

# **I'm Fine with God...**

It's Christians I Can't Stand

Bruce Bickel  
Stan Jantz



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS

EUGENE, OREGON

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Published in association with the Conversant Media Group, P.O. Box 3006, Redmond, WA 98007.

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

[www.harvesthousepublishers.com](http://www.harvesthousepublishers.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bickel, Bruce, 1952-

I'm fine with God—it's Christians I can't stand / Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7369-2197-8

ISBN-10: 0-7369-2197-4

1. Interpersonal relations—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Jantz, Stan, 1952- II. Title.

BV4597.52.B525 2008

277.3'083—dc22

2007041325

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**Printed in the United States of America**

08 09 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 / VP-SK / 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# I'm Fine with God...

## but I Can't Stand Christians Who Impose Their Morality on Others

Can we start with the premise that Christians are not held in high regard in society? According to my purely anecdotal research, Christians have managed to slide down the societal acceptability chart to a position that is slightly below telephone solicitors and personal injury lawyers. For each notch they move lower on the chart, Christians raise the respectability of some other annoying segment of society. So by contrast, they keep looking progressively worse.

I'm sure I won't get an argument over this assertion from those who identify themselves as existing outside the circle of Christianity. But it may surprise you to know that many Christians don't argue with this premise either.

I frequently have the opportunity to speak before Christian groups. The audiences usually range in size from 200 to 2000 people. As often as possible, I use these forums to conduct an informal survey. I don't have any formal polling methodology; I just ask this simple question: "What one word best describes the reputation Christians have in our society?" Here are the most frequent responses:

- judgmental
- hypocritical

- self-righteous (which is really two words, but I grant it an exception because of the hyphen)
- ignorant
- pushy
- dangerous
- irrelevant
- obnoxious

When I review the responses to my question with the members of the Christian audience, they almost universally agree that they have this reputation in our society. (Duh! Apparently Christians aren't as clueless as you might expect. Despite their flaws, at least they can manage to get a blinding glimpse of the obvious.) But here is what I continually find to be amazing: These Christian groups always agree that this unflattering reputation of their own constituency is deserved and accurate. They readily admit that their group is not being falsely accused.

Apparently a lot of extremist Christians somewhere have been working very hard to earn their unflattering reputation. Maybe the rest of us need to concede that as a group, Christians are now the most annoying segment of society. Tell them they've won. Maybe then they'll give it a rest.

Unfortunately, their annoyance is so multifaceted that it won't be easy for them to cease and desist. Even if we assume that they desire to improve their social standing, the one-word character descriptors only identify the symptoms that are painfully obvious. A much more sinister underlying cause of these symptoms remains. Treating the symptoms will require dealing with that cause, and the lunatic fringe of Christianity may not be willing to go there. Radical surgery would be necessary—more than amputation (because the ailment is too pervasive). More than a lobotomy (which simply may be a redundancy). We're talking about a drastic measure: removing Christians from their self-appointed role as society's morality police.

## A Brief Historical Interlude

Christianity began about AD 33 in the area surrounding Jerusalem as people began reporting that Jesus Christ had been crucified and came back to life. As with most of the known world at that time, Jerusalem was subject to the rule of the Roman Empire. For political reasons, Caesar let the Jews rule themselves in a semiautonomous fashion (as long as they paid their taxes to Rome). At this early stage, the upstart Christians weren't a nuisance to the Roman government. But the Jewish religious authorities weren't keen on this ragtag group that was promoting Jesus as the come-and-gone Messiah.

The Jewish Pharisees, who were the archenemies of the Christians, were stellar rule keepers. That was their gig. They were the largest and most influential religious-political party at the time; they controlled the operation of the synagogues and had tremendous influence on the general populace. The term "Pharisee" literally means "the separated ones," and that was an accurate description. The Pharisees separated themselves from the masses due to their strict adherence to the myriad of rules and regulations affecting worship, commerce, and everyday life (derived not only from the written Torah but also from the more extensive supplementary material in the Jewish oral law). They were known to be excessively rigid and intolerant with respect to the smallest deviation from protocols specified in the fine print of their laws.

Jesus was very critical of the Pharisees. He condemned them for caring more about the rules than their relationship with God. They were quick to condemn anyone who digressed in the slightest way from the behavior they considered appropriate. Jesus chastised them for following the letter of the law but completely missing the heart of the law. In one of his rants against them, he called them "a brood of vipers." I don't know the Hebrew symbolism behind that reference, but it can't be flattering.

## Presenting the Twenty-First-Century Pharisees

In time, "Pharisee" became a name for a self-righteous, hypocritical

person who took pride in behaving in a very correct and proper way and who felt morally superior to people who followed more relaxed standards. Now, 20 centuries later, does this remind you of anyone? Tah-dah! That definition fits many contemporary Christians (or at least their lunatic fringe). They are the Pharisees of the twenty-first century.

Representatives of the Christian clan are the first and most vocal to rail against any moral standard that doesn't fit within their tight-knit context. As a result, Christians are famous for their denouncement of the biggies: abortion, homosexuality, and heterosexual sex between adults who aren't married to each other.

But just like the Pharisees of the first century, certain outspoken Christians have a long list of supplementary, seemingly minor moral infractions that they consider to be major offenses:

- celebrating Halloween
- watching *The Simpsons* (because it sacrilegiously portrays Reverend Lovejoy as a pious doofus)
- looking at ads in the Abercrombie & Fitch catalogue
- saying "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas"
- drinking beer (not only because of the alcohol but also because of the sexually suggestive advertising)

Nothing would be wrong with Christians holding these opinions if they could keep them to themselves. Our culture has no gripe against people adhering to different lifestyles. We have no trouble assimilating Tibetan monks, astrologers, and vegans into our culture. We have all sorts of ethnic and philosophical subsets in our society, and we give them wide latitude to believe whatever they choose. For the most part, the vegans get along with the carnivores; neither group despises the other or tries to assert moral dominance over the other. But that is not the case with many Christians, who want to impose their morality as a

mandatory standard of behavior on everyone, especially those who subscribe to a different (purportedly lower) moral matrix.

Most Evangelical Christians presumptuously assume that their morality is the only correct one and that all other behavioral standards or codes of conduct are consequently wrong, flawed, and immoral.

No wonder that Christians who gallop through our culture on this high horse come across as self-righteous. And in classic slapstick comedic style (but not nearly so funny), one of their leaders falls off that high horse and into the sewer of hypocrisy when...

- A televangelist who shouts the loudest against homosexuality is arrested in the restroom at a playground for exposing himself to young boys.
- A Christian leader who condemns the materialism and greed of American society is caught embezzling funds from his ministry.
- A pastor who preaches the company line of stringent morality and encourages his congregation to picket the strip clubs and movie theatres is photographed sitting in a hottub with a naked woman who is not his wife (and the only thing he is wearing is a silly grin).

### **Another Dimension of Hypocrisy...and on the Lord's Day!**

It is easy to be critical of others if you don't have to deal with their problems.

The Pharisees in the first century had an easier time following their hundreds of picky rules and regulations because they didn't really have

to work for a living. They just had to be religious. Leaving a sheep in a ditch on the Sabbath, when no labor was permitted, was easy for them. But the poor Jewish schlep who owned the flock had to break the Sabbath rules and yank the animal out of the ditch if he wanted to have his livestock available for sale the next morning.

For a long time, Christians were critical of others over issues that the Christians managed to avoid altogether. But little by little, Christians fell victim to the same struggles and temptations as the rest of the population. And what do you think happened? Those things that were once grievous sins when the Christians weren't involved suddenly became more acceptable to them when they encountered the problems in their own lives.

It's bad enough that some Christians project such a morally superior attitude, but their offense is at its worst when they don't live up to the standards they are trying to impose on the rest of us.

This is where Christians enter a further dimension of hypocrisy. The first dimension is when they do things that they preach against. But a more insidious dimension of hypocrisy is revealed when a former "sin" is recategorized as something now acceptable because so many Christians are guilty of it.

As late as the 1960s, many communities still enforced "blue laws." These laws were designed to enforce moral standards, particularly the observance of Sunday as a day of worship. Under these prohibitions, commerce was restricted. Retail establishments were required to be closed on Sundays. The activity of many communities came to a screeching halt on Sunday mornings. It was not merely coincidental that this was the time that Christians considered to be the Lord's Day, when there should be no labor (and apparently no fun outside of

church). Christians disapproved of anyone promoting an activity or event on Sunday morning. Non-Christian men who were mowing their lawns on Sunday morning endured critical stares from Christian families driving by on their way to church. On Saturdays, people could do whatever they wanted, but on Sunday, only the pagans played. Even the NFL games were scheduled to start after Sunday worship services were over. Anything that threatened to take people away from church on Sunday was an evil influence that had to be avoided at all costs. The piety of the Christians on this issue was premised on the Fourth Commandment: Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. Anybody who would argue with or disobey one of the Big Ten was on spiritually shaky ground. (Christians overlooked the argument of the Seventh-day Adventists that the Sabbath was really Saturday. Seventh-day Adventists have always been in the minority, so their opinion didn't count.)

But beginning with the decade of the 1970s, a gradual moral shift began. As the Christian baby boomers begat more babies, and as Christian soccer moms started raising pint-sized soccer players, skipping church on Sunday morning was no longer a dastardly deed. If you wanted little Jensen playing soccer, it was going to happen on Sunday because that was the only day the games were played. And little Jensen couldn't go alone; his game had to be a family outing, so the entire family missed church. If churches wanted parishioners in the pews more often than when the soccer team had a bye week, the preacher had to stop making the parents feel so guilty for skipping church on game days. And to keep the coffers replenished, churches figured out an ingenious way to collect a weekly offering from those soccer families: Hold a worship service on Saturday night! It might not be church on the Lord's Day, but at least it is church on the Lord's Day Eve.

I have no complaint with the many churches that instituted informal Saturday evening services to accommodate those in their neighborhoods who would be intimidated by the more formal Sunday morning services.

Such concessions should be applauded. My grievance is with the hypocrisy of many churches that now provide alternatives to Sunday worship that permit Christians to treat Sunday as an ordinary day. These churches act as if this contemporary service scheduling makes them culturally hip, but not too long ago they were condemning a casual approach to Sunday because they considered it so sacrilegious. I've read the Bible. I know these Christians believe that God is immutable and that he never changes. I know they believe that his Word is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. So how is it that goofing around on the Lord's Day was such a heinous sin when it was convenient for them to gather on Sundays, but now, when they have frequent scheduling conflicts on Sunday, God has changed his mind about the Fourth Commandment? If they've got it right now, then they should admit that they had it wrong before. And somebody owes a big apology to all of those men who were mowing their lawns on Sunday mornings back in the 1950s and 1960s. (And my mom should admit that my eternal destiny would not have been jeopardized if I had gone to Donny Weller's tenth birthday sleepover party even though I would have missed Sunday school the next morning.)

### **Divorcing Themselves from Credibility**

Christians have sometimes been experts at taking a moral stance based on a theological position, only to change their morality when their theological interpretation changes. When that happens, they are quick to assert the correctness of the changed position; they just aren't good at apologizing for being so dogmatically wrong in the first place.

This is not misconduct of which only contemporary Christians are guilty. It goes way back in our doctrinal gene pool. The case of Galileo comes to mind, and he lived 400 years ago. A Christian himself, Galileo is perhaps most famous for his published observations in 1610 that the moon, Jupiter, and Venus orbited the sun. His scientific opinions were in contravention of the widely accepted belief that every part of

the universe revolved around the earth. Apparently the Christians at the time liked to think of themselves as the center of the universe, so they subjected Galileo to the Inquisition. Literally. The Inquisition of the Catholic Church consistently ruled against him from 1616 to 1633, resulting in a gag order against Galileo that restrained him from publicizing his theories. But as everyone now knows, Galileo's theories were correct. The Catholic Church got around to publicly admitting their error and later issued an official apology—in 1992!

Astronomy isn't the only subject on which Christians have changed their position. Divorce has been given an extreme makeover in the last several decades. Not too long ago, the D word was taboo in Christian circles. Good Christians never got divorced, although they might know someone who was related to someone (second cousin, twice removed) who had a divorce in their family. After all, the Bible says that God hates divorce, so Christians often shamed and humiliated anyone whose marriage ended in divorce. Apparently, it wasn't bad enough that the person had to endure the emotional, financial, and psychological drain of the divorce; Christians added spiritual shame and guilt to the list. Using the Bible like a sledgehammer, Christians beat down divorcées. The failure to keep a marriage (even a miserable one) hanging together disqualified a divorced person from preaching, teaching Sunday school, or saying the prayer at the start of the church potluck dinner. And if all of that didn't dissuade the divorced person from attending the church, he or she was subjected to further indignity with adult Sunday school class names like Pairs & Spares. There was no ambiguity about the second-class status in the church when the divorced members were labeled as "spares."

The Bible is just as clear about God's hatred of lying and gossiping as it is about God's stance on divorce. But Christians didn't discriminate against gossips (probably because it was a taint that the majority of them shared). Divorced people constituted a much smaller minority, so they were easy targets. Christians with a marriage license still intact belittled the tragic moral failings of those who didn't love God enough

to stay married. To the face of the divorcée, the Christians sympathized in a condescending manner; behind her back, they ruthlessly spread rumors about her. At the woman's Bible study group, they read the passages that condemn gossip, never imagining that their own sin was perhaps more egregious in God's eyes than the divorcée's termination of her marriage to an abusive husband.

Thankfully, Christians have eased up on their selective criticism of divorce. Is this shift mandated by God's change of opinion of the subject? Absolutely not. But statistics reveal that the incidence of divorce in Christian couples has now reached about 50 percent (and slightly higher than in the overall population according to some surveys). This means that half of the congregants in a Christian church will have a divorce on their résumé. Do you really expect that a pastor will pound on the pulpit in condemnation of divorce if it will offend the charitable inclinations of half of the congregation when the offering plate is passed down the pews? And how can a church in Southern California expect to put only non-divorced people on the church board if 80 percent of the congregation doesn't meet that criterion? And who will do the preaching if the pastor is disqualified from ministry because his wife couldn't take it anymore and filed for divorce? And are you surprised that some clergy who receive compensation and benefits of more than \$1 million per year from their ministries refuse to step down from their position (and lifestyle) simply because their marriage fell to pieces?

The frequency of divorce in Christian marriages has forced all of Christianity to consider divorce in a new light. And this is a good thing. Realizing that no one is immune from heartrending marital discord and breakup, Christians are compelled to be a little more gracious and understanding about it. But where is the apology for the decades of singling out divorce as being a worse spiritual failing than pervasive gossip and pride? Who is going to step to the microphone and admit that Christians were wrong to highlight divorce only because they weren't as frequently guilty of it?

We must publicly acknowledge that Christianity has no rightful claim to moral authority in our society when it discriminates against the sins that are uncommon among its members, only later to soften that stance when Christians are discovered to be heavily involved in the formerly despised behavior.

### **How Did This “Holier than Thou” Problem Get Started?**

In the first half of the twentieth century, people looked to the morality of Christians as the standard for acceptable behavior. That doesn't mean that everyone wanted to be a Christian or even agreed conceptually with the biblical view of God and Jesus. They simply considered Christians as moral people, and they considered the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and the rest of the “love your neighbor as yourself” principles to be fairly good benchmarks for societal interaction. (So much so that in 1956, Congress enacted the law that made “In God We Trust” the official national motto for America.) Even though people might not have agreed with Christian theology, they recognized that Christlike behavior was moral, upright, and a pretty good thing.

Christians survived well in this setting. Why shouldn't they? Christians were considered fairly respectable simply because they were presumed to be paragons of culturally acceptable behavior: They didn't smoke, drink, or cuss; they went to church; and they were supposedly honest, hard-working members of the community. Everything about the respectability of Christians was based on the prescribed behavior of their faith. Our society almost universally agreed that the Christian code of conduct was good, right, and true.

Over time, Christianity became defined more by its behavioral code than by its doctrinal beliefs. In other words, Christianity became a religion of do's and don'ts rather than a theological faith. This is exactly what Christ preached against when He butted heads with the

Pharisees. For him, the kingdom of God was all about relationship and the condition of a person's heart. He abhorred the thought that the kingdom of God would be minimized to rules and regulations and a behavioral checklist.

Notwithstanding what Jesus would think of it, Christians didn't seem to mind a checklist religion. They thrived on it. Admittedly, a checklist gives us an objective standard. We can easily determine how well we are doing (and we can just as easily determine how poorly someone else is doing in comparison). Jesus' approach of examining our own heart was way too subjective and ethereal. Without a checklist, Christians would have to independently think about whether their behavior was appropriate. A thorough analysis of propriety would involve the examination of motives and attitudes behind the actions. That approach was far too personal and involved too much soul-searching. It was so much easier to simply chant, "Christian men don't smoke and chew, and they don't date the girls who do."

### **A Reminiscent Walk down Legalism Lane**

I was raised in one of those legalistic Christian households. Along with my sisters, I knew exactly what was expected of me (because my parents posted it on the refrigerator). I was born into the religious heritage of the Plymouth Brethren, which on the morality scale was slightly more conservative than the Pilgrims. Here is a brief glimpse of my Christianized life as an adolescent:

Playing cards were prohibited in our house because people used those "toys of the devil" for gambling. Other card games were permissible, but not the kind of playing cards used by sinners. My mother was apparently worried that if we had a regular deck of playing cards in the house, I would grow up to be a professional gambler, and my sisters would wind up being blackjack dealers at a strip club in Las Vegas. This prohibition presented some obstacles during my adolescence, but I managed to become a pretty good poker player with our Go Fish cards.

Music on the radio was usually playing in the background in our house, but my parents told me that our radio only got one station. How fortunate that the lone frequency was a Christian radio station. While children in pagan homes listened to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, I repeatedly heard the greatest hit of George Beverly Shea (his vibrato-laden rendition of "How Great Thou Art" recorded live at one of the Billy Graham Crusades). Contemporary Christian music was in its infancy, but it hadn't yet made it to Christian radio because those musicians had long hair and didn't wear the customary white shirts and ties at church. The depth of their spiritual commitment was therefore questionable.

We had wine and other alcohol in our house, but it was used only for cooking, never for drinking. It was in the cabinet above the refrigerator, out of my reach. I was never tempted to drink it. Even at a young age I was smart enough to realize that the momentary pleasure from a single swig was not worth spending an eternity in hell. We never had any beer in the house, but we came tantalizingly close when I was about eight years old. Dr. Pepper released a drink called Pomac, which was like sparkling ginger ale with a shot of apple cider. All I remember is that it formed a head of foam when poured into a glass, and it was only sold in liquor stores. I called it "near beer" once but incurred my mother's wrath for doing so. Everyone in my family loved Pomac, but we didn't have it very often. My parents were forced to drive to a neighboring city to buy it because they didn't want anyone from our own hometown to see them walking into a liquor store. (I couldn't make this stuff up.)

Of course we had no cigarettes in our home. Smoking was the first step on Satan's Slip 'n Slide. I wasn't going to go there. I once saw a picture of my dad when he was in the army (before he met my mom and became a Christian). The picture was fuzzy, but my dad was standing around with a bunch of other soldiers, and I think they were all smoking. My dad never talked much about his army years.

We couldn't go to movies. Nothing was wrong with Disney films; my parents readily admitted that. But if we went to the good movies,

people might think that we also went to raunchy movies, like those risqué James Bond films with Sean Connery as 007. So we didn't go to movies at all.

I went to public school because homeschooling hadn't been invented yet. Our town had a private Christian school, but most of the students weren't Christian and went there only because they had been kicked out of public school.

I don't remember ever having the sex talk with my dad, but my parents did give me a book to read. (No pictures.) I had been going to Sunday school my entire life, so by my teenage years I clearly knew the dangers of premarital sex: It leads to dancing.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining about my upbringing. It was strict and religiously legalistic, but we had a great time together as a family. My parents loved me, and I can't fault their efforts because they wanted to make sure that in the afterlife I was going to have a mansion next door to theirs in heaven. They trusted me, but they imposed all of those rules because they didn't trust Satan.

My parents actually scoffed at Christians or wannabe Christians whose theology was based on the faulty premise of "do good and be good so you can go to heaven." Our faith was based on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I always sensed a cognitive dissonance about this. We sure spent a lot of time being good and doing good, and avoiding being bad and doing bad—much more time than we spent enjoying God. We Christians clearly had an image to maintain, and how we behaved and appeared to others was an important part of our Christian calling.

I was in high school and college during the era of Woodstock, the Vietnam War, and the cultural revolution. During these years, American culture experienced a megashift to the philosophies of relativism and postmodernism. (I know this because my college professors told me so.) I was a part of that first American generation to question whether

truth existed. For the first time, the general populace was taught that what is right for one person may not be right for someone else. Instead of Christianity being the default faith in our culture, the predominate philosophies became religious pluralism (all religions are valid, each has an element of truth, and it doesn't really matter which one you believe because they all get you to the same place in the end) and naturalism (there is no divine supernatural power at work in the universe, science is the full extent of what can be known, and our existence is merely the result of random and uncontrolled events).

As the twentieth century morphed into the twenty-first, American culture shifted away from social pressure to adhere to Christian principles as the singular accepted standard.

With this change in our culture's philosophical context, Christians were no longer the model for behavior and conduct. In fact, there was no single model that everyone was expected to follow. No longer was there a set of universally acknowledged moral behaviors. But Christians weren't savvy to this cultural shift. They kept expecting everyone to do what they did and to believe what they believed. Their attitude and their insistence on the correctness of their beliefs was precisely the opposite of what society now considered to be good, right, and true. Christians were desperately trying to lead society with their behavior without realizing that the culture considered them narrow-minded and judgmental for trying to do so.

Within a matter of a few decades in my life, Christians went from being respected in the culture to being rejected by the culture. I was an eyewitness to this train wreck.

### **What Does God Think About All of This?**

Christians have assumed the role of twenty-first-century Pharisees, which

is ironic because the Pharisees were the only ones Jesus criticized for their behavior. As an itinerant preacher of sorts, Jesus had occasion to hang out with the street people of first-century Jerusalem and the other towns and villages in Judea and Galilee. The socially acceptable members of society did not look favorably upon the people in his network of friends and family: the homeless, coarse commercial fishermen, prostitutes, dishonest tax collectors, lepers, and the like. Jesus' comrades were far from flawless, but he never chastised them for their behavior. Remember, he was the guy who said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" when he was asked to pass judgment on an adulteress who was hauled before him by the Pharisees. Was Jesus indifferent to immorality? No, but he didn't evaluate people on the basis of their rap sheet or their curriculum vitae. To him, every person, regardless of his or her moral mess-ups, was full of worth and value.

The only people who raised Christ's ire were the Pharisees. His complaint against them was that they had placed themselves in a position of moral authority over the people, but they refused to acknowledge that they were just as morally flawed as those they demeaned. The Pharisees' hypocrisy and spiritual arrogance ticked off Christ.

Christians who desire to follow Jesus' teachings should pay particular attention to how much he abhorred the behavior of the Pharisees. Then they should examine whether their own conduct and attitudes fit the Pharisaical pattern. If Christians doubt that their behavior is offensive to Jesus, they should examine his characterization of the Pharisees when he publicly castigated them in his famous "woe to you" speech (Matthew 23:13-36). See if you think his descriptions fit many contemporary Christians:

- "Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith."
- "Blind guides! You strain your water so you won't accidentally swallow a gnat [to retain your ceremonial cleanliness], but you swallow a camel!"

- “Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence!”
- “Hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people’s bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Would Jesus express the same indignation at many contemporary Christians? Maybe he is saying those very same things to them right now. But if he is, we’ll never know because they aren’t admitting it.

## The Salt and Light Defense

I’m a lawyer, so please excuse me if I anticipate the arguments that Christians will make if they read and object to my observations in this chapter. (However, I expect that the Christians who are most likely to disagree probably won’t read this chapter.) I anticipate that some Christians will say that God directs them to be behavioral models for society. They most likely will quote these words from Matthew 5:13-15 and make these arguments:

- “You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.” Most Christians interpret this verse to mean that God wants them to flavor the culture with a moral influence, that they shouldn’t blend in and lose their distinction. Instead, they should be a seasoning that enriches the culture.
- “You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden.” Like the bright lights emanating from a

city on a hill at nighttime, Christians are instructed by this verse to be shining examples of God's love.

- "No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket! Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father." Christians hide the light of their witness for God if they go along with the crowd or let Satan darken it. They are challenged to let the light of their Christianity shine brightly.

I have no argument with these verses, but perhaps I'm reading them a little differently. People are attracted to salt and light by their own volition. Something is appealing about the taste of the salt or the brilliance of the light that makes people desire more. That's how God wants Christians to behave. He wants their lives (their behavior and attitudes) to be so attractive and engaging that people are drawn to Christians on their own initiative. Those verses do not advocate cramming a five-pound bag of salt pellets down someone's throat. And they don't suggest that unsuspecting non-Christians be figuratively blinded by a halogen searchlight stuck in front of their eyes or that their body cavities be illuminated by a flashlight. Instead, Christians should live a life that is distinguished by their light and flavor in society without inflicting force and aggression on others.

I like the way God designed it:

- People can choose to leave the salt shaker on the table. Maybe they prefer their food to be sodium-free. Christians need to learn to let others ask them to pass the shaker.
- People can choose to view a city on the mountain from a distance. They shouldn't be forced to go and visit it. Christians need to realize that their light may be enjoyed better at a distance. In fact, they might look the best when they are the farthest away.

- Most lights are controlled by a switch. If the glare from the switch becomes annoying, the light can be turned off. Some Christians need an off switch because they are already annoying.