

ne Listening to a Former Christian

o Darrel Harvey

In the last year I have navigated some interesting waters. I sailed out of the sea of paid professional ministry and into the stream of missional living in the marketplace. After twenty-four years of church work, I bought a small coffee shop and I am learning to live among people as a friend and peer. Speaking and listening to others, not from the bridge as a captain, but on the deck as a fellow traveler has been good for me.

In this new venture, I have found people who are quite free about sharing their beliefs and questions, telling their stories and secrets, and baring their hopes and wounds. Each day I have conversations with people from all sorts of faith backgrounds. Some are casual; others are passionate. But I haven't found anyone yet who doesn't have an opinion on religion in general and Christianity in particular. To put it simply, most of the people I am getting to know have a tenderness toward God but reservations about the church. I remember thinking, *I am surrounded by potential candidates for this chapter. How will I choose the right person?* It was a bit overwhelming. I knew my contribution to the book would require more than a chat with a new acquaintance.

I shared my dilemma with a longtime friend. He was excited for me. This did not surprise me, because he has always encouraged me in my writing. But what came next from him caught me off guard. “I’ll do it,” he said. “What?” I replied with a nervous chuckle. “I’ll be your person who has walked away from Christianity.”

Throughout our friendship Scott has expressed his frustration with the widening gap between what Jesus taught and modeled and the way Western Christians live and behave. We have spent hours venting our disappointment with corporate religion and wondering what Christ thinks about the things done in his name. But now Scott was identifying himself as a former Christian, and this was a new step for him.

Our Friendship

Let me back up. I met Scott as an eighteen-year-old college freshman, but we didn’t really get acquainted until ten years later. My wife and I were considering moving to a new city, church, and assignment. Scott was a part of the group I was having lunch with during the process. I remembered him right away from college, but this time as we talked and joked, I immediately sensed the spark of prospective friendship. I am always amazed that God has given human beings the ability to sense the potential for connection and relationship. We meet (or remeet) someone and instantly things start firing in our heart and brain that say, *I like this person. We connect. What might God be up to here?*

My wife and I decided to accept the assignment and make the move. Not long after our arrival I realized Scott and I had similar interests, senses of humor, upbringing, and frustrations. Over the years Scott has become a great friend, never avoiding

an opportunity to uplift, challenge, confront, or affirm. To this day he continues to live out what Ralph Waldo Emerson meant when he said, “I do not wish to treat friendships daintily, but with roughest courage. When they are real, they are not glass threads or frost-work, but the solidest thing we know.”¹ I cannot think of anything we have not talked about. He has permission to ask me any question he wants, and he has given me the same privilege. When we talk, everything is on the table—God, marriage, parenting, sports, and the condition of our hearts.

Scott and I are true friends, and the conversation that follows comes from a friendship that was birthed in ordinary circumstances, grown in the soil of our shared interests, and refined in the furnace of pain. It is a friendship that continues to grow through the foggy landscape of questioning and doubt.

Unchristian

Before we go too far, we need to understand what the words “Christian” and “Christianity” mean to Scott: “Currently, when I hear or use the term ‘Christianity,’ I think of the [different] institutions that bear the name church. In other words, I think of Christianity in very broad and sweeping ways. Yes, I know there [are many variations] within the tradition of Christianity between the many doctrinal camps; yet with very few exceptions most churches are in the business of selling some sort of salvific product.”

That word “product” struck me. Scott is not the only non-Christian to imply that the church looks more like a distributor of religious goods and services than the dynamic movement we see depicted in scripture. It caused me to think back to some of the conversations I had with Christians who visited my church as

they searched for a new one. At some point the discussion would get around to them saying, “What do you have for us and our children?” Many were not looking for a mission to give themselves to but a new religious sweater to try on. We on the inside need to acknowledge that more often than not, our unbelieving neighbors are right. We have overpromised and underdelivered. We have lowered the bar. We have tamed a dangerous movement. Scott said, “Let me put it another way: Christianity is much more concerned about increasing market share by getting people saved than in wrestling with statements attributed to Jesus [that] have deeply political, economic, and [worldwide] implications. Let me say it even another way: I think Christianity would [prefer to save] people who love/care poorly than to acknowledge people who love well but don’t embrace Jesus as the only way.”

Scott did not grow up on the fringes of Christianity. He is a third-generation member of an evangelical denomination, a graduate of a Christian college, and a former ordained minister. His experiences with us go back as far as his memory, so his opinions of Christians are vivid, colorful, and moving:

I love some Christians deeply, and I have no appreciation for the beliefs or [lifestyles] of others. The same could be said of any people group. [Some] have not thought very deeply about what they say they believe and therefore are very inconsistent in orthodoxy and orthopraxis. As a whole I believe Christians practice a religion of convenience and comfort. I agree with Gandhi’s assessment that Christians are more invested in practicing a religious experience than in living out the radical and demanding teachings of their Man-God. The face of Christianity, the image most people [think of], is not one of wondrous graciousness, economic criticism, nonjudgmental-

ism, rationality, [and so on]. There is a reason for this, and it isn't simply due to [the media's] portrayal. Hypocrisy and dishonesty is rampant.

While Scott's comments about some of the Christians he knows stings, I can't help but notice the respect, even reverence, he has for Jesus. I have suggested that his frustration with the church is directly linked to his admiration for Jesus. I think he appreciates my optimism concerning his spiritual condition, but he does not act as if he buys it. However, this does lead us back to what Scott says about the simplicity of Jesus' teaching: "From my perspective, most of what Christianity is so heavily invested in theologically is rooted primarily in Pauline influence and second- to fourth-century politics. Jesus and his teachings are viewed [backward] through this grid, thereby distorting and minimizing his core message." I reflected on my own upbringing and training. Setting aside Christ's birth, death, and resurrection, I was much more familiar with the writings of Paul and the teachings of the church than the life of Jesus.

Scott concedes, "I'm not sure how to completely determine what that core message is; however, I am certain it is much less bulky and much more radical than the current, overall message [of Christianity]." In his opinion Christianity has repeatedly focused on the wrong things for the past two thousand years:

After two thousand years claiming to speak for God and claiming to be empowered by God through the Holy Spirit and claiming to have the keys to a fulfilling life, Christianity has yet to bring about anything that appears to be close to the kingdom Jesus described. Christians are just as likely to hate, to cheat, and to judge as those who are not Christians. If Christianity were true, then I would [expect] that

the present economic and political powers would be challenged [because Christians would] no longer [be] playing by their rules. If Christianity were true, then I would expect that there would be graciousness, forgiveness, compassion, justice, and mercy left in its wake. If Christianity were true, then resources and time would be spent addressing what [seem] to be bigger problems than programs, buildings, and alternative recreational choices. It seems to me that addressing poverty, injustice, [and] inequality would not be [a] side [program] of Jesus' followers or [an] exception to the usual [program] of telling people they are lost.

In the spring of 2008 I had the opportunity to speak at a pastors' gathering. It was an opportunity to join the conversation on where the church should head and what should shape our ministry in the twenty-first century. I knew Scott would be helpful, and I could not wait to get his input. I also knew it would be an opportunity for him to unpack his thoughts further on the core message of Christ and the ministry of the church. After all, it is easy to pick apart any religion, but to make suggestions on how to fulfill "our" mission is quite another matter.

We e-mailed back and forth and talked on the phone several times about the topic and the event. While he has always had great credibility with me, and his voice consistently rings loudly in my heart, his first paragraph in one e-mail got my attention:

To be honest, I nearly talked myself out of giving any feedback because I don't really believe your audience wants to do anything differently beyond [making] programming changes. Maybe that should be Part 1—I've got something to say, but you don't really want to deal with it. That's harsh, I'm sure. So let me say it differently. Since I am most likely apostate at

best and a pagan at worst, I don't think I have any credibility to say, "Your theology, worldview, and praxis [are inadequate], and you'll never reach the growing numbers of nonreligious until you seriously reconsider what you are about."

I started to think seriously about who I am and what the church I led was about. I wondered how much the birth and growth of the institutional church and the rise of the church growth movement had affected me. How far have I drifted from the picture Jesus painted in his words and life? How often are my choices as a leader driven by a desire for more "market share" instead of life transformation? My conversation with Scott would not only be helpful in addressing a group of pastors but also be critical in shaping my ministry in the twenty-first century. As we talked, a metaphor surfaced. Scott said, "Set a larger table."

He continued,

I believe this idea returns us to the early church's seeming preoccupation with hospitality . . . , the image of Jesus offending the religious by who he ate with, and Paul's encouragement to the "strong" to accommodate the sensibilities of the weak. From my past experience as an "insider" and now as an "outsider" with increasingly secular tastes, I would never describe [those in my former denomination] as people who are comfortable eating, let alone opening their homes, with just anybody figuratively or literally. I know how you all, clergy and laity alike, talk; after all, I talked right along with you about sinners, and I know that an invitation to your home is more like being invited to learn about a tremendous business opportunity, like Amway, than to a party. I'm sure everyone is not like this, but it is the exceptional and not the normal

[church member] who doesn't see the "lost" as projects or opportunities or offensive.

Christians have small tables where only close family [are] invited to come and sit without fear of embarrassment or correction or judgment. You all may think you set a big table, but your actions and attitudes convey a different message. We know that our preferences, political positions, and social choices offend you and in turn encourage you to tell us how we need to change or risk going to hell. So, why would we want to sit at a table with you? In other words, we know you don't like us for ourselves, just as we are, so we'll take the lead and prevent making you any more uncomfortable than you already are.

As I recall (and cling to) your master's level of grace, . . . his demand of those calling themselves disciples to express a similar level of grace was huge! His grace was big enough, his table large enough, to be offensive to even the minimally proper. In short, he lacked good taste and didn't seem to give a rip about what others thought [about him] . . . sitting with those of disreputable character. I don't know if he enjoyed it, but I sure want to believe he did. So as leaders in his movement, why not set about extending grace to his level by inviting us all to sit at a very big table where the notions of who can eat freely or not [are] very, very blurry? Why not examine in [yourselves] why you find us so hard to truly embrace and ask your God to create in you a genuine affection for something more than our souls?

Yes, I am asking you to keep your nose out of my personal business—you haven't earned the right. Yes, I am telling you that I am not likely to change my behaviors simply because you tell me they are offensive to your God. Yes, I will con-

tinue to misbehave long after we have coffee together. So, I know what I am suggesting to you is very difficult to stomach and highly unlikely.

However, I will be happy to raise my beer to your coke and to share a good meal and to laugh at our foible-filled stories and to debate social policy and to go on long walks through narrow canyons, if I know you completely accept me—period—no strings attached. Are you willing to make your table that big—really? Are you willing to call your own out when their tables are small? Are you willing to put on hold your need to convert me so we can simply enjoy a good burger and basketball game? Are you willing to make your table that big for the likes of me to sit at?

If the purpose of this book is to help us listen to our unbelieving neighbors, friends, coworkers, and relatives, then these questions have to be considered on an individual and corporate level. But I also hear Scott asking us larger questions: Are we truly Trinitarian? Do we believe in the Holy Spirit? Do we trust him to do his work? Do I see my role of being a friend, walking alongside people who might make me uncomfortable, as sacred and enough, while allowing him to do the rest?

Scott and I have had many conversations about personal evangelism. Since he grew up in the church, he has seen and heard it all. As a teenager he served as a leader in the local youth ministry. He has been trained in personal evangelism. He has given altar calls. He has seen all sorts of tactics used on individuals and crowds to solicit a particular response. Now he is on the other side of the issue and quite vocal about our attempts at soul winning.

I asked him what we could do: “You know the tension that we (those of us from an evangelistic tradition) live in. How do we address this challenge? How can we be faithful to our understanding of the Great Commission in a post-Christian and postmodern culture?”

Scott responded,

One thing you could do: Value and focus on [my] present life more than my future eternity. I’m sorry, but we skeptics don’t care as much about heaven or hell as you do. It’s not that we want to change your mind about how great [life] is going to be after you’re dead, but eternal life is not something we think about in general and don’t trust specifically. Please forgive us, but we are really tangible people with a “seeing is believing” mind-set and [we were] raised in an ever-increasing technological world that has its roots in empiricism. I mean, you wouldn’t ask us to believe again . . . that the world was created literally in [seven] days or that the sun rotated around the earth or that schizophrenics were possessed by evil entities, [would you?].

To be honest, you’d be better off not bringing up the subject to us for more compelling reasons—[because] it causes us to feel superior and [because] we don’t have anything to learn from you. Why? First, we can’t buy into the logic that a divine being who loves us more than the universe itself (so you all say) could ever bring himself/herself/itself to [hand] us over to demonic waterboarding. Yeah, yeah, I can recall the way you get around this by making it our failure to decide—fair enough; but that begs the question. Forget about the obviously logical problems with people who deal with mental illness [and] personality disorders, [who] live in third-

world countries, or who are immersed in non-Christian cultures, [and so on]. Instead, all you really have to do is ask any parent off the street if [he or she] would stand by idly and allow [his or her] child to be tortured because of [the child's] own stupidity.

Do you see my point? If your peers still aren't convinced, tell them to ask that same parent a second time, but this time have them really ramp it up by telling the parent that [the] child's stupidity was rampant, that she broke [her parent's] heart multiple times in the face of [her parent's] pleas to do differently with her life, and [that] she repeatedly went against [her parent's] good advice, then ask the parent if then [he or she would] be [OK] with an eternity of woe for that kid. Yeah, yeah, I know, if I were holy and pure and transcendent, the decision would be easier—but if that's holiness, then the CIA must be dishing it out in the truckloads and I want to be as far away from it as possible. Honestly, we feel pretty arrogant about this point and truly believe our position holds the high moral ground—sorry; let's just agree to disagree.

Second, I'm sure your compatriots don't mean it, but we have come to see your use of heaven and hell as a type of religious boogeyman. It comes off as a sales pitch used to scare us into buying a universal life insurance policy immediately or, worse, as a way of wearing us down [as] a Kirby vacuum salesman [would do]. "Yes, yes, I'll take Jesus and heaven, now will you please get out of my living room!" Darrel, we don't care, we aren't convinced, we don't want to go someplace that excludes the likes of us, and we definitely think if that is the best you have to offer, it's a weak reason to become religious.

Perhaps most importantly, telling me about hell in our future does nothing about the hell [in] our present. As a group, we tend to be most concerned about the here and now. We agree with you—there is a lot of suffering in this world. Where we differ is that we think it will take a whole lot more than going to church to bring comfort to the hurting. I know this probably isn't fair, but doesn't Jesus' teachings talk more about abundant living and God's kingdom now than about eternal retirement locations after death? There is enough hell on earth to keep your Jesus-machine working overtime on things like hunger, poor education, racism, militarism, planet extinction, and overall human rights. These are issues that many of us feel deeply about, and we have [gotten] to the point where we don't think the government or big business is going to address them in creative, honest, or earnest ways. Yes, I'll be honest with you, we are as guilty as the next American in helping to create and perpetuate these global (and neighborhood) problems—we are selfish, consumeristic, hateful, wasteful, and as likely as the next guy to drop a bomb on our enemies if threatened.

Listen, many of us are clutching [on] to hope “out here,” and we are wanting and waiting to be inspired, to be challenged, and to see and believe that as a people “we can do better than we have.” Does Jesus have anything to say about this? Would he go about addressing these problems any differently than we are? Could your congregations model for us [what] an alternative approach to living looks [like] in the here and now? Please quit trying to save me from hell, and show me the power of the gospel to address poverty, hatred, divisiveness, suffering, [and so on]. Seeing something like that oc-

curring before our very eyes would be more compelling than streets of gold, and [it would be] something we would get behind and give our energies to whether we ever bought into that insurance plan of yours.

I wonder what you, the readers, are thinking right now. Have you written my friend off as a malcontent or someone who is misguided or disgruntled or bitter? Or are you listening? I am thinking of what a gift I have in a friend like Scott. He reminds me that many seekers, skeptics, and cynics are looking for evidence and encouragement that there is a better way to live. He is looking for good news. Good news for today. Good news that life is worth living. Scott's presence in my life also causes me to evaluate whether I am clinging to the Christian faith or only a cultural expression of the faith.

Most of our conversation thus far has been about Scott's impressions of us—Christians and Christianity. It would be unfair for me to leave you thinking that all he was willing to do was unload on our beliefs and behaviors. He was just as open about sharing his views on spirituality. Here is what our conversation was like:

DARREL: So what is it all about? What is the purpose of life? Why are we here?

SCOTT: To live and love fully.

DARREL: What do you mean by that?

SCOTT: By “love” I mean to care well for our neighbors . . . local, national, and international. The term is more akin to the word “agape” and carries with it the idea that I am to be invested in compassion, justice, mercy, and equality.

DARREL: How is that going?

SCOTT: I hope I am gracious, forgiving, wise. I hope I listen well. I hope I am loyal.

DARREL: How do your beliefs influence your daily life?

SCOTT: I hope I am learning to love better. I hope I am living more consistently with my beliefs about caring well for others.

DARREL: How do your beliefs affect your relationships with others?

SCOTT: My lack of believing about Christianity affects my wife to some degree, and maybe even my friends. For her, I believe there is some level of anxiety created by my disbelief and agnosticism. However, I also think my humanistic leanings are appreciated by her. I believe she would say I am maturing and becoming a better person. Of course, she doesn't understand why I can't do both! Truly, if I could make myself believe, I would. I keep looking at the emperor, telling myself he has clothes on, but each time I open my eyes I see a naked man. Oddly, several of my friends who are Christians have suggested I am living more closely aligned to the teachings of Jesus than ever. I don't know. I hope so, but I don't think they have an absolutely clear picture.

Having a friend like Scott has taken away the oversimplified notion that Christians are the good people, as if we are the only ones who are upright, honest, and honorable. I have had the benefit of watching him in different situations. I have seen him deal with challenging people. We have been in situations where integrity could have been put on the shelf. I have witnessed him consistently choose the difficult path of goodness. So to put it bluntly, I asked him, "What ethical principles do you live by?" Here is his response:

On this point, I would agree with the Humanist Manifesto:

Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience. Humanists ground values in human welfare shaped by human circumstances, interests, and concerns and extended to the global ecosystem and beyond. We are committed to treating each person as having inherent worth and dignity, and to making informed choices in a context of freedom consonant with responsibility.²

As we have talked over the years of our friendship and more specifically during the last few months, I can see how this philosophy guides Scott's ideas and life. He takes seriously the impact of his choices and their effects. Not for some eternal reward but because of the immediate consequences and benefits. I made sure to ask him specifically about eternity and destiny:

DARREL: What effect do your choices have on your destiny?

SCOTT: If by destiny, you mean "tomorrow," then my choices have real and ongoing effects that I must deal with on a daily basis. If by "destiny" you mean "afterlife," then my choices will be something those who knew me must deal with at some level.

DARREL: What about heaven, hell, karma, some sort of check and balance in the universe? Do you believe in any of that?

SCOTT: Nope.

I then asked him, "What do you believe about God, human freedom, the natural world, human relationships?" and he gave this reply:

"Believe" is the right word, because I have no actual knowledge of a divine being outside of time, space, and natural law. At this point, I am probably located somewhere between agnosticism and atheism. The idea of God as typically defined by most if not all religions is untenable to me. Currently the

most accurate description of where I am is that provided by Dawkins: “I cannot know for certain but I think God is very improbable. . . .”³ Christians would probably suggest that my failure to believe is a lack of faith or simply hostility. Perhaps. However, I have tried to [believe], to embrace, to convince myself that there is something divine and spiritual. The best way to describe it is that I don’t seem to have the mechanism to allow me to truly believe. I could say “I believe” or “I have faith,” but I would know, deep down, that at heart I am very doubtful. This is not to say I am closed to having my mind changed or having the mechanism to believe added; but it will require something I have not been able to muster up for the past [forty-plus] years.

Human freedom—yes and no. This is a very philosophical question. We are not completely free to do whatever we want; we are not free from the “influence” of culture, economic systems, dominant worldviews, or our genetics. However, I think I have the ability to make choices on a daily basis, to say yes or no, to invest my energies in one direction or another. The ability to think seems to imply a level of human freedom.

The natural world exists and can be encountered. It should be protected and partnered with versus taken advantage of and used up. The natural world is all that exists. If something exists that cannot be seen or discerned, it is because we have not discovered or developed far enough to see or discern it. For instance, the idea of existence at the atomic level was posited long before it was actually proven to exist. I believe, along with most physicists, that there are many more dimensions than the handful we currently experience (e.g., worm holes). These dimensions are still part of the natural

world. Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis.

Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships. Relationships are central to our becoming and living. We are relational beings that desire for and benefit from intimacy, friendship, brotherhood, and community. The evil done through systems (e.g., economic, political, social) and individuals is the result, in part, of ignoring our “relatedness” and our “commonality.”

I then asked Scott, “How does your position help you to understand suffering, crises, and why bad things happen to good people?” He responded by saying, “Why do good things happen to bad people? . . . ‘Bad things’ do not have a will or intent; the bad in life is not discriminate but dependent on genetics, context, chance, [and so on]. ‘Bad’ is not an entity. ‘Bad’ is a word used to describe a subjective sense of what is not desirable by an individual or a group. Sometimes things defined as ‘bad’ are later embraced as the ‘best thing to ever happen to me’ and vice versa.”

I hope you resist the temptation to assume my friend Scott is arrogant. I know that he wrestles with these issues daily. He weighs his decisions of right and wrong, how he spends his money, and what he gives his time to more conscientiously than many Christians I know. He openly admits, “Too many of my decisions are based in self-interest, self-protection, and selfishness. Hopefully I utilize wisdom, consider how my choices might affect those I love, and examine whether my decision is aligned with what I say I believe.”

This project has taken our friendship to new places. We have talked about familiar topics from totally different vantage points. In one such conversation I said, “We Christians talk a lot about

worship. For several years you and I talked about it programmatically and even worked on planning worship. I wonder now, how do you worship? What does worship mean to you?” Scott replied, “Worship for me is those moments when I am absolutely present; when I am awake to the moment I am in—listening, breathing, absorbing, living. I am not present very often and believe this should be remedied! [I think.] The solution to becoming more mindful is likely to come through contemplation and practicing mindfulness. I suppose worship is also about those moments of joy, discovery, and speechlessness that sometimes meet you through the course of a day/lifetime. Examples include a hug from your child, forgiveness from a spouse, falling to the ground next to a brother [and] gasping for air after pushing [yourself] to the limit, and seeing graciousness.

I recently sat with Scott in a worship service. We went to hear a mutual friend preach. The music was good. The message was inspired and powerful. Communion was served. I remember being particularly moved at one point. Scott noticed, leaned over, and said, “You know you are loved, right?” “Yes,” I whispered. Volumes were communicated in those six words, but I think even more was communicated in what went unsaid. That is a snapshot of my friendship with Scott. I have been surprised by grace, kingdom living, and acceptance more often in my relationship with him than in my relationship with those who are certain of their faith. I am truly blessed to have a friend like him. I am glad I am not God (and you are too). I am glad I do not have the responsibility of rendering some sort of final judgment, for it is hard to imagine a heaven without Scott.