

# GOOD FAITH

BEING A CHRISTIAN  
WHEN SOCIETY THINKS  
YOU'RE IRRELEVANT  
AND EXTREME

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AND GABE LYONS



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We dedicate this book to our children

Emily, Annika, and Zachary Kinnaman

and

Kennedy, Pierce, and Cade Lyons

with the prayer that it serves you well as a small guide  
to following Jesus in the days ahead

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PART I

# UNDERSTANDING OUR TIMES

# 1

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## BAD FAITH, GOOD FAITH

*Extremist.* In our part of the world these days, this word is about as aggressive an insult as you can throw down in polite company, instantly associating the recipient with rifle-brandishing ISIS militants, Paris bombers, or Boko Haram kidnappers.

In some people's eyes, if you are a devoted Christian today, this label now describes you.

Do you believe Jesus is the only way to heaven? *Extremist.* Prayed for someone you don't know? *Extremist.* Believe marriage is meant to be between one man and one woman? *Extremist.* Would you give up a good-paying job to do mission work? *Extremist.* Do you believe Christians have a responsibility to talk about Jesus with nonbelievers, even with strangers? *Extremist.*<sup>1</sup>

Something—a backlash against religion's worst sins, a political climate that wants to stamp out religion in public

life, the popular rise of atheism, amplified access to polarizing points of view, *something*—is making it increasingly difficult to practice faith in our society.

For many people of faith, it's becoming harder to live their convictions outside of their religious communities. It feels as though forces are pushing religion to the margins. In fact, to millions of people, faith is irrelevant or even bad news. "Religion poisons everything" declares the subtitle of one of the bestselling books of our new century.<sup>2</sup>

Many Christians—and believers in other faith traditions as well—are feeling overwhelmed, sidelined, and misunderstood. They feel typecast as bigoted, judgmental, and hypocritical. The sense for many believers is that society is hostile to faith in general and to Christianity in particular.

This isn't just a feeling. When one-third of college-aged adults want nothing to do with religion, and 59 percent of Christian young adults drop out of church at some point in their twenties, it's the new reality on the ground. Culturally, it seems like a landslide victory for the other side . . . whoever that is.

This book aims to address the questions, *What does the future hold for people of faith when people perceive Christians as irrelevant and extreme?*

*In what ways can faith be a force for good in society?*

*How can people of faith contribute to a world that, more and more, believes religion is bad?*

## **Faithful Is Not Extreme**

Whether or not we like the cultural trends, we need to get a handle on reality and chart a way forward.

People of every religious tradition—and secularists too—make claims about the nature of reality and how humans ought to live within it. Most people believe their own religion’s (or nonreligion’s) appraisal of reality is true. And not just “true for me”—true for human beings everywhere. Eight out of ten practicing Christians, for example, agree the Bible contains moral truths that are true for all people without exception.<sup>3</sup>

This bothers some people. They believe religion should be consigned to the realm of the private, to family home and house of worship—no exceptions.<sup>4</sup> They claim “real” life happens in laboratories and the marketplace and boardrooms and city halls. They are convinced that spirituality and other fluffy, intangible stuff matter only peripherally to “real” life. And their views are gaining currency in our culture.

- More than two out of five Americans believe that, when it comes to what happens in the country today, “people of faith” (42 percent) and “religion” (46 percent) are part of the problem, rejecting the idea that religious individuals could be part of the solution.<sup>5</sup>
- More than eight out of ten practicing Christians say religious freedom has become more restricted because some groups are actively trying to move society away from traditional Christian values.
- Further, the public’s perceptions of the clergy have changed. Fifty years ago clergy members were commonly viewed as among the most important leaders of our society. They were trusted sources of wisdom across a wide spectrum of issues. But the public’s respect for pastors, priests, and other faith leaders has significantly declined. Today only one-fifth of US adults strongly believe that

clergy are a credible source of wisdom and insight when it comes to the most important issues of our day.

Or consider how attitudes have changed when it comes to public expressions of religious commitment. As Western culture continues to become more secular, many of the everyday acts of devotion practiced by people of faith—Christians, Jews, Muslims, and many others—are increasingly considered inappropriate by ever wider swaths of the growing nonreligious population.

In other words, more people are skeptical of hard lines and strong convictions, preferring a watered-down tolerance over a hard-won peace. A new generation is reflexively suspicious of anything that smacks of piety. For these folks, a life lived with religious conviction is not just countercultural or counterintuitive but dangerous, even damaging. In their view, if you raise your children to embrace the same convictions, you are beyond extreme; you may be criminal.<sup>6</sup>

People of good faith, however, contend that every thought, word, and deed are meant to be weighed on the scale of faith, that faith should be the primary lens through which life is perceived, that science, commerce, business, politics, and every other sphere of human endeavor are at their best when approached from a distinctly theological point of view.

But what does it mean for Christians today?

To put it broadly, a theological approach insists that God is at the center of life, not on the periphery. Faith has implications for all of life, not just for the hour or two a week when like-minded believers gather to worship and pray.

These believers, like us, contend that faith, when it's done right, is *good*. It is good not only for the faithful but for nonbelievers

as well. Lived well and practiced consistently, good faith may be the best hope for our neighbors and society as a whole.

The aim of this book is to make a case for good faith. Christianity has managed to survive and thrive as a minority religion countless times throughout history—and does so in many places around the world today. So we hope you’ll gain confidence that holding tight to biblical conviction is not only worthwhile and critical but also absolutely doable. Despite the faults we Christians bring to it, Christianity practiced well helps people thrive and communities flourish. Together, we want to discover how Christians can do good for *and* with the people around us—even when doing so may, at first, be an unwelcome advance.

*Good Faith* will prepare you to be smart and courageous and to live faithfully in a changing culture that is no longer particularly friendly to faith.

At best, diverse, pluralistic cultures, like that of North America today, are indifferent to people of faith; they accept only the most tepid, inoffensive forms of religious expression. At worst, they are actively hostile toward religious practices and beliefs (one recent op-ed called them “superstitious rituals” and “comically outlandish claims”). This book touches on many topics that crowd the intersection of faith with the wider culture: sex and sexuality, politics, race, religion and public life, morals and virtues, and many more.

When it comes to good faith, everything must be on the table.

## **Difficult Conversations**

Of course it was in an elevator—where you can’t escape an awkward conversation. I was visiting a posh part of London,

and a fellow hotel guest asked, “What kind of event is happening here?”

I explained, “It’s a conference for church leaders. Christians are here from all over the world to listen and learn from one another.”

Smugly, he replied, “I have an idea for your Christian conference: why not hold it in a less expensive place than London and give the money you save to the poor?”

“Well, there are many reasons for being here. The conference is hosted by a church that’s located in this neighborhood, and they’ve got loads of volunteers and places to meet at no cost. So it’s actually less expensive for the conference to be hosted here than in many other places.”

Not satisfied, the middle-aged skeptic and his companion edged out the door to the fourth floor as he muttered, “Whatever. It makes no sense to me!”

I called to the closing doors, “I’d be happy to talk more if you want . . .”

Don’t you just hate it when people don’t want to hear you out?

The next morning at the hotel’s breakfast buffet, the same man sat just a table away. Knowing I was taking a risk, I said, “Good morning,” as friendly as I could.

He seemed startled, and then slightly annoyed, to see me again. He grunted a hello, then picked up where he’d left off the previous evening: “Did you come up with an answer to my question? Why are you guys here wasting money?”

*Man, this guy is relentless*, I thought. “As I was trying to explain yesterday, there are lots of good reasons, like . . .”

I couldn’t get the words out before he cut me off. “There is only *one* good answer. Don’t waste your money. Your priorities

are screwed up!” Pointedly, he turned his full attention to his eggs, beans, tomatoes, and bacon.

The discussion was over. In a few minutes, he gathered his things and left.

\* \* \*

It’s hard to have a good conversation these days, especially about faith. Even when two people pretty much agree, honest interaction seems elusive. But being friends across differences is hard, and cultivating good conversations is the rocky, uphill climb that leads there. Good conversations demand active listening, mental and emotional engagement, openness to the possibility that we’re wrong, and empathy to see the situation from the other person’s point of view.

Now throw in some genuine differences of opinion—profound gaps in religious viewpoint or worldview—and a good conversation is further out of reach. Try to talk about things like gay marriage—or anything remotely controversial—with someone you disagree with and the temperature rises a few degrees. At times, it feels as if the other person is speaking a different language, or he’s deliberately misjudging your point of view, or you’re both assuming the worst about each other. What might have been a good conversation—where both people feel heard, understood, and respected—degenerates into defensiveness, name-calling, accusations, bitterness, and even hatred. Good conversations, our best hope for peace in conflicted relationships, are on the endangered species list.

Our research shows that having meaningful conversations is increasingly difficult for many of us. This is true not only on an individual level but also society-wide. Why is a good conversation so difficult to find these days?

First, it's not enough to be nice. When it comes to conversations about beliefs, morals, and faith, Christians have often emphasized the importance of being winsome and engaging. The thinking—driven by the right impulse—is that if Christians could be *reeeeally* nice about things, then others would at least respect the people behind the beliefs.

We'll make the argument, however, that it's no longer sufficient for Christians to be winsome. Being winsome is not bad. It's good. But aiming for niceness as our ultimate goal can give us a false sense of making a difference in people's lives. And as you will see in the research we conducted for *Good Faith*, many of the basic ideas Christians believe are perceived as irrelevant and extreme. Nice doesn't overcome the perception that Christians are crazy.

More and more people think the Christian community is completely out of step with the times. No matter how kind or friendly believers are in presenting their beliefs, it's not likely to make much of a difference. Many folks have their minds made up that Christian ideas are outlandish. These people might listen for entertainment's sake, but Christians have little chance of breaking through to real understanding.

Now, this is not an excuse to be less kind. Far from it. Rather, it's an invitation for Christians to rethink our manner of being “in the world but not of it.” We hope this book is a map for the path forward.

An uncomfortably large segment of Christians would rather agree with people around them than experience even the mildest conflict. According to this perspective, it's never right to criticize people or their decisions and lifestyles.<sup>8</sup> By adopting this value without much reflection, many Christians have stuffed their convictions. When Christians cram their deepest

beliefs so far down, there's little hope those beliefs could ever affect real conversations. We acknowledge that our times are complex and relationships are complicated. These facts don't mean, however, that we should not try to see and communicate about reality more clearly. It *is* hard to agree on what's best, but taking ourselves out of the conversation to avoid conflict doesn't help anyone.

Second, the gaps between people groups seem to be growing. Even if they've been there all along, the divides have widened on social media and twenty-four-hour cable news. There are gaping fissures between rich and poor, between races, between genders, between faith groups, between political parties, and so on. Generation, gender, socioeconomics, ethnicity, faith, and politics massively divide us. Just look at the furor ignited in Indiana over religious liberty legislation and in Kentucky over marriage licenses. Or consider the protests in Ferguson and Baltimore that escalated into violence. Even *inside* the Christian community there are acute divides between various "tribes."

The bottom line is that many of our social structures—the institutions and rhythms that keep us whole and healthy as a society and as individuals—are unwinding.<sup>9</sup>

Third, social media, for all the remarkable benefits of digital tools like Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram, can make connecting across these gaps more difficult, not less. In spite of the truly wonderful gifts of the digital revolution, social media at its worst can magnify our differences, making it even harder to have conversations that matter. For one thing, it can make it more difficult to see other people for who they really are. For another, it helps us find the tiny cliques of people who are already convinced of the crazy things we

believe. Social media makes it far too easy to self-select voices that always affirm and never challenge our assumptions and sacred cows. Plus, many of our sanest thinkers and leaders are choosing to stay out of the fray altogether. They've clued in that the most strident and extreme voices are liked, shared, and retweeted—not the most reasonable ones.

How do you think social media has changed our capacity for healthy, effective, *good* conversations about our differences?

According to Barna research, most people believe these digital tools have made meaningful dialogue and deep connection more difficult. In fact, 61 percent of adults say they believe social media has made people less social, less capable of deep friendships and strong connections. Furthermore, Americans are twice as likely today to say they are lonely compared to ten years ago.

Social media doesn't always make us more social.

How can we have conversations that matter on important issues between people and between groups of people? How can we believe with conviction and courage while reknitting social and spiritual bonds?

Our intention for *Good Faith* is to take a factual, realistic look at the challenges of living faithfully in our new cultural reality and then to help the community of faith respond effectively—both individually and collectively.

## **An Unfamiliar Landscape**

Your guides are two guys who have worked together before, on a project called *unChristian*. When it released in 2007, that book presented the North American church with an “outsider’s view” of itself and challenged individual Christians and church

communities to seriously consider the critiques offered by young nonbelievers. It has been nearly a decade since then, and countless local churches have accepted the challenge to take a hard, humble look at how they practice and communicate their faith. With more awareness of the attitudes of young people, they are more intelligent about how to engage topics such as politics, sexuality, social issues, and pop culture and how to describe what following Jesus requires.

We decided to work together again on *Good Faith* because we see extraordinary opportunities for Christians to lead our culture today in a fresh and compelling way. There are plenty of challenges too, of course. And we are duty-bound to give you the brutal reality—but with hope. In the face of a tough cultural context, we have a deep-rooted hope that God's people can understand the times and know how to engage well (see 1 Chronicles 12:32).

To map the terrain for this project, Barna Group interviewed thousands of US adults and more than one thousand faith leaders, including Protestant pastors and Catholic priests as well as Jewish, Muslim, Mormon, and other clergy. The goal was to get an accurate lay of the cultural landscape, particularly of the places where communities of faith feel friction with their surrounding culture—and vice versa.

*Good Faith* walks through the findings of Barna's studies and other research and examines the implications for how we live and practice our faith now and in the future. All this new work has excavated two perceptions about Christians that are gaining cultural ground.

We are *irrelevant* and *extreme*.

Irrelevance is primarily about the rising tide of apathy toward religion overall and Christianity specifically. In our

last book together, we talked a great deal about the hostility of younger non-Christians toward Christianity—and admitted there was some truth to their perceptions. Yet an even more significant challenge may be that growing numbers of adults, and especially younger adults, have no inkling that Christianity matters and could matter to them. Furthermore, they have little appreciation for how Christians generate good in the world.

The perception of extremism is the second major obstacle for Christians today. Many very bad things are legitimately called extremism and should be prevented by society. Yet some religious beliefs and practices are considered extremist not because they are violent but just because they're different. How should Christians navigate these choppy seas to engage with people who don't see things the same way?

The research for *Good Faith* leaves little room for doubt that the world is changing around us, making it harder for people to live faithful lives. There are doubts about who to believe and whether the Bible can be trusted, and these fault lines are sometimes pulling Christians and churches apart. However, the hard work of writing this book has generated in us a sense of awe and love for the Christians, churches, and faith organizations we work with. All of us together as Christ-followers have an amazing opportunity to shape the next decade of Christian witness in the world. As authors and leaders, husbands and fathers, we know it is a profound honor to be on mission with Jesus and his followers in this crazy, complex culture!

Still, given the increasing tension many Christians are experiencing, the two of us felt compelled to come together again. This book is meant to help our Christian sisters and brothers find footing on unfamiliar terrain. To accomplish this, we pulled from every available resource at our disposal:

brand-new social research, interviews and conversations with a broad range of leaders with diverse views, our own hard-won lessons, including stories of our personal shortcomings. We examined the habits of good faith Christians so we can learn from them and grow in our own lives. Just as in *unChristian*, we resist name-calling or finger-pointing. What good would that do?

This book offers a framework for thinking and living, including practical suggestions for how to respond to our changing society. Our prayer is that, despite the stiff headwinds we face, this project will fill you with renewed hope and purpose.

We believe that when people commit to a Jesus-shaped way of life, they create a counterculture for the common good—living their lives not for themselves but for the benefit of others to the glory of God. If we do this, we can reshape the imagination of our culture so that the gospel can renew hearts and minds in the generations to come.

Let's take a deeper look at the two negative perceptions facing Christians today.