

CHAPTER 1

WHEN CHRISTIANS ARE UNCHRISTIAN

John was twenty-four years old and had just returned from six years as an Army Airborne Ranger deployed first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. It was John's dad, Tom, who suggested we meet. I am Tom's pastor. Tom told me that John had very strong negative feelings about the Christian faith. He felt that both John and I

would benefit from a conversation together. We met in my office, and in our ninety-minute conversation John was thoughtful, articulate, and respectful, but at times almost angry as he described for me the reasons he had rejected Christianity. His subtle undertone of anger was not directed toward me, but at the views, attitudes, and actions of Christians he had known—views that seemed out of sync with the God of love that Christianity preached. John was describing for me the ways in which he believed Christians get it wrong.

John's feelings about Christians were not new to me. I had heard them many times before, though seldom as thoughtfully or comprehensively presented as John presented them. I had felt some of these same things myself in dealing with some of my fellow Christians. Several years after meeting John, our church set up a Web site to invite young adults (those under thirty-five) to tell us where they believe Christians get it wrong. About that same time we began sitting down to talk with people who had opted out of church. There were so many common responses between the two groups. Generally we found that young people rejected Christianity because of the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of Christians they knew.

Their criticism of Christianity usually included one or more of five key themes: (1) the unchristian ways

some Christians act, (2) the anti-intellectual, anti-science stance of some Christians, (3) Christianity's views of other world religions, (4) questions related to the role of God in human suffering, and (5) the way Christians view homosexuality. Each of these themes will be considered in a chapter in this book.

My hope in writing this book is to speak for young adults who have been turned off, frustrated, or even hurt by Christians and to suggest what Christianity might look like when Christians get it right. Let's begin with the unchristian ways some Christians act.

WHEN CHRISTIANS ARE UNCHRISTIAN

In their 2007 book, *unChristian* (Baker Books), David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons outlined the research of the Barna Group with hundreds of young adults who, like John in our opening story, were outside the Christian faith. They found that more young adults today are turning away from Christianity than in years past. Their research did not explore the theological issues that have turned people away from the Christian faith; instead they focused on understanding the perceptions non-Christian young adults have of Christians. Among their findings:

- 91% of those adults surveyed who were outside the Christian faith felt Christians were “anti-homosexual.”
- 87% felt Christians were judgmental.
- 85% felt Christians were hypocritical.
- 75% felt Christians were too political.
- 70% thought Christians were insensitive.

My conversations with young adults substantiate these findings. If these words accurately describe how young adults have experienced Christians, then is it any surprise that they are turning away from the Christian faith in droves?

When I ask non-Christians what they think Jesus stood for, most say, “Love.” And they are correct; this is one of the defining elements of Jesus’ teaching. He told his followers that God’s will for humanity could be summarized with two

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commands: love God and love your neighbor. He went on to say that our neighbor is anyone who needs our help. The love we are to

show is not a feeling but a way of acting—a love of kindness and compassion and a desire to bless and seek good for others. Jesus told his disciples they were to love not only their neighbors and friends but their enemies as well. He told them that the world would know that they are his disciples by their love. Non-Christians know that Jesus stood for love. Which is why, when those who claim to follow Jesus act in unloving ways, it feels particularly unpleasant.

This disparity between the love Christians are meant to display and what young adults often experience is most pronounced when Christians speak with judgment or in disparaging ways toward others.

One young man described an experience when he was invited to attend a special youth group event at a big church in his town. He noted that the kids at school rarely spoke to him until it was “bring a friend day” at youth group. They invited him to join their group at the local water park. Here’s his description of how the day went:

It didn’t start off badly; the rides at the park were fun, and I even enjoyed hanging out with some of them. But during the long ride back to the church, they started talking about people. They discussed who was having sex, who was smoking weed, who was gay. The more they talked the worse things they said. Many of the people they were talking about were my friends, and they knew it! To make things worse, some of the ones

talking loudest were doing the very things they were gossiping about. Finally, they got on to the subject of who was going to hell. It seems that if you didn't go to their brand of church, you didn't stand a chance of getting into heaven. That, of course, meant me, and it didn't seem to matter to them at all that I was sitting right there, soaking all this up.

The judgmental, hypocritical, and unloving spirit these Christians displayed left this young man determined not to go back to church.

Another young woman echoed these same sentiments when she said:

I'm thinking of the Christians in my school that I see every day. They judge everyone constantly. It's annoying, and a lot of people don't really like it or like them because of it. I have a really good friend who claims to be a really hard-core Christian but he smokes weed all the time and drinks and does all these things and lies, and he's just not a Christian at all.

These were both teens who turned away from the Christian faith because of the actions of Christians they knew. But this phenomenon is not unique to young adults. No doubt you can think of examples of Christians you have known who were judgmental, hypocritical, and unloving.

Some of the most insensitive, critical, judgmental, and mean-spirited people I've known were persons who claimed to be committed Christians.

I was officiating at the graveside

funeral for a young man who had taken his own life. The parents were still in shock and experiencing intense grief. In the eulogy and message I sought to help them and all who had gathered to make sense of this terrible tragedy while finding comfort and hope in God. As a part of the service we remembered the unique and special qualities of their son. Following the service, a husband and wife—sister and brother-in-law of one of the boy's parents—came to me and asked, "Why didn't you tell them that their son is in hell today?" I was taken aback and asked, "How do you know the boy is in hell today? Do you know what was in the boy's heart? Are you so certain you know the mind of God?" They looked at me and walked away. What kind of people are so certain of another's eternal fate that they can stand before grieving parents and callously tell them their son is in hell?

FOLLOWING THE

funeral, some relatives of one of the boy's parents came to me and asked, "Why didn't you tell them that their son is in hell today?"

I could fill this book with stories like these from my own personal experience of Christians, including a few pastors I know, who are free with their condemnation of everyone who doesn't conform to their very narrow view of the world, of the Bible, and of truth.

JESUS AND THE PHARISEES

Of course Jesus confronted the same kinds of things in his day. If you read the Gospels carefully, Jesus never got angry with prostitutes, adulterers, or ordinary "sinners." Nor did his actions turn such people away. In fact, Jesus drew "sinners" to himself by the thousands. He made such people feel at ease. The only people Jesus had words of judgment for in the Gospels were the *religious* folks. What angered him the most about these people, particularly the religious leaders, was their judgmentalism, their hypocrisy, and their failure to love. They believed God was primarily interested in people following the rules. Jesus taught that God's primary rule was love, and that God's interest wasn't in condemning "sinners" but in drawing them to God.

Though Jesus was opposed by various people in the Gospels, his primary opposition was from a group of religious people called *Pharisees* (the word likely comes from a Hebrew word that means "set apart" or