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*They Like Jesus but Not the Church*  
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# I PROBABLY WOULDN'T LIKE CHRISTIANS IF I WEREN'T ONE

Christians are hard  
to tolerate; I don't know  
how Jesus does it.  
— BONO

I hate, hate, hate going to the gym. I am not an athlete, unless you consider bowling and shooting pool to be sports, but I do believe God wants us to take care of our bodies, so during certain seasons of the year, with good intentions, I make attempts to go to the gym for a workout. For someone like me, it's awkward enough trying to use the weights and gym equipment, but it's even more awkward because of the mirrors they have all around so you have to look at your awkward self as you fumble with the weights and equipment.

But I know it's important to go, so on this one occasion I decided to try a different gym. This one had a bunch of new hydraulic weight machines and an attendant who would show you how to use them, which worked out well for me because I didn't feel so naive and didn't have to fumble around trying to figure things out on my own. And this gym didn't have any mirrors either.

## NO ###% WAY YOU'RE A PASTOR ... PASTORS ARE CREEPY!

The instructor, a girl probably around twenty-three years old, seemed really nice. She made conversation the whole time she was showing me how to use the machines. She talked about music and how she really liked a few bands that were popular in the 1980s, such as the Cure, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and the Smiths. I was familiar with these bands and had even seen two of them live, so we instantly had a musical connection. We

talked about the music scene and about other '80s musicians and bands from England that we both liked.

At the end of the loop of machines she was showing me, she wrapped up her instruction and asked me what I do for a living.

Since I don't try to hide it, I said, "I'm a pastor at a church."

Her expression changed as she took two steps backward and tripped on the leg of the machine next to her. "No way you're a pastor. I don't believe you!"

It took several minutes to convince her I really am a pastor. She said there was no way that a pastor would ever have liked the Smiths or the Cure, and she was shocked because I seemed normal and not at all what she thought a Christian and especially a pastor would be like.

Her strong reaction made me wonder why she would think that, so I asked what she thought a pastor would be like. She said, "Pastors are creepy." She went on to say that pastors are out to "try to proselytize people to become right-wing Republicans" and that "they hate homosexuals" and that "a pastor definitely wouldn't know who the Smiths or Siouxsie and the Banshees are."

When I asked her if she knew any other pastors, she said no. Instead, her impressions came from stories she has read, from what she sees on TV, from the occasional street preacher she has seen, and from some encounters with Christians during college.

### IT'S NOT JUST CALIFORNIA

You may be thinking that this woman's view would be different if that health club weren't in California. But I have lived in New Jersey, Colorado, and California, as well as in England for a year and in Israel for several months, and I've traveled enough to know that this is a widespread view. In certain areas of the country which are more conservative, such as the Bible Belt, there is a strong historical Christian presence and churches are everywhere. There is some degree of cultural respect for Christians and church leaders, and so you might not find such a strong reaction as the trainer's. But please don't assume that even in conservative areas the sentiment about Christians and churches isn't changing, especially among younger generations.

When I travel I try to find a coffeehouse to hang out in to listen, observe, and talk to (not proselytize) people hanging out there. In fact, as I was writing this chapter, I was in a coffeehouse adjacent to the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. At the table next to me was a college-aged couple who were reading some books and talking. One of the books had the name of Solomon on the cover and some Hebrew letters, but they also had some books about magick.<sup>4</sup>

I politely asked about the Solomon book, and the couple said it was about Solomon and the spirits that guided him. They were friendly and eagerly opened several of the books they were studying to answer my question. They shared what they were reading and also talked about Kabbalah and showed me some diagrams of people throughout the Hebrew Bible who had guiding spirits.

Since they mentioned the Bible, I asked if they ever talked to Christians about this. They exchanged a quick glance and then with pained emotion said yes, but they warned me that the church doesn't tell people everything. They said church leaders hold back the secrets and origins of the faith from the people in their churches. Because of this, most Christians aren't aware of the origins of the Bible and of the worship of God throughout world history. This is why as soon as they talk to a Christian about any of this, they immediately are told they're wrong and are accused of being involved with demonic things.

Now, from what I could observe, the Bible condemns what they were reading as being of evil origin. But it was interesting to hear that they feel church leaders keep secrets from their churches and that the only thing they have experienced from Christians is being told right away how wrong they are.

### FEELING SORRY FOR CHRISTIANS

We continued to talk about Christians, and eventually I shared with them that I am a Christian. What was interesting was that they didn't react like the girl in the gym. Instead, they gently smiled, kept looking right at me, and didn't say anything at all. Then they exchanged glances like they were having the same thought. What was weird was that their reaction communicated that they felt sorry for me. It wasn't a repulsed reaction, and

I think they didn't respond negatively because of the friendly tone of our conversation and because I had shown an interest in what they believed. When I told them I am a Christian, it felt like I had just told them I have some terminal disease and they felt sympathy for me, like they were thinking, "Oh, that's too bad. That poor, poor guy."

They were so open to dialogue, and I imagine if we had more time together, we could have compared what they were reading with the Bible and discussed why they concluded what they did. I could have explained specifically what I believe as a Christian and had a deeper dialogue with them. The couple invited me to go over to a bookstore around the corner if I wanted to read more or talk to someone who could answer more

WHEN I TOLD THEM I AM A CHRISTIAN, IT FELT LIKE I HAD JUST TOLD THEM I HAVE SOME TERMINAL DISEASE AND THEY FELT SYMPATHY FOR ME, LIKE THEY WERE THINKING, "OH, THAT'S TOO BAD. THAT POOR, POOR GUY."

questions. So I accepted their invitation. The bookstore was larger than I expected and the manager was friendly. I took their frequently asked questions brochure and found that it said this: "We worship the Gods and Goddesses in Anglo-Saxon England, Scan-

dinavia, and other Germanic countries *before their forcible Christianization* in the early Middle Ages." So apparently the bookstore was alluding to the Crusades and propagating the negativity of Christians' forcing their faith on others.

Now, I agree that the Bible says the worship of gods and goddesses is worshipping false gods. But I bet this young couple hadn't yet had someone talk to them about this in a loving way. They didn't react negatively to me and condemn me for not believing what they believed or for being a Christian. Rather, they treated me with respect even after they found out I'm a Christian. I relate this incident simply to show how even in another part of the country I found sitting next to me yet another example of what I'm talking about in this book.

Now, I assume that a very small percentage of the population is into magick and pagan religion. But this bookstore was right there among all the other shops, and judging by its calendar of activities, this group keeps

pretty busy. Some people may think it was wrong for me even to go into their bookstore. But I hope that from my taking the time to dialogue with them, they at least had a positive conversation with a pastor who asked them questions, took the time to listen to what they believe instead of simply telling them what they should believe, and showed them respect instead of instantly condemning them, even though I don't agree with what they believe. I hope that the Spirit of God sends someone who lives near them to continue the conversation I started with them (Acts 8:29).

Whenever I go to places like that bookstore or strike up conversations with people who might be antagonistic toward Christians or other faiths, I think of the story in John 4. Jesus went out of his way to Samaria, which was a region religious Jews would normally avoid. While there, he talked with a Samaritan woman (whom a rabbi wouldn't normally talk to) who was promiscuous (all the more reason for a rabbi to avoid going near her). But Jesus did go near her, and he did talk with her, which surprised his disciples (John 4:27). I love the heart of Jesus, who spoke to people outside of the religious circles of his day. We should pay close attention to his example.

### THINKING LIKE MISSIONARIES IN A POST-CHRISTIAN WORLD

The reactions of the girl in the gym and of the couple in Minneapolis really shouldn't surprise us, since we're living in a post-Christian culture. To them, Christianity isn't normal. This is really important to realize, and if you aren't sensing this in our emerging culture, you might be too enclosed in your Christian network and subculture to fully see what's happening.

If you are a baby boomer or of an older generation and were born into a Christian home, you probably have relationships with people who still share values and beliefs that are more in line with a Judeo-Christian world, and you might not see the change in emerging generations. If you are younger, were raised in a church, and surround yourself socially only with Christians, then you might not notice this as strongly either. And so it's important that we think like missionaries. Instead of viewing our towns and cities as Judeo-Christian and feeling that everyone needs to automatically adhere to what we believe, we need to act like missionaries do when they enter

a different culture. When missionaries enter another culture, they listen, learn, study the spiritual beliefs of the culture, and get a sense of what the culture's values are. They may try to discover what experiences this culture has had with Christians and what the people of the culture think of Christianity. Missionaries in a foreign culture don't practice the faiths or embrace the spiritual beliefs of that culture, but they do respect them, since the missionaries are on the other culture's turf.

Maybe you're thinking, "No! This is God's turf! They need to repent and follow God, not their own beliefs! This is America!" Yes ... and no. Yes, God is the creator, and "the earth is the LORD's, and everything in it,

CHRISTIANS ARE NOW THE FOREIGNERS  
IN A POST-CHRISTIAN CULTURE, AND WE  
HAVE GOT TO WAKE UP TO THIS REALITY  
IF WE HAVEN'T.

the world, and all who live in it" (Ps. 24:1), but when missionaries enter another culture, they are in a *different culture*. God still is God, and that's why we need to be missionaries to speak

of his love and salvation through Jesus. We've got to realize that in our emerging culture, we are now in a different culture and we need to view it and the people in it as a missionary would. Christians are now the foreigners in a post-Christian culture, and we have got to wake up to this reality if we haven't.

Perhaps you're struggling with this idea because some twenty-somethings or college students in your church don't fit this description. But do you know and interact with people in younger generations outside of your church? If not, I really believe that if you got out of your subculture, you would get much the same reaction I did with the girl in the gym or with the couple in Minneapolis.

What we have to realize as church leaders is that we aren't as respected by people who are growing up outside of the church as we were in the past. We aren't sought out as the ones to turn to for advice, and we aren't in the position of influence in our communities that we used to be in. Again, I know there are some regions where there's still a stronger positive Christian sentiment and respect for the church. But overall, from my

experience talking to countless people, in particular among those who are under thirty-five years old, and especially younger people in their teens and twenties, there is a quickly growing misperception of what Christianity is, what church is, and who Christians are.

But this isn't the first time in history that there were widespread misperceptions about Christians.

### CHRISTIANS WERE ONCE KNOWN AS CANNIBALISTIC, ATHEISTIC, AND INCESTUOUS

When we look at the first few hundred years of church history, we find that ancient Christians and early church leaders were also misunderstood by outsiders. For example, it was thought that:

*The church practiced cannibalism.* Because rumors got out that Christians drank blood and ate flesh when they were taking communion, they were thought to be cannibals.

*The church practiced incest.* People would hear Christians calling each other brother and sister, including married couples who now saw each other not only as husband and wife but as brother and sister in Christ. So to outsiders, hearing a married couple address each other as brother and sister implied that they were biologically brother and sister, and that looked like incest to outsiders.

*The church was made up of atheists.* Most Greek and Roman religions would use a statue of their deity in their worship, and since Christians didn't have a physical representation of the God they worshiped, they were accused of being atheists.

It's easy to see how such misperceptions might come about, especially at a time when Christianity was new and people didn't know much about it. Christianity was viewed as a new sect of Judaism and as perhaps a part of the other mystery religions of that time. So the early apologists responded to these accusations in their writings. Today we aren't thought of as cannibals, atheists, or incestuous. But in our emerging culture, there are other misperceptions we need to be aware of and respond to.

## **TODAY, CHRISTIANS ARE KNOWN AS SCARY, ANGRY, JUDGMENTAL, RIGHT-WING FINGER-POINTERS WITH POLITICAL AGENDAS**

Reading a description of Christians like the one in this subhead can make us defensive, saying, “That’s not true!” But remember, you are on the inside. You know why certain Christian leaders vocalize things the way they do, even if you don’t agree with them, because you understand what’s behind their statements. Hopefully you aren’t angry, judgmental, and pointing fingers at people, and probably other Christians you know aren’t either. But we need to view ourselves the way others on the outside see us.

Also, perhaps you hang out primarily with people over thirty or thirty-five years old. Many older people outside of the church don’t have as many negative impressions of the church and Christians as younger members of our emerging culture do. But, like people in the early church era, today’s emerging generations don’t know Christianity. They don’t know the difference between Baptists, Methodists, or Episcopalians. They see the more vocal and right-wing evangelical Christian leaders being interviewed on news shows, and to many people, they represent all of Christianity. Most who have grown up outside of the church have impressions of Christians based only on television, or on occasional encounters with Christians handing out tracts and telling them they are going to hell, or on seeing Christians standing outside of rock concerts with lists of sins on big signs and shouting through megaphones that everyone passing by won’t find God in the concert. (I recently experienced this very thing the last two concerts I went to.) We have the reputation of being right-wing, fundamentalist, finger-pointing, judgmental individuals. While some Christians might fit those categories, most of us don’t! Sadly, the most vocal and aggressive voices that people are familiar with do.

## **I CAN’T BLAME THEM—I WOULDN’T LIKE CHRISTIANITY EITHER**

This may sound odd, but quite honestly, I don’t blame people in our emerging culture for what they think about us. If I weren’t a church leader or if I weren’t friends with Christians who really are following Jesus in a loving and balanced way, I would probably judge Christians and Christianity based on what I could see from the outside. And it isn’t a pretty picture. Based on outside observations of Christians, there’s no way I would want

to become one of them. I wouldn't want to become an angry, judgmental, right-wing, finger-pointing person. I wouldn't be saying that out of rebellion against God or the church; I would simply conclude that from observations of Christians and from not wanting to change into something I wouldn't want to be like.

During the time of the early church, outsiders' perceptions of Christians weren't true. But until the early Christians befriended non-Christians, and until apologists came to explain what Christianity really was about, people didn't know better. In the same way today, people outside the church are concluding things that for the most part aren't true either, but they're making these conclusions all the same.

### **THE GOOD NEWS: MOST PASTORS AND CHRISTIANS AREN'T CREEPY**

Most pastors and Christians are not creepy (as the girl in the gym thought) or out to condemn everyone they run into who believes differently than they do (as the couple in Minneapolis felt). I think overall, most Christian leaders are wonderful and dear people who are trying their best to follow Jesus and to make him known to others in the best way they can. Most of my friends who are pastors and Christian leaders are nothing like what the girl in the gym described.

However, I do think there are a lot of Christian leaders and Christians who need to rethink what it means to live in a post-Christian country. I do believe there are good-hearted, wonderful Christians and church leaders who don't realize how they are coming across to people in our culture today. I have met pastors, as well as read blogs and websites, who actually reinforce negative attitudes and misperceptions. But the good news is that most of us aren't like that. Most Christian leaders are not intentionally arrogant and forceful and do care how we come across to those outside the church.

But there's bad news too.

### **THE BAD NEWS: MOST PEOPLE DON'T SEE OR MEET THE AVERAGE CHRISTIAN OR PASTOR**

When I first started leading a youth ministry, one of the students came up to me and shared how the whole youth group hated him. At that time, there

were around twenty-five high schoolers in the group. I was aware there was a recent conflict between him and someone else. He told me he was thinking of not coming to the Wednesday night meeting, since no one wanted him there. I slowed him down and asked him to tell me specifically who hated him. He named two students. I said, “That’s it?” and then we talked through how his perception of the whole youth group was really based on only two students, who it turned out didn’t really hate him but were angry with him. We all experience this to some degree. It just takes hearing from someone that “others feel this way about you too” and you end up being consumed with the idea that the entire church or your entire office thinks about you in a certain way, when in reality it may be only one or two people.

I think at the core of a lot of the confusion is the fact that most people are making conclusions about Christians and Christianity based on a few bad experiences. But they are bad enough and reinforced enough to give the impression that this is true of all Christians. For some, it may be an excuse so they don’t have to face their sin or admit that what they are doing is wrong, so they blame Christians. But I don’t sense this is true of most people.

But quite often, don’t we do the same? How quickly some Christians make generalizations about the gay community or liberals or whatever other terms we throw around. We need to be careful that we don’t do the same thing and make assumptions about others based on a few bad experiences.

### **MIGHT FEEL DEPRESSING, BUT THE FUTURE IS HOPEFUL**

It may be a little depressing hearing some of the things I am saying here. Yet I’m optimistic about the future of the church and the way emerging generations will respond to our efforts to reach them. But until we are out among the “natives” of the new culture, until we befriend them, earn their trust, hear their stories, understand their hearts and values, we really can’t be good missionaries.

In the next chapter, I’ll explain how I tunneled through the walls of Christian pop music, Christian books, Jesus trinkets, church activities and meetings, escaped the church office, and met people who like Jesus but not the church.

## LOOKING AT YOUR CHURCH THROUGH THE EYES OF EMERGING GENERATIONS

1. When is the last time you had an encounter with someone like the girl in the gym or the couple who is into pagan magick? What did they say to you about Christians or the church? What were their impressions of Christianity?
2. If you have not had such an encounter, why do you think you haven't met anyone with viewpoints like this?
3. If you were raised outside of the church and hadn't met a Christian who represents Jesus in a good way, do you think you would like Christians? Why or why not?