

CH 1 | TEND, NOT TALK

Some conversations have a way of finding an audience. Some excite, some anger, some become the rule for the cause. Some are a colossal waste of time. Others, we pray, continue into eternity. 1.1 THE TALK

This particular conversation is going on right now. It starts and stops with every possible argument, thought, and dissertation we have for why church is the way it is. As believers, we hold this conversation close as we gather safely in our places of worship across this great country.

This conversation is usually kept behind closed doors. It's held between men and women who rarely deal with the unsaved and unchurched, people who have forgotten what the outside world looks like, smells like, and feels like.

This conversation has no affiliation to any one body of organized religion or faith. It's not evangelical, postmodern, emergent, left wing, or right wing. It has no PowerPoint presentation, and it has no line of ancillary products or T-shirts.

When this conversation begins, it questions, then reveals the painful truth about who Christians are as a church.

They start like this:

"Where is the love?"

"Why are we stuck in the pews?"

"Why is Sunday the only time we see Christians?"

"Why is everyone such a hypocrite?"

On rare occasions there are those willing to commit a form of spiritual suicide in the Christian subculture. Men and women yell from the rooftops, "Church sucks!" Their voices are quickly dismissed and rarely see the light of day. They are labeled fanatics and troublemakers and are asked not to come back.

Christ yelled the same type of thing once. It got him killed.

This conversation is on the tips of all sorts of tongues:

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your fellow churchgoers, your neighbors, your spouse, your kids, your friends. And the most important part of this conversation is what *you* will say.

Welcome to the conversation.

JAMES 1:21 *Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.*

1.2 I didn't go to church for years. I am an ordained minister—
HONESTLY I grew up in the church—but ever since I left my job as a
CRAIG youth pastor, it was tough to go back.

"I love football." "I like to sleep in." "I would like a weekend off." "I can't sit through that boring service." I used all the excuses. "I don't need more corporate worship in my life." "I spend most of my weekends at church gatherings, conferences, and church events. When I'm home for a weekend, it's kind of nice to sit back and relax." For the first four years of my walk in full-time ministry, it was tough to attend church.

Rarely would I tell people that I did not go to church, but the few times I did, I almost always got the same reaction: concern. People were concerned for my family and me. They chimed in with their opinion on the subject (not because I asked for it; they just gave it). It didn't matter that I know every rendition of "Lord, I Lift Your Name on High" and have heard and given more messages from the pulpit in four years than many people will hear in a lifetime.

"You don't go to *church*?" they'd say, shocked. And the people asking me this question were the ones who would never allow me close enough to them. But they go to church.

Why didn't I go to church? The reason was simple: I didn't want to.

But one day I decided I would go. Because church is not about me, right? It is not about what / like, what / want to

sing, what I wish I could hear, and how short I wish the service was. Sure, I have grown some. I have a family now and a wife who spends more time at home on the weekends than I do and who wants to connect with people other than just her husband.

Bottom line: I decided to go back to church to be a part of the solution. To borrow an analogy from sports: You can't get anything done when you're not on the field. The bench, the sideline, and the on-deck circle are a lot different than the court, the field, and the plate.

I have been a part of two new church communities in the last three years. I don't agree with everything they have done, but I don't have to. As I said, church is not about me; it is about all of us.

I'll admit it: I have a hard time with most Christians. Most make me sick. The toothy grins, the mixed bag of fake and highly suspect promises. I love the church but hate its politics. I love the gathering but hate the process. I love the principles but hate the personalities.

1.3
HONESTLY J.R.

Sinful thinking? Absolutely. I acknowledge it, and more times than not, I'm asking forgiveness for it. I pray God helps me through this crap; I pray for love in my life; I pray my heart softens to *all* of his children. I pray that I will see *you* the way Christ saw *me* when he went to the cross.

I first saw Christ when I was a teenager. I will spare you the details, but here's the nutshell version: I fell flat when I was eighteen, drug addicted, alcohol soaked, and morbidly morbid. Christ knocked, and with the little energy I had, I opened the door. It was hard, painful, joyful, crappy, funny, exhausting ... peaceful. I was changed forever through very little effort. All I did was lay my life down for a God I still have never seen, never touched, and never met in person. Crazy, right?

For those of you who think Christ was the inevitable last stop for a guy prone to addiction, you're right. I know the argument. I also know a few of you actually believe that

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only the shallow, weak-willed people of the world fall in love with Christ. That's true too.

I am quite content these days. In fact, I'm unbelievably peaceful. I no longer search for the next great thing to make me happy or get me going. I no longer yearn for things to make me satisfied. I am completely at peace with God.

Please note again: I'm at peace with God. That's important to know, because while I'm at peace with him, I am not completely peaceful with all the human beings around me, and some of them I don't even know. The bottom line is that God the Father has filled me with his Spirit, and I'm adjusting as I go.

I am a sinner and a Christian. Sometimes those words are reversed in my day-to-day existence, but for the most part that's what I am. I am on a quest to understand my human condition in relation to my spiritual condition. Basically I'm just like you, if you also care about a guy who hung bloody on a cross.

1.4 WHO ARE THESE GUYS? Here are a couple of questions: How can a porn pastor and a self-proclaimed street theologian have an opinion about the organized church? How can God take two sharp, edgy, politically incorrect voices that have a penchant for all things offensive and do anything with them?

We ask ourselves the same questions. We wonder why we talk about the things we do, why we resent the things we do, why we have to be involved in some of the most insane things going on in this crazy little subculture.

Here are two more good questions: Why do things stay so veiled and hidden in church circles? (We wonder why the church doesn't talk about sex, drugs, booze, lying, stealing, cheating.) Why do we insist on running away from sin?

We're like many of you. We still doubt God at times. We fight coveting the cool stuff other people have. We occasionally think we're not good enough. We wonder why God answers some prayers and not others. We get scared when we witness to people. We sometimes slack on our study and

prayers. We even dream about taking a spiritual vacation: the kind that doesn't involve praying, studying, helping, dying to self, and digging sin out of our lives. It does sound good.

But sin—why can't we take sin head-on in the church? Why do we whisper about sin, creating layer after layer of shame for those struggling with it? Why are sinners running to self-help groups, reading books by doctors who have never seen a Bible, and logging hours with counselors who charge by the obsession?

Our leaders are doing everything they can to guide us into the good life by placating our sinful natures. We need some good old-fashioned butt kicking in the form of honest talk—and not just in the Wednesday night small group. We need it on Sunday mornings in the open, so the people—and there are many of us—enslaved to sin can get up and say, "Thank God someone finally said something!"

For more than a year, J.R. and I have traveled all over the country. We have seen both the very best and the very dreadful in church activities. When not traveling, we tend to be on the phone with one another, determining the fate of the world through an ongoing conversation about faith and the church. We're pretty much resigned to the fact that the church is killing itself.

This may sound pessimistic, but it just doesn't seem as if we're getting anything done. We don't see a lot of love or compassion, and rarely do we read about the church reaching into the human gutter of sin and pulling people out. Just a lot of sanctimonious speech and self-righteous indignation, all wrapped up in great marketing and advertising. There's a whole lot of talk but not a whole lot of action.

Too harsh? Maybe. But the seeming lack of everything really bums us out. Yet in some sick way it puts smiles on our faces. We take some kind of weird pleasure in knowing the church is tanking, at least in its current form.

We're sick of the mega-Bible studies with postmodern

1.5
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THE WORLD

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verbiage, coupled with poetry and art parties for the “emergent.” We wonder what happened to evangelism. What happened to talking about the Bible as God’s Word? Or prayers that end in “amen,” instead of some long dissertation about being a speck of dust to his infinite hugeness.

We’re sick of something we call Value Meal Theology. You may not know this, but pastors all over the country are choosing their sermons and lessons from the spiritual-message buffets cooked up by a few of the leading megachurches.

Pastors are closing the door on the creative force of the Holy Spirit within their own community in favor of Value Meal Theology. Why create something new when you can use another pastor’s words, along with his well-established marketing teams, great hair products, and cool, untucked shirts? If *he* looks good and sounds good, then I can imitate him and *I’ll* be good. Why let the inspiration of the Holy Spirit drive the message to the people in your own church when you can get a yearlong subscription to a great, feel-good, give-and-get program wrapped up with a bow, guaranteeing bigger and better results for your church? Never mind challenging yourself in the Word of God when you can shut yourself down on all fronts with another guy’s message. After all, if you’re having trouble increasing the numbers, go for what works.

We’re sick of pastors with planes, pastors with record deals, pastors with bodyguards, pastors who offer time alone with them (for a fee), pastors with head shots.

What happened to pastors with sexual-sin problems? Bring back Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker. At least we knew what we were getting. We’re sick of not seeing Jesus in the pulpit. Instead, many of us are getting a weaselly, feel-good message veiled with Scripture, so people won’t run from the ten-million-dollar building.

We’re sick of it! And yet ... happy. We’re happy because something is on the horizon, and it’s not offering the five keys to spiritual freedom. It’s a mad army of disciples who are just like us: sick and tired of the shepherds who only *talk* to their

flock and don't *tend* it. Alcoholics Anonymous refers to the apathy as being "sick and tired of being sick and tired."

We know a lot of this rhetoric will fall on deaf ears. For some of you, this doesn't apply—you have or are an awesome pastor who truly desires to hear God and follow him. For others, you're hunkered down in your beliefs and aren't going to hear us, no matter what we say.

We know we can't write the definitive book on how to change church culture, because we hear the arguments all the time. One person says the church needs a bomb to shake it up. Others say, "Change? We don't need to change, we're doing great!"

Look, there are facts, figures, and statistics we could roll out at this point, but we're not Barna. We'll take our chances with the Holy Spirit. We're stepping out in faith and asking you to consider your position, your role, and your life. We're asking you to radically evaluate your life and faith. We're asking for work in the name of God. It's almost too cliché to roll out a verse, but it's a necessity we need to glue to our lives.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

MATTHEW
5:13-16

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. Let your light shine, so they can see your good deeds and praise the Father. We're advocating work: not speeches, not sermons, not four-hour weekend workshops. Just work.

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

1 JOHN 3:18

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Matthew got it. John got it. Get up and do something. We don't care what it is. Just take some action. The rule should be "Do anything short of sin."

Give to the poor. Feed the hungry. Evangelize on a city street. Help a kid who has cancer. Join the fight against pornography. Share some time with the elderly. Love your neighbor. Play with and teach a little kid. Make yourself available to a teenager who needs a mentor. Fix someone's car. Paint a house. Talk to a homosexual about his or her faith. Pull a drunk out of the gutter, and give him something to eat. Give the homeless guy a place to crash. Bring a hooker to church. Spend the afternoon talking to an inmate at the local jail.

You get the idea. Bottom line: Get off your butt and do something.

1.6 JUST JUNKIES J.R. and I consider ourselves reaction junkies. Not attention junkies. Please know that there's a big difference between the two. One says, "Please have something to say about what I'm saying or doing." The other says, "Please have something to say about me, my thoughts, my actions. Me ... me ... me."

Christ was a reaction junkie of a sort. As a result, he created the biggest reaction the world has ever seen.

We would love to say we are perfect examples of Christ. The truth is, the Enemy would love us to drive XXXchurch into the ground. He would love for us to crave the fame of our peers and say, "Oh, look at us! Traveling the countryside, getting people to react, just like Christ did. Aren't we great? Look at our big Web sites, look at our cool resources. Check out our five-part series and all the cool merchandising. Order today—we take credit cards!"

Satan does a great job ministering to those in the church who love the fame and power associated with helping others heal. You can get drunk on helping people change their lives. Unchecked, the lie becomes "God had little to do with it, and I am solely responsible for this new life." Believe the

lie long enough and you start believing your own press. Satan then devours those seeking themselves by helping them celebrate their own self-centeredness. In the long run, the lie turns into a self-righteous theology that says, “I am the bottom line in the lives of people.” The ministry quickly becomes about a man and what the man has to say or not say.

Satan teaches the self-centered and self-obsessed how to be what J.R. and I call “Born Again Lazy”: how to actively fulfill selfish desires while keeping Christ at arm’s length. Satan ultimately wants your reaction to be a call to do nothing for others. He’s looking for you to say nothing, leave nothing, and offer nothing.

Jesus, on the other hand, seeks to mix it up. When Christ calls us, he engages our sin, not our dreams, goals, or passions. He died for our sins. He served humanity by giving his life. He’s asking you to do the same. Grab the people around you and serve them.

Jesus understands the human drive to be important and valued by other people. He is here to set us free from ourselves. The freedom needs to express itself in selflessness and service to others. He’s looking for your reaction to the world to be that of a servant.

Be in the world, not of the world. We love to screw this up. We automatically assume we should check out and pay no attention to the pop culture radar. Forget about the people who are led astray. Build a bunker in the backyard, cover the kids’ eyes and ears, and hope all your willpower and energy will be enough for the world to stay away. The problem with this behavior is when you follow Christ, you will be asked to serve those who are of the world.

Then there are other Christians who take this in the opposite direction, focusing too much on pop culture, letting too much of the world come into their lives until they stop talking or thinking about Jesus altogether. Let’s talk about *Lord of the Rings* or the latest episode of *Lost* instead.

1.7
HIS REACTION