things in their meetings. The one was “organized” making you clap your hands and sing upbeat commercial jingle sounding songs. The other church was “organized” to have men wearing strange looking robes, dreadful organ music, and making you repeat droning phrases out loud in unison.
I now understand that these things come from a “tradition” and can appreciate them more now. But when I first was looking into Churchland – it was confusing and not appealing at all. It did feel like they were taking “God” and organizing what they felt about God into their own ways of doing things. That’s why I gave up on church at that time because I figured the church was way too organized for me to fit in. But I had to figure out why churches did the things they did.

How could I answer my friend telling me that church is “organized religion”? How could I move forward into Churchland without understanding what I was getting into?

**Looking into why churches do the things they do**

The tension I experienced during this period of looking for a church was that I had read enough of the New Testament to understand that if you’re a follower of Jesus, then you understand the beauty of being connected to a church community of other Christians. From my time in that London church, I knew this was true and what I supposed to do. But with these strange names and suspicions I had about Christianity, I didn’t want to get into some cult or mind-controlling group. I didn’t want to be part of a group of people who weren’t thinking about why they believed what they believed.

So I had to do some research about why there are so many different church experiences out there. I also knew I had to have an answer to my friends’ concern of Christianity being an organized religion. So I did some reading of church history, and when you study the development of the church, you see how certain denominations
developed. How churches are “organized” now isn’t necessarily from the Bible itself, but it developed later in time. When you study church history you discover that:

- **Church buildings were not used in the Bible for their weekly place of meeting.** The church actually did not meet formally in designated church buildings for over 300 years, but met in homes. So “church” as we think of it today isn’t like it originally was. No stained glass, pews, pulpits or leaders wearing different outfits than the people of the church. No peppy commercial jingles about Jesus sung in church meetings. They met in homes with average people leading and teaching a community of people who were following Jesus and serving others. As the church grew it moved into formal buildings, and growth should be normal if God is changing lives and more people become followers of Jesus. What a beautiful thing when more and more lives are touched by Jesus and changed. So of course there would be the need for different meeting places other than homes as the church got larger.

But these buildings were not seen as “God’s House” or magical buildings where you go to meet God. The New Testament teaches people are “God’s House” and not a building. And God doesn’t only dwell in church buildings, but is with us always. So that’s why in the early church they met more informally in homes where meals were served, wine was drank and people worshiped in community. The meetings were informal, but still structured in an orderly and communal way so there could be teaching and praying together. And that’s why it is confusing when church meetings feel so “organized” that the family feel seems to be very distant.

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75 Acts 2:46; Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15, etc.
76 Hebrews 3:6; 1 Corinthians 3:16,
77 1 Corinthians 14:26,
I just talked to a 24 year old who was visiting a church for the first time this past week. He had coffee with him and people came over to where he was sitting and told him coffee wasn’t allowed in the sanctuary. He said it was embarrassing, other people saw it, and it made him feel like a total outsider. I assume it was because of the carpet that they didn’t want coffee in the building, but the early church served meals and drinks when they met. Movie theaters even allow you to bring in drinks. But this young guy visiting a church wasn’t allowed to have his coffee in the building. When carpets become more important than people, a church begins to reek of “organized religion.”

Churches meeting in buildings instead of homes are not bad things. I am very thankful that the church in London had a building, as it was there where I met Stuart and had meetings that were life changing. If it met in a home in some London suburb, I would never have found it that day.

I currently am part of a church that meets in a designated building that seats several hundred people. But I found it fascinating to learn that the Bible never puts the church building as this sacred, magical sort of place to meet in. It’s just a building. We shouldn’t be organizing our church around the buildings, but organizing our buildings around what best helps us become followers of Jesus and make a positive difference in the world—coffee spills and all.

- *Today’s church buildings themselves often reflect the design of Roman courts or Broadway theaters.* After I discovered that the early church eventually moved into bigger buildings, I learned they had to get more organized. It wasn’t just 30 or 40 people meeting. Now it could be hundreds. I learned that when the church moved out
of homes and into formal buildings, they modeled them directly after buildings that were common at that time period - the Roman basilica. The Roman basilicas were basically the government courtrooms—rectangular shaped, with a stage at one end. In the Roman basilica they’d have speakers separated and elevated up front, facing the people, and the books of law were kept in what currently would be the “pulpit”. Pews were added in the 1300’s and especially became important after the Reformation when the sermon became the focal point of church meetings. People then needed to sit down in these buildings that reflected the design of a Roman law court. Where the books of law once were, the Bible now is sitting. Where the judge would reside, it’s now the preacher. This does impact the atmosphere of meetings, whether we’re conscience of it or not.

Not all church buildings today use that style, as now there are ones with sloped floors, comfortable theater seats and lights to enhanced the preacher and musicians. I discovered in my research that churches of the nineteenth century began copying the architecture of theaters in hopes to communicate to people better.78

It is fascinating when you look into why churches do what they do. There’s nothing wrong with any of these buildings. The Bible is silent on what kinds of buildings we use. But when we get locked into organizing ourselves around the building, because we say what we do is the “biblical” way of doing things and put buildings over people, then it becomes organized religion.

• **Communion, as we commonly think of it today was very different in the Bible.** It didn’t stop with just the buildings, I wanted to know about this “Cup of Wonder”—as

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my friend Randy unforgettably put it—that Christians drank in churches. I wanted to know about what is now known as Communion, Eucharist, Mass or the Lord’s Supper, and I learned it was originally not something that was a distinct act, with only a church leader serving the people a small piece of bread or wafer and small cup. But instead, it was part of a full meal that the early churches ate and drank together when they met in houses. The bread wasn’t originally a little thin wafer or tiny little Chicklet-shaped thing, and the cup was actually a glass of wine that was part of the meal, not grape juice in a miniature plastic cup served in trays or served only after an official church leader blesses it. So how we practice Eucharist, or Communion, or The Lord’s Supper in most churches today is very foreign to the way it originally was done.

• **Sermons like we generally give them and hear them today, were not like they did them in the early church.** The church adopted the Greco-Roman approach to communicating and teaching later on. When the church moved into formal buildings, the pulpit and the pastor or preacher now became elevated higher above the people of the church so you could see them. This did cause a feeling of separation to develop between the leader and the people of the church. The Bible does teach that the church should have leaders and a leadership structure, but having them suddenly on a platform did change the dynamics of things. Nothing wrong with preachers on a platform and using different communication styles, of course, but it understandably begins to feel more “organized”.

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79 1 Corinthians 11:20.
80 Hebrews 13:7; 17.
• *Church leaders dressed no different than other people in the beginning.* Where did all these pastoral robes come from? Why do so many preachers wear suits and ties? I learned that through time, church leaders also got more “organized”—keeping in step with their buildings—and began dressing differently than the common people of the church. At the time of the Reformation in the 1500’s, church leaders decided to wear what was the clothing of “scholars” at that time which were robes. So back then, it meant something to know your pastor was educated and he would wear the robes to show this. Today, no one wears these robes outside the church, graduation ceremonies and courtrooms. But these things have roots and reasons, and some have chosen to stick with what meant something in the past even if today most people have no idea why the pastor of a church would wear a robe.

When the church met for the first several hundred years, people just wore whatever they were wearing that day – not special clothing. They met, most likely, on Sunday nights, and since it was a workday for them, they would gather for a meal, have teaching, prayer, then take the bread and wine as part of the meal and remember Jesus (which was their communion or Lord’s Supper). They most likely didn’t dress up or put on different clothing for church.

I learned that even most of the formal titles we use today for official church leaders—such as reverend, minister, even pastor—were never in the Bible. You never see in the Bible someone saying “Hey, Reverend Jim”. People had the role of “pastoring” which meant the care and oversight of a certain group of people, but there’s no indication they used these “organized” titles. These formal titles developed later,
and there’s nothing wrong with using them, if it doesn’t create organizational distancing and unhealthy control issues between people and the leaders.

**Diversity of how the church meets and does things can be beautiful**

It was amazing for me seeing the rich history of the church and how it developed. It made me appreciate that there’s diversity and it actually showed me that Christians aren’t all homogeneous. So I learned to enjoy that there were more formal churches, less formal churches, big churches, house churches – all kinds of churches. But what I did get concerned about is that when churches go into “Simon Says” mode, they can become “organized religion”.

What I mean by that, is that over time leaders and the people of churches can just go through motions like Simon Says. And it can lose its life and, over time, become an institution.

**We don’t have to use giant shoe-box sized car phones anymore**

What I learned is that there isn’t a biblical basis for many of the surface things that were either confusing me or putting me off from wanting to be part of church and Christianity. So much of it was sub-cultural to the specific church or denomination. Things that developed in a certain time period in the church’s history and were helpful at that time. However, if a church does things because “we’ve always done it that way” it’s easy to slip into organized religion.
I was watching an 80s movie on television, and they had a scene where someone was using a car phone, when car phones were brand new. So the car phone was gigantic. It seemed like it was the size of a shoe box and looked so weird and even humorous to see the person hold it to his head as he talked. There was even a coil from the phone to the receiver in the car, so you couldn’t walk anywhere with the phone. You had to stay in your seat to use it. At one time, this car phone was cutting edge technology. It served its communication purpose in its time but now we’ve found easier ways to communicate via wireless small cell phones rather than through a giant shoebox-sized phone.

Wouldn’t it be weird if we were still forced to use the giant car phones, because they were once useful and made sense to communicate at a certain time period? It wouldn’t make sense. And what would be even weirder would be for a church to arrange everything around something like this giant phone that once served a purpose—even building new cars to fit the shoe-box-sized phone—and then forcing people to use the giant phone if they come into the car.

Of course a church wouldn’t do that. But could it be possible that so much of what people feel is “organized religion” is simply the church paying more attention to what actually was once “organized” and sticking with a structure that may not be as useful or inviting to people today?

You may have been to a church where it felt like you were being forced to use shoe-box phones because once they were once good way to communicate. With a church, it may be being forced to communicate with God in a certain way. Or what the sermons are like. Or it could be the roles the leaders have set up—the differences
between what leaders can do and what the people can do. Or how a church building is
decorated or set up. So many different things. It can feel like you’re walking into a
system and structure with a shoe-box phone and a cord attached.

It’s awkward, and you know that something should be different, but others
seem to go on like this organized religion is normal. So although we have so much
freedom in what we do in churches, churches have to be careful they don’t start pro-
tecting and guarding shoebox-sized car phones and making people feel guilty if they
don’t feel right using them or don’t even know how.

**Most of what we “organize” in our churches is not in the Bible**

When I first got involved in church, I simply assumed the way the church was or-
ganized and functioned was the way the Bible taught it should be organized. So how
the preacher preached was the “biblical way”. Or the titles the church leaders used for
themselves, or the way the meetings were run and the whole feel and vibe of church
meetings – I assumed it was all based out of the Bible. I didn’t know any different.
Until I actually explored the Bible to see what was in there and what wasn’t about
how churches are organized and function.

What’s fascinating is that the Bible does show how the early church was orga-
nized to the point that it had meetings in both large gatherings and also small gather-
ings, in homes.\(^81\) They did seem to meet on a specific day of the week. The Bible
does say there should be teaching from the Scriptures when the church meets togeth-
er. There should be prayer. Caring for each other. Taking the Lord’s Supper togeth-
er.\(^82\) There should be leaders established who have a responsibility to care for peo-

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\(^81\) Acts 2:46.
\(^82\) Acts 2:42-47.
ple. But apart from that, it doesn’t say too much about various formats of what happens in church meetings. The emphasis is more about growing in love for God and others.

It becomes a bad thing when one church says “this is the right way to do it and you’re wrong if you aren’t organized like we are.” But, as I’ve stressed, when you study the Bible, you find that what can be clung to and what is “organized” is rarely in the Bible itself. With doctrines and teaching there can be the same attitudes of fearing change, fearing questioning. I fully believe in certain doctrines and beliefs. I think there are some beliefs to fight for. But there are many that the church fights over, that perhaps we need to loosen up on. Perhaps we shouldn’t “organize” these beliefs so tightly.

**The beauty of the ever-changing creative and adventurous church**

The openness and sense of freedom and creativity that I learned the Bible gives the church is the very reason I have such hope for the church. Christianity and church can be a beautiful, flexible, changing, community of creativity, which organizes itself not for restricting people in ritual, rules and going through mindless motions, but for freeing people. The church can be a community of very diverse, non-homogenous people, who get to use their uniqueness as human beings to express their love for God in so many different ways.

But talking about things like this can make some Christians uncomfortable. Because the organized way we may have thought was “biblical” turns out to be personal preference. Even when church leaders want to change how they are “orga-

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83 Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 3:1-13.
84 Romans 6:18.
nized”, sometimes people of the church like things the way they are. This is a letter that was written from a church member to a church music leader who was simply trying to make a change in regards to music in the worship service. Listen to the tone of this letter and the resistance to seeing change in this church:

“I am no music scholar, but I feel I know appropriate church music when I hear it. Last Sunday’s new hymn - if you can call it that - sounded like a sentimental love ballad one would expect to hear crooned in a saloon. If you insist on exposing us to rubbish like this - in God’s house! - don’t be surprised if many of the faithful look for a new place to worship. The hymns we grew up with are all we need.”

The irony is that this letter was written in 1863, and the song this person was so concerned about was the hymn *Just As I Am*. Today that hymn is a beloved hymn sung in so many churches around the world, yet when it was first introduced to the church, someone was upset about it--it was a change in what the church normally was singing and doing. The person writing this letter had “organized” their religion to the point where a new song was threatening and they wanted no change.

**Fighting about bringing the organ in and fighting about kicking it out**

Another fascinating example is that many churches used an organ as their primary instrument of worship for centuries, and when people began to suggest that the organ was not the instrument that connected with people anymore, many fought back. How dare people think they can take the organ out of church? But what is so funny, is that when you look at history, the church once resisted bringing the organ into the church. It was considered a “pagan” instrument, used at the time for signaling the entry of kings and queens. So to bring an instrument that was used

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85 From sermon Nicky Gumble gave on evangelism at Alpha Conference in 2008 (from the typed notes he used).
like that into the church was unthinkable! Of course, through time the organ was allowed and eventually became the most common instrument used in the church. But then years later to suggest another change by removing the organ and using contemporary instruments caused fighting and tension in the church. So there was fighting to get the organ into the church and fighting to get the organ out of the church—and it’s all personal preference. That’s organized religion.

Oh, what strange things we do sometimes. And the sad thing is that the church who becomes “organized religion” will squelch out the life of its people. I wonder what Jesus thinks of all the energy, emotions, arguing and bickering over something like an organ. Let’s now look at how Jesus reacted when he experienced “organized religion” in all its horrible glory.
Chapter 10: Organized Religion as the Hope Of The Masses

“‘I’m not into organized religion.’”

- Neil Young

“Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers.”

- Jesse Ventura

“There are things about organized religion which I resent. Christ is revered as the Prince of Peace, but more blood has been shed in His name than any other figure in history.”

- Frank Sinatra

I don’t know about you, but something I hope I never have to experience is an incredibly angry Jesus chasing after me with a whip. It’s a very odd thing to picture, but it actually happened to a group of people, according to the Bible.
Whatever it is that set Jesus off like this is something that certainly I want to avoid at all costs. I don’t normally think of Jesus with a whip in his hand running after people. In my mind I think of images such as Jesus sitting on a grassy hillside teaching people to love their enemies. I see the image of Jesus calmly and gently reminding others to be loving their neighbors as themselves. I have the image of him tenderly reaching out his hand and healing people. But not the image of an angry Jesus running full-force after people with a whip in his hand and turning over tables.

I can’t imagine what it must have been like standing there in the temple courts that day and hearing sounds of a commotion happening. You turn to see what’s happening, and you suddenly see a fuming Jesus running full force straight at you with his hand raised holding a whip. “Oh #&! Here comes Jesus! And He is really, really mad!”

I’d probably faint and drop if I was one of those people and he was coming after me. The scenario does seem quite contradictory to so much of what we read about his life and actions in the New Testament.

So, what caused Jesus to get this upset?

The non-Jesus like organized religion that hurts and excludes people

As we explore this story and the unusual way Jesus reacted here, we see that the reason Jesus was angry was because of “organized religion”. The story here is that Jesus was going into the Temple Courts in ancient Jerusalem. The Temple at that time was the central place where people who had faith in the God

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86 Matthew 5:44.
of Israel would gather together to worship. In the Hebrew Scriptures there are some established guidelines about worship in the Temple. There was a distinct order of sacred functions and there was even a rhythm of worship and special festivals through the calendar year, which the Scriptures taught about. Those who believed in the God of Israel would then come to the Temple to worship during certain times of the year. These were all good things and very celebrative with deep meaning, remembering God’s love and faithfulness to people. It must have been an incredible experience seeing people from so many different places—men, women, rich, poor, young, old, different races and all those who believed in God—coming to worship together.

Because many people were coming in from different countries, some from quite far away, they needed to be able to bring certain things into the ceremonial worship and had to buy them in Jerusalem when they arrived. To do so, they needed to exchange money into the local currency to pay the Temple tax as well as purchase what they needed for the ceremonial acts of worship that they would participate in. The actual exchanging of money and selling of sacrificial objects in itself wasn’t a bad thing. The money changers were actually helping those coming to worship to exchange their currency as we do when we enter another country who uses a different currency. So it wasn’t the money changers who upset Jesus.

It was something else about what was happening, which caused Jesus to take a whip and go into action. In the New Testament book of Mark chapter 11:15-17 it says:
“On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But, you have made it a den of robbers.”

We read further about what Jesus did here in John 2:15 that “he made a whip out of cords” and chased them away. As Jesus is overturning the tables and chasing them out with a whip in hand, he quotes a passage from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah\(^88\). What he quoted stressed that the Temple and the worship of God would be for all people of all nations. However, what was happening here in Jesus’ day, was that the religious leaders had turned something beautiful into “organized religion”. They determined that there should be rules, and they had opinions of how things should go. These rules and practices were not in what they had in their Scriptures, but were things they had personal opinions about, opinions about how things should be done. So they “organized” things and segregated the areas in the Temple by race and gender for what they determined were “purity” reasons. Jewish women were only allowed on a lower level, and non-Jews in the outermost court. At this time the religious leaders also had organized and added restrictions and were not allowing anyone who was blind, lame, deaf, or mute (even children) to have full Temple access. The whole purpose of “all nations” freely worshiping together was turned instead into an organized religious system involving segregation. Human rules and restrictions were added in, causing hurt and discrimination. No wonder Jesus was ticked.

\(^88\) Isaiah 56:7.
Jesus also quoted the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah\textsuperscript{89} and said that they had turned the Temple into a *den of robbers*. When you look up the passage Jesus quoted from the prophet Jeremiah in the Hebrew Bible, you find a scenario where God was condemning the Jewish leaders who allowed the Temple to be a refuge for those who were committing crimes. So, Jesus is then directly inferring that the Temple leaders (once again) allowed the Temple to be used for organized crime and profit. They saw the exchanging of currency and the purchasing of items for worship as opportunities to take advantage of others financially. Something beautiful was corrupted and “organized” for personal gain, power, control and profit. It makes you hope that Jesus got some good whip cracks in on the bottoms of those out there doing this.

**Would Jesus look at the church and see “organized religion” today?**

The question I would like to raise now is this:

*If Jesus was walking around and peeking into Churchland today, would he make a whip and start chasing after some of the church leaders and Christians?*

As I was exploring Christianity and the church, I had to figure out this question of organized religion. I had all these reservations about Christianity because of the way there have been wars, hatred and killing in the name of organized religion. I had these apprehensions because of the way I understood Christianity to be enforced dogma, restricting and controlling people’s thinking—making followers worship and pray in ways others deemed best.

A relationship with God doesn’t seem like it would be about wars, hatred or enforced dogma. So is the church guilty of taking something that is beautiful and

\textsuperscript{89} Jeremiah 7:11.
setting up a system of “organized religion” that restricts and controls people in a way that God wouldn’t be pleased with? If the church gets organized and institutionalized and turns what it means to follow God into a culture of oppression and conformity, where rational thinking or questions are suppressed and political agendas in the name of Jesus are present, I think Jesus would be getting his whip.

**Chasing out the traditions, restrictions, control and rules that squelch life**

When I first was entering Churchland I was more aware of the negativity of organized Christianity. But after getting to know the wide variety of churches out there and meeting a lot of church leaders, I can truly say that most churches, even the most organized churches, generally don’t set out to restrict, control or hurt people. But it does happen.

Over time, some churches can end up shifting and putting higher values on their systems and ways of doing things than they do on people. These systems could be from the way a church holds their Sunday meeting to the way they make decisions – or the way nothing changes, no matter what. Or it could be the way the leadership in a church is established or how members become members. It could how people are directed to do “Simon Says” things in prayer and singing, the way my friend experienced church. So whatever the tradition is (whether from the 1500’s or 1989), if it becomes more important than people and seeing people know Jesus, then I do think it means “organized religion” has stepped in, and Jesus would be chasing it out.

**Chasing out the way politics are brought into the church**
Perhaps Jesus’ whip would come out when the church organizes itself to sway people politically. Despite how it feels at times from media and from some people in churches, Jesus was not a Republican or a Democrat. Jesus taught that he was personally concerned about the kingdom of heaven, not building political structures on earth. He even refused to take political leadership when people wanted to make him an earthly king. Jesus did show great wisdom politically, so he was not naïve to the political climate and dynamics of his day. But Jesus was concerned about people not politics. Jesus was out to transform society by transforming individual hearts - not by transforming the political system.

Jesus was not passive at all when it came to taking action on helping people. He gave directives for those who follow Him to feed the hungry and cloth the poor, and love others unconditionally. I personally believe that in whatever country we live in, we should of course vote as we live in a world of politics that effect our daily lives. So I pray and hope that who I vote for and what I’m voting on would be things in alignment with the heart of Jesus. I see issues that we know Jesus would be concerned about sometimes heralded by Republicans and sometimes heralded by Democrats. But when churches start seeing themselves as guardians and promoters of political parties, I do think it means “organized religion” has stepped in and Jesus would begin chasing them out when this happens.

**Chasing out the mind-control and non-thinking for yourself**

Most churches are not into mind-control, but sometimes a church can create a culture that doesn’t allow much questioning or encourage critical thinking. I once

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90 John 18:36; Matthew 22:21; John 18:36.
knew a youth pastor at a church who told me the climate of his church didn’t allow him to read books by authors who were not in alignment with the specific theology of the church. He said he had to create a “secret bookshelf” in his home because if other staff at his church saw the books he was reading it would cause questions and possibly even cost him his job. What a horribly sad thing to have to deal with and church culture to live in. To question something in the church he was in was to then be seen in a bad light by the leadership. He eventually left this church, and understandably so. It was surprising hearing that from him, because this is a fairly large church and from the outside looks very hip and contemporary. But from this one pastor’s perspective, internally it wasn’t a safe place to raise questions. To me, this feels like “organized religion.”

**Having beliefs and doctrines does not mean you are closed-minded**

I hold very specific beliefs and doctrines. I would defend and even die for some of my beliefs and theology. I will write about which ones later and why I feel they are so important. But because one has beliefs doesn’t mean that you can’t be in dialogue and explore a wide variety of thinking. If we’re afraid to explore various beliefs outside our own, then we must not have too much confidence in what we believe. I can’t imagine Jesus wanting us to be afraid of interacting with differing beliefs. He did himself with the Samaritans\(^\text{93}\). You even see Paul the apostle interacting with people of differing beliefs.\(^\text{94}\)

In my library of books I have books written from Bible scholars who don’t believe Jesus rose from the dead and even books by Satanists (like Anton LaV-


\(^{94}\) Acts 17:1-34.
ey’s autobiography). Now, I don’t agree at all with these authors in their theologies, as they are in total opposition to what I personally believe. But I want to learn how people think and how people come to the conclusions they do. It also helps me talk about my faith more—in addition to all the books that express and affirm what I actually believe. I know I want to be reading and exploring all types of thinking.

“If only people with closed minds came with closed mouths”

There is a bumper-sticker I have seen often that says “If only people with closed minds came with closed mouths” referring most likely to loud Christians making their opinions known to others. For those of us who follow Jesus, we should have minds which are never closed, but constantly learning, constantly exploring. It doesn’t mean you have to believe everything is truth. Nor does it mean you have to abandon what the essential truths of the Christians faith. But it makes you all the more respected when you do “open your mouth” and speak when you have a rounded and educated understanding of the various opinions and thoughts about life, philosophy, and other world faiths and religions. For some Christians, to have questions, to doubt, to stretch your thinking is not seen as a positive thing, but a negative thing. Remember the Bereans? In the New Testament, a story is told of the Bereans who questioned the teaching about Jesus and went to go and study it for themselves, and they were called “noble”\textsuperscript{95}. Paul the Apostle, when speaking once in Athens, obviously knew the culture as he referred to a poet of their time period and shared that he understood some of their religious beliefs,

\textsuperscript{95} Acts 17:10-12.
which were different than his own\textsuperscript{96}. In the Hebrew Bible we see the story of Daniel, who was taken into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. Daniel was immersed in Babylonian philosophy and training. He even had his name changed to \textit{Belteshazzar} which even had the “Bel” part of his new name from the Babylonian god, Bel\textsuperscript{97}. Daniel didn’t freak out and become closed-minded and we see no record of him refusing to learn new things, but instead he discerned what would compromise worshiping the God he believed in and drew lines there in his actions, not in learning. He stood strong in his faith in the God of Israel, even while being immersed in Babylonian gods and culture. Perhaps with some churches today, Daniel would have been called “worldly” for being so immersed in Babylonian culture. But he showed you can be a thinking person, a learning person, not closed-minded and still stay true to your beliefs. And God used Daniel to make a difference in Babylon over the years, because of how he handled himself and the respect he garnered.

\textbf{Christians should be the most open-minded thinkers and learners of all}

So Christians, of all people, certainly can be open-minded learners and never have to feel we cannot learn other philosophies, religions, and stretch our thinking outside our own faith, which does not mean you abandon faith. Jesus wants us to think and use our minds. That’s why he told so many parables.\textsuperscript{98} Parables are stories told with an underlying meaning that the listener needs to figure out. Jesus wanted people to actually use their minds and not just passively listen, accept, and not think about what they were being taught. That’s why Jesus taught by asking

\textsuperscript{96} Acts 17:22-31.
\textsuperscript{97} Daniel 1:1-8.
\textsuperscript{98} Matthew 13:10-17.
questions. So if Christianity becomes more about blindly listening without the ability to think and question, then I do believe “organized religion” has stepped in.

I never want to underestimate how often people experience the church today as an organized (hurtful) religion, but there really are also such good things that the church organizes itself around. Unfortunately, when we say “organized religion” it’s (understandably) felt to usually be a bad thing. But perhaps we can look at organized in a good way as well, in a way that Jesus would perhaps approve of—and not be pulling out a whip when he sees it.

The good and evil of being “organized”

Like the quote at the start of last chapter by Madonna, she likes Jesus but doesn’t like “organized religion”. That’s fully understandable, but how we define organized religion is important. Let’s take a look at how those words are defined.

organized vb.

1. Functioning within a formal structure, as in the coordination and direction of activities. 2. Efficient and methodical.100

Thinking of “organized” in this way isn’t that bad. It means there’s structure and coordination of activities for efficiency. Go to any sports game and there is organization for the teams to properly and fairly play. Go to any school and there is an organized plan for training and learning. Go to a hospital and I sure hope it is organized so that people in need can be helped and the right medical attention given. Hopefully your bank accounts, checking, savings and personal

99 Mark 8:5.
budgets are organized too. So “organization”, is not a bad thing. It’s needed in our lives and in the world. We need organization or there would be utter chaos in both.

But “organized” can also be used as a bad and even evil thing. Nazi Germany was organized. Terrorists are often very organized. There is even “organized” crime. So organization can be good or bad. Unfortunately the church and Christians are known more for the bad kind. Admittedly, the church has done some bad things throughout history. But for every bad thing the church has done in the past, there are many lessons to learn for the future church. There are so many Christians wanting to reclaim the goodness of what the church and Christianity are supposed to be about. This isn’t new. Throughout history the church has organized itself for many good things, they just aren’t widely known.

For those who feel that something like church shouldn’t be “organized” at all, let me share a few ways that “organized” can be healthy in religion.

A healthy family is like a church and organized in a healthy church way

Let’s think of the church as a family – which is a metaphor the Bible uses to describe the church.¹⁰¹ A family is set of organic relationships. In a healthy family, we care for one another and love one another. However, in any family or in any relationship for that matter, organization is necessary. For example, when a family meal is made, there needs to be organization by someone who picks out what gets cooked for dinner. There needs to be organization in knowing the recipe and what ingredients are needed, and what temperature the food is cooked at.

¹⁰¹ Galatians 6:10.
There needs to be thought and organization in knowing how many chairs are placed around the table, how many napkins and forks and knives needed.

In a family, there needs to be organization in who is paying the bills, and knowing when they are due. There need to be schedules for when the family goes to bed, wakes up for school or work. Chores are organized and divided up according to who is taking out the garbage, who is cutting the lawn etc. There needs to be organization and schedules set to make sure the family gets to relax and all hang out together, and spouses get to spend time alone together. Even though a family is relational in nature, there is organization that needs to happen for practical function. So when someone says “I don’t need organized religion to have a relationship with God” – I would ask the person to consider how in any relationship there needs to be some sort of organization for it to be healthy.

It all depends on what you are “organizing” for—that’s what makes the difference. Nowhere in the teachings of Jesus or the Bible does it say that the church is supposed to organize around contemporary politics. Nowhere does the Bible or Jesus teach that the church is supposed to organized to force personal non-biblical preferences on other people. However, we can be confident that Jesus would be pleased if a church organized itself around helping people know who Jesus is and his message of hope. If the church organized itself around helping the poor and those in need as Jesus taught his followers to care about – then this is an “organized” faith that Jesus would be pleased with.

Looking into the inside instead of judging from the outside
From an outside perspective, some churches can look like organized religion with big buildings, parking lots and large meetings happening. But as I wrote in an earlier chapter, Jesus said not to make judgments from the outside. We do need to explore each specific church to see what is happening on the inside. Often in churches, it can seem from the outside like “organized religion”. There are programs, parking attendants, people assigned to greet people coming in, a band with lyrics on screens, someone who stands up and teaches. However, what one may not notice is that often these larger and more “organized” meetings are the ways that people can then get into the more organic smaller meetings that happen. It is in these smaller meetings where true community happens. Relationships develop. Care is given. Lives are changed. People pray for each other and know what is happening in each others lives. There needs to be organization in a church for people to get help and care. Churches do need systems to care for people. Like I mentioned earlier, in a hospital we surely wouldn’t want it not to be “organized” when it is helping people. Same for the church.

**Being “organized” in the church without being “Organized Religion”**

Jesus was organized. I think of Jesus organizing his twelve disciples together and training them for the mission he was sending them on. I also see Jesus being organized when the Bible speaks of him doing things intentionally and in patterns such as his prayer life, where we read in the book of Luke 5:16: “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”
Interestingly a metaphor that is used of the church in the New Testament is that is a “body”\textsuperscript{102}. The description used even talks about how the parts of a human body are all organized functioning together with specific purposes. So the section of the Bible there teaches that a hand can’t function like an eye or an eye the hand. They are all coordinated to function together organically, yet beautifully “organized.”

We read in the New Testament that as the early church grew, it needed to add on structure and organization. There was a time when—because the church was growing—widows ended up being neglected. So we see that they had to set up some structure and get more “organized” to make sure the widows were cared for\textsuperscript{103}. So “organized church” doesn’t have to be a bad thing. The church actually needs to get organized when it begins caring for more and more people. If the church isn’t organized, it won’t have as much impact as it could to help more people.

Although you may have only heard of negative things the church has “organized” for, there are plenty of things the church has organized for that I believe Jesus would be pleased with.

- Christians got organized in the early church to help widows, orphans and society’s outcasts.\textsuperscript{104}

- In the 4\textsuperscript{th} Century Basil of Caesarea and St. Chrysostom of Constantinople got “organized” and urged the construction of orphanages to care for infants and children without parents.\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{102} 1 Corinthians 12:4-30.
\textsuperscript{103} Acts 6:1-4.
• In the 1800’s during the Industrial Revolution many people in cities were starving. William Booth was a Christian pastor “organized” The Salvation Army which began feeding, clothing and providing shelter for people who were in horrific need.

• It was several Christians in the 1800’s who got “organized” and got several bills passed in England so that children had protective laws against abuse. At the time children as young as 5 years old were working in coal mines and fabric mills more than 16 hours a day.

• In the early 1880’s Christian William Wilberforce got “organized” and campaigned for the abolition of slavery. Because of his organized effort, 700,000 slaves were set free.

• Today there are evangelical Christians formed ministries such as Compassion International and World Vision who organized themselves and churches to raise millions of dollars to support children and families in need all across the globe. These evangelical Christian relief agencies are some of the very first groups to jump in and help when global emergencies like earthquakes happen. These Christian groups also organize the support of several million children globally where families sponsor a specific child. Each month the child is financially helped and letters are written and a relationship happens. Millions of children wouldn’t be getting helped unless these religious ministries were organized.

105 Schmidt, How Christianity Changed The World ( ), 12.
106 World Vision web site is http://www.worldvision.org/ and the Compassion International web site is http://www.compassion.com/.
Just last night I had dinner with Chris Seay, a friend of mine who is also a pastor. He and another pastor Rick McKinley organized a church program called “Advent Conspiracy” a few years ago. It’s a campaign to rally churches around Christmastime to spend less on consumerism and spend more on helping people in desperate need around the world. Several thousand churches have joined in this mission and hundreds of wells have been drilled in over 17 countries so that people in villages have access clean water. Millions of dollars have been raised through the churches participating in this to bring relief to people in need.

When we got together, Chris shared with me how he was doing an audio recording for the organized campaign this year, but kept breaking down and crying while he was recording it. He was thinking of the people whose lives have been saved and those whose lives will be impacted when so many churches “organize” themselves to help those in need.

There is someone who is part of the church I’m currently at named Nathan George. He was a successful business person who began getting haunted by the poverty and needs of people globally. He ended up quitting his successful job and started a company called Trade As One that deals with Fair Trade to help support people in need all over the world. He now helps make Fair Trade products available to people in the United States, but it’s more than that, as he is trying to solve root problems about global poverty and he teaches others that God doesn’t just care about what we give to the church. Nathan teaches that God cares about the other 90% and how we spend it too.

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107 Trade As One http://www.tradeasone.com (accessed month, day, year).
Our church had Nathan and his team put on a very organized fair trade event where thousands of dollars were then made for people in need. One item I bought was a cross made from a bullet shell. They were made in war-torn Liberia out of the spent bullet casings that litter the country. This small cross stands as a powerful symbol of hope and peace. It’s a symbol of Jesus, handcrafted from the very instrument of death used during the civil war. The bullet shell was left intact to give a tangible demonstration of transformation from hate to hope, and from death to life. The description shared how the crosses are made by those who had families killed in the civil war of Liberia. All of this takes organization, and it is organized churches who host these trade fairs (in a very organized way) for the betterment of humanity.

**Organized religion as the hope of the masses**

As much as “organized religion” has negative connotations, and I know in history that “organized religion” has done terrible things that would not align with the teachings of Jesus. But there are very beautiful things that can happen when the church does get organized. Jesus told his followers that they should be out on a mission of loving people and sharing the wonderful news of grace, forgiveness, new life they can have as they know and follow him. Jesus wants the church to be “organized” to help the poor, the hungry and those in trouble and in need. The church is Jesus’ organic yet organized hands, mouth, and feet in this world today. We are to be doing the things that Jesus Christ would do if He were here

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110 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.
physically on the earth. That’s an incredibly sobering and thrilling think to imagine. And the good news about this is that there are literally millions of lives are being helped around the world because the church gets “organized.”

I know, I know that the church has failed in this through the years. And I’m embarrassed about the way the church has gotten “organized” at times to create a life-draining, controlling, non-thinking-for-yourself religion. But there is such a fresh wind of change happening in the church, where followers of Jesus are no longer satisfied with the negatives of what was and are determined with everything we have to be creating the positives as Jesus would want them.

**It hasn’t just been Christians who have made mistakes**

There’s a lot of understandable criticism about organized religion and the church as I have admitted, even as a Christian. There has even been a rise of this criticism from best-selling books, which have slammed Christians and the church, basically categorizing us as evil and even destructive. Charges that the church has caused wars, hatred, violence and power struggles.

Yes, there have been terrible and horrible things done in the name of “God” or Jesus. But something to truly understand is that when these things have occurred, it’s not from following the teachings of Jesus. It is when we’ve gone outside the teachings of the Scriptures and then acted from human thinking vs. Scripture-guided thinking. There are clear guidelines in the teachings of the Bible that show why the very things done in the name of God by human beings, would not be things God approves of. Just because something has been done “in the name of Jesus”, doesn’t mean that Jesus would approve of it. We always have to

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be checking what someone does or a church does with the actual teachings of Jesus and the entire Bible.

Secondly, the consistent claims that religion is the source of evil, often pointing at Christianity, is simply not accurate. When you look at evils and wars and powerful negativity perpetrated by those claiming no religion or those who are atheist, you don’t see a clean record at all. Studies actually show that there have been more wars, hatred and evils done by those claiming no religion, than those who do. Joseph Stalin was an atheist who wanted Christianity purged from existence, and he was responsible for the deaths of over 10 million people under his regime. Studies show that more than 93 percent of all the wars in human history had no relation to religion. You can look at history and the criticism that religion or Christianity caused wars, murder, hatred etc., and see that those who claim no beliefs or beliefs against religion have committed horrific crimes themselves.

To twist the words of Karl Marx, instead of organized religion being the opium of the masses, I truly see organized religion being the hope of the masses, when we mean organized in the good sense of the word. We have been created by God to care about people. Most people care about people. And when the churches then have this God-implanted caring for others and fuse the church with it, the limitations seem endless. I just read that in a major global earthquake that recently happened, where hundreds of thousands died, that half the food coming in for re-

\textsuperscript{112} STATISTICS OF DEMOCIDE: Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1900 By R.J. Rummel as read on http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/NOTE5.HTM See also: The Irrational Atheist: Dissecting the Unholy Trinity of Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens by Vox Day (Dallas: Benbella Books) 2008.

\textsuperscript{113} Vox Day, The Irrational Atheist (Benbella: Dallas, 2008), 97-111.
lief was from religious organizations and churches. This is an organization that I can’t imagine Jesus not being pleased with.

So when Jesus pulled out that whip and began chasing people in the Temple, he was doing that for the leaders who “organized” systems of discrimination and set up barriers between God’s people and worship. But there’s an organized religion Jesus would surely approve of that aligns with his purpose for the church to be his body, arms, feet, and hands in the world today.

So, as much as I’m fully aware that many feel the church is an “organized religion” desiring to control people, I believe that Jesus would instead see the church as an organized community on a mission to serve people. And it is happening.

You’ll probably tire of my saying over and over again that I have hope for the church and Christianity. But it’s because in the church I’m part of, as I travel around the country – I keep seeing and sensing the same thing. Change is happening. When the organized church looks nothing like organized religion (which is often associated with spiritual death), and it focuses on what Jesus told us to focus on, it is reviving and life-giving. When the church functions in a healthy “Organized” way as a family and community, it is a beautiful thing. If you’re a follower
of Jesus, you have the opportunity to get “organized” to make incredible change in this world as Jesus wants us to.

If you’re not yet following Jesus, I hope you will keep opening the door to trust and watch to see how Christians are changing. As the sun sets with the old ways of “organized religion,” the sun is rising with the organized church, which is organized to be a family, a community and a body that cares for humanity, a people organized around the mission of hope and grace that Jesus sent us on.

THIS IS THE END OF ARTIFACT BEING TURNED IN. THE ACTUAL BOOK CONTINUES (SEE TABLE OF CONTENTS)