

Contents

Preface	9
CHAPTER 1	
Help Them Get Lost: The Case for Reaching Cultural Christians	11
CHAPTER 2	
Religion without Salvation: Characteristics of Cultural Christianity	21
CHAPTER 3	
Civic Religion: Generic Faith That Demands and Asks Nothing of Its Followers	33
CHAPTER 4	
Bridging the Gap: Challenging Cultural Christian Beliefs	43
CHAPTER 5	
Overcoming Obstacles: Barriers to Reaching Cultural Christians	55
CHAPTER 6	
False Assurance: Once Saved, Always Saved	63
CHAPTER 7	
The Country Club Church: How Lax Church Membership Fosters Cultural Christianity	73
CHAPTER 8	
Christmas and Easter: Moving Beyond Cultural Observance to the Life-Changing Implications	87
CHAPTER 9	
Making Decisions vs. Making Disciples: Why Raised Hands and Sinner's Prayers Don't Guarantee Salvation	105

CHAPTER 10	
God Shed His Grace on Thee: Partisans, Politics, and Prosperity	119
CHAPTER 11	
The Moral Theist: Reaching the Good Person Who Believes in God	131
CHAPTER 12	
Hail Mary, Notre Dame Wins: Reaching Generational Catholics	141
CHAPTER 13	
The Watered-Down Word: Reaching Mainline Protestants	153
CHAPTER 14	
Faith, Family, and Football: Ministering to the Bible Belt	167
CHAPTER 15	
The Harvest Is Plentiful: Challenging Cultural Christianity with Courage and Love	181
CONCLUSION	
A Heart Check for Us All: How Do I Know I'm Not a Cultural Christian?	187
APPENDIX	
Types of Cultural Christianity	193
Acknowledgments	197
Notes	199



Help Them Get Lost: ?

The Case for Reaching Cultural Christians



Thinking that I deserve heaven is a sure sign
I have no understanding of the gospel.
—SINCLAIR FERGUSON

If there is such a thing as missional insecurity, I have felt it. It's that feeling you had in college when your friends spent spring break serving in a Haitian orphanage while you drove to the beach. My most vivid experience of this insecurity came while moving out of my seminary apartment. I was loading up to make the drive back to my hometown of Tallahassee, where I would begin local church pastoral ministry. I was excited to be heading home, until I saw my neighbor from our seminary apartment complex, Matt. He was moving to Northern California to join the staff of a local church. *Great, I thought. There's Matt packing up his family and entire life to move to one of the most secularized regions in America, and I am going back home, where I will live ten miles from*

the Georgia state line and less than an hour from Alabama. He's going on mission, I'm headed to the Bible Belt.

I felt like I was taking the easy road and Matt was taking the courageous one, leading his family to an area where preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ would be just barely harder than finding a Republican. I was heading to the Land of the Monogrammed. I wanted to say something spiritual to make myself feel better. With the standard one-arm man hug, I said, "I really admire what you're doing and will pray for you as you head to an area with such an important Great Commission need."

Matt's reply was not what I was expecting.

"Whatever," he said, doing the required pat-on-the-back during our man hug, "the Bible Belt is the most difficult place in America to pastor a local church."

I was stunned. He must have sensed my confusion because he explained further. As he did, I had a serious epiphany. I believe the Lord knew what I needed to hear in that moment, and it changed my perspective forever on my role as a pastor in the part of the country where I live and minister. "In California," Matt said, "there is rarely confusion. Either you're a Christian or you're not. In the Bible Belt, many people think they're Christians but have no concept of the severity of sin, necessity of repentance, message of grace, or the overall message of the gospel. They think they're just fine with God and God is fine with them because they aren't atheists and have been to church before as a kid. It's almost like you have to help them get lost, so they can actually be saved. They believe in God, but do not believe their sin has done anything to separate them from Him or caused them to need the Jesus they claim to believe in."

You have to get them lost before they can actually be saved.

People are too quick to claim something is "life-changing,"

and I've done that myself about a new flavor of Blue Bell Ice Cream or some Kansas City BBQ. But from a ministry perspective, this really was the moment for me. The reality of Matt's description of my hometown created a missional urgency rather than missional insecurity. Since that parking lot conversation, I moved back home just south of the Georgia line to plant a church among people with Southern accents, who never missed Vacation Bible School as kids, and now drop their own kids off several weeks of the summer to different VBS programs across town. Whereas church familiarity is a rarity where Matt is, people back home will dress up to go to church on Easter Sunday, while having no concept of why that holiday even matters on Monday morning.

Since that conversation in our seminary apartment parking lot, I have also come to realize that the spiritual landscape Matt was describing is not unique to the South. What he was describing was *Cultural Christianity*: a religion that, I believe, is practiced by more Americans than any other faith or religion. Its participants can be found in Catholic or Protestant churches, in the South and Midwest, on high school football fields, at patriotic celebrations, and around family dinner tables. It looks and sounds very Christian on the surface, but is merely Christian by culture, rather than conviction. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not part of the equation.

The people who practice cultural Christianity are not atheists or agnostics. In fact, Cultural Christians would be offended if described with such labels. These are not the urban academics living in loft apartments who could articulate their opposition to Christian beliefs. These are the suburban, cul-de-sac folks hosting a cookout to watch the game. They believe in God. They take seriously their "Christian" traditions, prayer in schools, nativity scenes, and Linus reciting the story of the birth of Christ during *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

Cultural Christianity admires Jesus, but doesn't really think He is needed, except to "take the wheel" in a moment of crisis.

What is wrong with being a monotheist who loves Charlie Brown and believes Jesus was born in a manger? Nothing, if it leads to gospel belief and practice. But the difficulty comes when we examine exactly who their God is and question why the coming of Jesus even matters.

Cultural Christianity admires Jesus, but doesn't really think He is needed, except to "take the wheel" in a moment of crisis. The Jesus of Cultural Christianity is a type of historical imaginary friend with some magic powers for good luck and sentimentality. "Amazing Grace" is a song known from memory, but why that grace is amazing cannot be explained. The God of Cultural Christianity is the "big man upstairs," and whether or not He is holy and people have sinned against Him is irrelevant. Words such as "hope," "faith," and "believe" hang on the walls of living rooms as decorations, but the actual words of God only come around when Psalm 23 is read at a loved one's funeral.

Religious but Not Saved

It is well documented that those who claim no religious affiliation (called "the nones") are on the rise.¹ Between 2007 and 2014, the group of people self-identifying as having no religious affiliation jumped from 16.1 to 22.8 percent of the American population.² This coincides with a decline in people identifying as Christian, although there is reason to believe this is really just a refinement process and not a sign of bleeding in the actual Christian demographic. As the social costs of Christianity increase, those with

only nominal belief are falling away.³ According to a study of US adults, 80% of those polled believe in God, but only 56% believe in God as described in the Bible.⁴ Considering the fact that approximately 70% of the US population still identifies as Christian, we have a large group of people that would likely be overlooked in outreach or missions. With this in mind, I believe Cultural Christianity is the most underrated mission field in America. While there is evidence that nominal Christianity is declining on its own, it is of utmost importance that we minister to those on the fence, in hopes that they may end up within the fold and not without.

The words my friend Matt used to challenge me in that parking lot have been confirmed since I moved back home to pastor in a city saturated with Cultural Christianity. Indeed, there is familiarity with church and Christian lingo, but a familiarity with the gospel is hard to find. To add to the problem, the church often “assumes the gospel.” As a result, people can camp out in churches for years and never hear what the Bible actually says. What an opportunity to make a Great Commission impact! But Matt was right when he said it was difficult. Reaching people who think they are fine is a seldom-discussed starting point for evangelism and local church ministry.

Getting someone who thinks he’s a Christian to see that he is actually *not* is a delicate and sensitive endeavor, but not unique to our time. Jesus Himself, in the greatest sermon ever preached, reminds us that being religious but not saved is not unique to our day. The Sermon on the Mount is our starting point for understanding Cultural Christianity, where Jesus addresses the distant cousins of the modern day over-churched, under-reached: those who were religious, but not repentant.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?’ Then I will announce to them, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers!’” (Matt. 7:21–23)

Jesus wasn’t speaking about atheists, agnostics, pluralists, or secular humanists. He was directly describing moral and religious people doing good religious acts in the name of God. These were the Tom Bradys of religious observance. They had a collection of lanyards from conferences that would make any worship leader jealous. Religion was deeply embedded into the routine of their lives, which gave them full confidence that their acts of righteousness built an impressive résumé setting them up for a big payoff in heaven.

The old adage that “it isn’t *what* you know but *who* you know” rings true for these religious all-stars and their impressive accomplishments. They might have known religion, but they didn’t know the Redeemer standing right in front of them. And therefore “what” they knew didn’t really matter all that much. Consider the petitions Jesus gave as an example in Matthew 7:21–23 in our modern context. I believe His examples would translate to our era like this:

Didn’t we “say grace” before dinner?

Didn’t we vote our values?

Didn’t we believe prayer should be allowed in school?

Didn’t we go to church?

Didn’t we believe in God?

Didn't we get misty eyes whenever we heard "God Bless America" sung at a baseball game?
Didn't we give money to the church?
Didn't we treat women with respect?
Didn't we own Bibles?
Didn't we get the baby christened by the priest?
Didn't we want America to return to its Christian roots?
Didn't we stay married and faithful?

The term "self-righteousness" often comes with a connotation of superiority or rigid legalism. And while those might be results of self-righteousness, the *root* of self-righteousness is the belief that your own personal works justify you before God. Self-righteousness believes that you are good enough or can be if you try hard. Many people function as if they don't need saving, but that doesn't change the reality that God has given only One mediator and One atonement and that there is no exception clause.

"Didn't We" vs. "Didn't He"

That reality has changed the way I view the mission field. These petitioners Jesus spoke of loved to say, "didn't we?" when they should have been saying "didn't He?" They should have put their trust in a righteousness outside themselves, one that only Jesus could provide. But there was only one "didn't" that Jesus answered with, and from His own words, it was that He did not know them. This may sound strange because Jesus certainly knew them in a literal sense. The One whom the Scriptures state is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible" (Col. 1:15–16), certainly knows each person by name.

By not knowing them, He meant He did not know them spiritually because of their sin. By Jesus declaring, “I never knew you,” He was claiming that they were not His disciples. They were not in His family and stood as unforgiven “lawbreakers.”

They may have known Jewish religion, ritual, and duty, but they didn’t know Jesus Christ. They were on a wide road that would lead to their destruction, even though their religious résumés left them assuming they were just fine.

This reality calls us to missional urgency to reach those in our services who are comfortable with Christian lingo but have no understanding of the truth. The message remains: no saving faith exists apart from commitment to Jesus Christ and belief in His gospel. While the number of those who check “No Religion” on a survey might be rising, politicians still invoke vague language about God in their speeches to appease the millions of Americans who get goose bumps singing “God Bless America” at baseball games. This god they are singing of, however, functions more like a national mascot than a God who demands our faith and repentance. The church must awaken to the reality that this is a false gospel with eternal consequences. Cultural Christianity is a mindset that places one’s security in heritage, values, rites of passage (such as a first communion or a baptism from childhood), and a generic deity, rather than the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. These false gospels pose serious challenges to pastors and local church members who are seeking to live on mission and remain faithful to the Great Commission where the Lord has them living, working, and being part of local life.

Gospel believers who care about the souls of their friends, coworkers, neighbors, high school teammates, and families need to be knowledgeable about their mission field and understand the task at hand for those of us who live among Cultural Christianity.

Jesus claimed He would tell those religious people to depart from Him because He never knew them. What a statement and what a tragedy! Understanding this mission field has led the church I pastor to clarity and intentionality as we minister to our modern-day Matthew 7:21–23 community. Knowing the cultural religious landscape keeps us focused on gospel-centered efforts to see people move from being “Christians” by culture to Christians by conviction.

We know, from Jesus Himself, that there are people who can be in the church but not of the church. We know there are unsaved “Christians.” And we know that Jesus will not be fooled, even if the rest of us pretend to be.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- Matthew 7:21–23 informs us that not every religious person will inherit the kingdom of heaven and not every religious person is known by God as an adopted member of His family. What is your gut reaction to that fact?
- If someone asked you why you’re a Christian, or more specifically, how you know you’re a Christian, what would you say?
- Are you tempted to put your faith in anything but the shed blood of Jesus Christ?
- What is your version of “Lord, didn’t I _____?”