JIM HENDERSON & MATT CASPER

*Foreword by George Barna*


**A believer, an atheist, an unlikely friendship...**

# JIM & CASPER GO TO CHURCH

**Frank conversation about faith, churches, and well-meaning Christians**

**You will never read a more interesting book about how outsiders view the church. Overhearing the conversations between Jim and Casper as they go to church is pure gold. It's like being a reporter who somehow wound up in the White House and overheard the most private workings of government . . . and then got to use the information to help thousands of people. Jim and Casper will help any church leader who pays attention.**

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*Former National Director, Vineyard Churches USA*

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*Author and Activist*

***Jim and Casper Go to Church*** **is a daring book, way overdue. Jim and Casper call us to listen, to carry on a conversation, and to be honest and open—seekers of truth. This is not just a novel idea. It is exactly what Jesus did. We must begin talking to each other about the deep things that matter, the truths that call out for each heart and soul to be discovered, embraced, and known.** ***Jim and Casper Go to Church*** **is an absolute must-read for every pastor, staff member, leader, and person who takes expanding the Kingdom of God in a dark and hopeless world seriously.**

**DR. DAVID FOSTER**

*Author of* A Renegade's Guide to God
*Founding Pastor of TheGatheringNashville.com*

I would like to dedicate this book to Helen Mildenhall, Christine Wicker, and Matt Casper, none of whom would call themselves Christians, but their kindness and courage have helped me to understand God in new ways.

Jim Henderson
Seattle, Washington

I dedicate this book to its readers: thank you.

Matt Casper
In San Diego and in a NY state of mind

JIM HENDERSON
& MATT CASPER

A believer, an atheist, an unlikely friendship . . .

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Frank conversation about faith, churches, and well-meaning Christians

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Designed by Stephen Vosloo



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# Foreword

***By George Barna***

**Do you remember the** first time you went to church?

When I was young, I frequented church, growing up Catholic. But, like so many other Americans, I dropped out for a while after college. When we got married, my wife and I went on what she called our "search for God" and gained exposure to a variety of Protestant churches. It was the first time I witnessed any expressions of faith outside of the Catholic tradition. Those visits to Protestant churches, which ranged from large, African American Pentecostal churches to tiny, middle-class, white fundamentalist congregations, shook us up. Our reactions spanned the gamut—from bored to mesmerized and repulsed to comfortable. After a few false starts, my wife and I wound up in a series of churches that led us to Christ and a more holistic Christian life.

But many people never have a positive church experience, or perhaps any church experience at all. Still others are jettisoned from the church world by hurtful or irrelevant experiences they suffer in those places.

In fact, even though many people think of the United States as a Christian nation, and journalists proclaim America to be "the most religious nation on earth," an enormous number of Americans—one-third of all adults—are unchurched. In part, that figure remains prolific because of the large number of young people who abandon the organized church as soon as they are no longer held responsible for their daily choices by their family of origin.

Historically, Americans have been attracted to Christian churches. Why the seemingly sudden change in behavior? It

certainly is not because of a lack of churches: There are more than 335,000 Christian churches in this country. It cannot be attributed to the indifference of church leaders, since the primary measure of "success" used by churches is the weekly attendance figure. And it is not because church leaders are unaware of the existence of unchurched people: Best-selling Christian books trumpet the fact; well-attended seminars discuss methods of reaching the unchurched, and churches spend millions of dollars every year attempting to attract people who are not connected to a faith community.

Research among those who avoid churches suggests that the main obstacle is the busyness of these people. But that excuse is probably just a smoke screen; after all, churchgoing folks are busy, too. Somehow, despite equally frenetic schedules, churched people find a way to make time for church. Further exploration shows that people avoid church because they perceive church life as irrelevant, they have vivid memories of bad personal experiences with churches, they feel unwelcome at churches, or they lack a sense of urgency or importance regarding church life.

## A Changing Environment

As our society changes, so do the reasons for the growing number of church dropouts and church avoiders. For instance, the encroachment of postmodern thinking over the past two decades has laid a foundation for new thinking about the value of skipping church. Postmodernism suggests that there may or may not be a supreme deity; each person must determine that independently, and that decision cannot be imposed on other people. According to postmodern thinking, how one chooses to handle that determination is a personal, private matter that need not have substantial influence on one's life. What matters most is that people are com-

fortable with their own decisions, and that they are able to have whatever faith-oriented experiences they desire.

Add to that the changing nature of the church scene, and things get even more confusing. Specifically, a growing number of Americans are shifting away from conventional church experiences and gravitating toward alternative expressions of faith. For instance, the recent jump in house-church involvement and the growing experimentation with online faith experiences are reshaping the field of options that are available. Gone are the days when it was a simple decision: Either attend the church on the corner or find a nearby congregation of your chosen denominational affiliation. In the land of choice, even the church world now offers people a veritable menu from which to select the best or most appealing option.

Finally, consider the fact that few religious leaders or churches have any idea what it's like for an outsider to try to break into the holy huddle. Most churched people have been so immersed in the church world that they have completely lost touch with what it is like to come through the church door and try to fit into a place that has very distinct habits, language, goals, events, titles, architecture, traditions, expectations, and measurements.

## A Visitor Enters the Building

In some ways, then, attracting people to a conventional church is a greater challenge than ever. And if a visitor *does* enter the building, then what? What do first-timers see? How are they treated? What are the central messages they glean? How do they process the experience? On what basis do they decide whether or not to return?

That's what this book is all about. You are about to read the adventure of Jim (Henderson) and (Matt) Casper. This journey is the brainchild of Jim Henderson, a creative spiritual entrepreneur

who has had a wealth of experience serving Christ from inside and outside the organized Church. You will be eavesdropping on a conversation between Jim, a committed Christian, and Casper, a committed but open-minded atheist. Like many good friends who want to share something of enduring value, they took a road trip—but in this case, their destination was churches! Casper gamely entered each of the churches Jim designated for the journey and agreed to describe his experience, akin to being a foreigner entering places unknown.

Marketers sometimes use a "mystery shopper"—an unannounced, anonymous observer, who is secretly sent into a client's environment to note what the experience is like for a typical outsider. In a sense, Casper was sent as a mystery shopper to examine the church environment in America. His articulate and insightful reactions within each church he visited should captivate the mind of every Christian who wants to make Jesus Christ more real and accessible to people. As someone for whom this whole "church thing" is new—someone who does not even believe that God exists—Casper brings a fresh pair of eyes to an environment that most of us can no longer see objectively. His reactions and observations are invaluable.

As you read his experiences, pay attention to the different axes on which he reflected:

- What is, and how compelling is, the call to action?
- How is the Word of God integrated into practical examples of living the faith?
- What prior knowledge and belief does the church assume attenders possess?

- Is the church more interested in conversation or conversion? In dialogue or debate?
- How accessible is the heart and mind of the ministry?
- Is the church engaging people or performing for them?
- How realistic is the teaching? Is it the result of proof-texting or contextualization?
- What is the church's capacity for listening?
- Is this a body of believers who are more interested in serving or in being served?
- What makes a church genuine and authentic in its interaction with people?
- How honest are Christians in discussing the cost of following Christ?

Those who have eyes to see and ears to hear will learn much from this fascinating trip to a sample of the outposts of American Christianity. It is our hope that this foray into the thick of ministry methodology and practice will motivate you to reflect on the definition of true ministry, the purpose of the local church, the commitment we should have to reaching people, and the best ways we can remain consistent with Scripture while penetrating our culture. But, as Casper points out during this trek to the holy hot spots, it's not what you know but what you do with what you know that matters.

# Introduction

## *I Pay People to Go to Church*

**I spent twenty-five years** as a pastor feeling like a failure.

Using the conventional standards of measurement most pastors live with (buildings, budgets, and butts in seats, a.k.a. the Three *B*s), it was more than a feeling—it was *true*.

For the life of me, I couldn't figure out how to get people to come to my little church. I tried "seeker sensitivity," "servant evangelism," "cell church," and even becoming a "contagious Christian." Nothing worked.

I was ordained in 1977 after spending seven years in training in an independent Pentecostal church. No seminary or Bible school for me: Just go out there and do it for Jesus. We started our first church in a small town just north of Seattle that already had twenty-seven churches, but a multitude of churches has never stopped a dedicated Pentecostal from launching another one. We viewed most church people as needing our upgraded version of Christianity as badly as the unsaved.

Like Steve Martin in the movie *The Jerk*, I would later discover upon leaving my closed spiritual community that things weren't exactly as I had been led to believe. I thought I looked like everyone else, but my seven years in the group had made me into something of a religionist.

I had started on the path with Jesus but had come out on the other side of what is commonly called the discipleship process thinking more like a Pharisee—the exact group of people Jesus had most of his difficulties with. I call such people religionists: people who have bought the lie that Christianity is supposed to

be in the religion business when a simple reading of the Gospels reflects nothing of the sort.

In fact, what Jesus talked about looked more like Habitat for Humanity or Alcoholics Anonymous—a grassroots movement with no official hierarchy but lots of leaders; no offerings, but enough money to get the job done. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God.

Like a sunrise, the lights started to go on for me when I began to meet some Christian leaders from the *other* groups: Baptists, charismatics, Christian Reformed, and lo and behold, even Catholics. I began to "fellowship" with them and even started to like and respect them.

As I've now come to understand, *when people like each other the rules change*. And I was no exception. Jesus began washing away the bigotry, biases, and spiritual pride I had developed while in training for my first ten years of Christianity. I wish I could say that my experience was unique, but after thirty years in the business and hundreds of conversations with disillusioned pastors and leaders, I know I'm not alone—not by a long shot.

We called what we did "church planting," but it was really more like starting our own pizza place or coffee shop. I was taught that in order to be successful in the church-planting business (or at least look the part), we needed a building, brochures, and a salary.

So I began recruiting young people into our group. I talked to them about Jesus and many of them "accepted him as their personal Savior." All of that was good, but then I began turning them into better citizens. I began civilizing them the way I had been civilized.

That was not all bad, but it went much farther than I had

anticipated. In spite of my desire for people to encounter Jesus, I spent most of my time functioning as a moral policeman. (Young people can really test you in that area.)

In my first church, I had been taught that this was the church's primary task—being society's moral policemen—and that we should occupy ourselves with this task while we wait for Jesus to come back and rescue us from this sin-stained world. I even looked into joining up with the Moral Majority movement; that's how zealous I was. (Before I was saved I considered joining up with the Black Panther Party—stupidity has no favorites.)

I was so busy chasing the elusive Three *B*s of pastoral success that I hardly had time to focus on anything else. In fact, I outright ignored the people that Jesus himself primarily came to connect with—*the people Jesus misses the most.* (I say that Jesus misses them because a careful reading of the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin in Luke 15 reveal that *God* was the one who felt the loss, not the sheep or the coin. Today, when people get lost we call them missing so that everyone will continue the search—calling them lost means all hope is gone.)

But thanks be to God! He saw to it that I struggled and stayed in touch with my humanity and failures. My wife, Barb, had a lot to do with that. She loved me and followed me—as did my three young kids—but never once did she buy into the "closed Christian community" line.

Fortunately for both of us, Barb had been theologically trained while serving as a Catholic nun for six years before we met. (Sorry, that story has to wait for the next book. But I did meet her while she was still in the convent.)

Barb kept reminding me that God is much bigger than I imagine, and that he is also kind to people who aren't interested in him.

I ignored her for a long time, but eventually I was worn down by her love and her authentic relationship with Jesus. This is in spite of the fact that she could never pinpoint the exact day and time that she "got saved," which was originally a sore point with me, but has now turned into a very humorous issue for us.

However, I really did love Jesus, so I never quit thinking about how to improve what we call church, and more specifically what we call evangelism. As I said, I was a complete failure at church planting (at least by today's megachurch standards), but like the player who spends a lot of time on the bench waiting to get in the game, I had plenty of time to ponder and pay attention to what we were doing and where we might be able to improve our approach to how we do church.

I ultimately decided that the one thing I could contribute to the church was to bring fresh imagination to the whole process of connecting with the people Jesus misses most—*the people formerly known as lost*.

It's said that desperation is the mother of invention, which probably explains why I eventually decided to pay people to come to church. That's right, I hired people—gave them cash—to come to my church. This may sound extreme, but bear with me.

We refer to what we do each Sunday as a service. We open our doors to the public and hope outsiders notice the Everybody Welcome! sign flickering in their peripheral vision as they speed by our building on their way to work, school, or play.

If we were in direct competition with other businesses, we would be considered part of the service sector. So wouldn't it make sense to mimic the practices of other businesses that regularly hire mystery shoppers or focus groups to help them better understand the needs of their prospects and customers?

If we really are providing a *service* to the public, why do we make such paltry efforts at trying to understand what they truly think? Why is it easier for us to spend millions on a building campaign than to spend twenty-five dollars on a one-person focus group to find out what he or she *truly thinks*?

I began thinking like this around 1994 when I read a little book called *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing*. I know this will sound sacrilegious to some, but I really felt like the Holy Spirit directed me to read that book and inspired me with certain specific passages.

The authors, Al Ries and Jack Trout, say that we expand our effectiveness by narrowing our focus. I realized that the church does not know what business we are in. Instead we practice what Ries and Trout call "line extension."

At a time long before the Internet revolution, Xerox, the famous copier company, attempted to go into the personal computer business. They reasoned that since they had succeeded in one business they could certainly succeed in another. In the process, they lost billions of dollars. That's line extension. They lost focus.

The church does this as well. Like Costco and Wal-Mart, we continually expand our offerings to our church attendees, hoping that they will see us as their one-stop "Mall for God." Most churches fail at it, but a few succeed, which is enough to keep the dream alive.

I knew I had to focus and, as mentioned, I was becoming painfully aware that it wouldn't be as the pastor of a megachurch. The only thing about the church's mission that captured my imagination was evangelism. By 1998, I knew that I would spend the remainder of my life trying to reinvent evangelism.

In addition to the book by Ries and Trout, much of my inspiration also came from a number of other business books I was reading at the time. I simply could not find any books written by Christians that were tough or pragmatic enough to help me break through to new thinking about old problems. Frankly, many of the authors on evangelism seemed as if they were playing *not to lose* instead of playing to win.

Since I was still pastoring a church, I realized that our resources would be more effectively allocated by focusing them on the people Jesus misses most. So I tried out a new, untested approach and started hiring unchurched people to attend services at twenty-five dollars per service.

The people I hired were the kind of people I wished would come to my church. The idea was to (1) pay them, (2) ask them to tell us how we could improve, and (3) pray that someone just like them would *voluntarily* come. Makes a lot of sense, doesn't it?

To make these people feel comfortable, I gave my unchurched/unsaved/lost visitors something official to do while they sat through the service—a survey. (This has since been refined and published as the Off The Map Church Survey, which you can find at http://www.churchrater.com.)

I instructed them that it would take about an hour and that they were not required to participate personally in the service (you know: sit down, stand up, kneel, sing, clap, *tithe*). They needed to understand that this was a real job, and I needed the survey completely filled out.

I also assured them that this would not be a bait and switch; I wasn't trying to trick them into attending another meeting. They were not prospects for conversion, nor were they obligated to return to the church: They were simply, well, *consultants*.

## Heading Off The Map

I, too, was becoming a kind of consultant. In late 1998, after twenty-five years of being in *almost* full-time ministry, I resigned from being a pastor and went back to what I felt was more likely my real calling—painting houses.

I thought this was the end of my ministry career (did Jesus think of his work as a "ministry career"?). But between the time I resigned from pastoring and reinstated my contractor's license, I was offered a staff position as the director of evangelism at a large church.

I took the job because—like people who finish their graduate studies and then are offered a fellowship—I figured it was like being paid to do more research. Of course I didn't tell my new employer this, but God and I knew. I wanted to find out what a church that was committed to evangelism did when it came to getting ordinary people involved on a grassroots level.

I managed to survive the megachurch corporate culture for two years, and I enjoyed a great deal of the experience, especially the fine people I got to rub shoulders with. While there, I was asked to help produce a conference on evangelism. We called it "Evangelism Off The Map."

Because I was partially in charge of this event, I was able to try an idea that had been brewing in my mind for several years. I spend a fair amount of time in restaurants and coffee shops, and I often strike up casual conversations with the people who serve me.

Katrina was serving me coffee when I asked her if she'd mind answering some questions about spirituality. She agreed. Because she was a college student, she was used to the give and take of new ideas. Over the next couple of weeks, Katrina filled me in on all the details of her spiritual and church experiences. I eventually

asked her if she would be willing to have this same conversation on stage in front of five hundred pastors. I said I'd pay her twenty-five dollars to do it. To my surprise, she said yes.

After finding two more like-minded people, we were ready to have our conversation, which I called "An Interview with Three Lost People." I had to explain to my non-Christian friends why we called them lost behind their backs, and I also had to ask their permission to use that term at the interview. They graciously agreed.

The objective was to create an opportunity—a face-to-face forum—for those who weren't "born again" to tell the "professionals" exactly what they did and didn't like about church, Christians, and Christianity.

Our "lost" friends' candor and humor caught the audience completely off guard—and they responded with a spontaneous standing ovation. My friend Dave Richards was in the audience, and based on the success and obvious impact our event had on the pastors at that conference, we formed the beginnings of what is today called Off The Map.

Off The Map helps Christians learn to communicate better with non-Christians, or as some of my more outspoken "lost" friends prefer to put it, Off The Map helps Christians learn how to not be jerks. From the very beginning, Off The Map has been working with (and often paying) people to tell us what they think about church and how we can improve what we call services.

## I Bought a Soul on eBay

My friend Joe Myers, author of *Organic Community*, has been part of the Off The Map network from the beginning, and he knew about my odd hobby of hiring lost people to go to church. So he

e-mailed me, assuming I would be interested in checking out an atheist who was selling his soul on eBay. He was right.

Hemant Mehta, a twenty-three-year-old graduate student at DePaul University in Chicago, was offering his atheistic attention to the highest bidder. He was tired of people pigeonholing atheists (sound familiar?) and was looking for a fun way to show that he could attend church with an open mind and give the speaker, the church, and the denomination their best shot at converting him. And he was doing it for a pretty cheap price as well—ten dollars per church service.

Much to his surprise, the bidding took off like a rocket. It soon reached four hundred dollars. I was new to the whole online auction process, so I called some friends who were experienced eBay bidders, and we formulated a strategy for winning the auction. We succeeded and won the auction with a bid of $504. Five hundred and four dollars for a man's immortal soul: *Quite a deal*, I thought.

With that $504, Off The Map had successfully bought our first soul. We promptly sent our new atheist staff member off to do what we had already been doing with other non-Christians—go to church and tell us what he saw.

Instead of fifty churches, I told Hemant we preferred for him to visit ten to twelve churches and to write about his experiences on our blog (an online discussion group you can find at http://www.off-the-map.org/atheist/). Word about our blog spread quickly, and soon fifty thousand people were consuming and/or contributing to the blog.

The *Wall Street Journal* religion reporter got wind of the story and flew to Chicago to attend the first church service with Hemant and me. The paper ran a front-page article on us that prompted a flurry of national and international media coverage.

For thirty days following the *WSJ* article, Hemant and I were on radio or TV every day doing interviews together. It was an honor to be given the opportunity to help people reimagine what it might mean for Christians to connect with non-Christians respectfully and authentically. Hemant felt the same way about his mission as well, which was (and still is) to put a new face on atheism. We essentially used each other to advance our two very different missions.

To be honest, I'd never given much thought to atheism or atheists. I always assumed that they were intellectual (mostly true), really into science (which I'm not), and, in general, pretty disgusted with Christians and church (again mostly true, but for reasons many Christians might find themselves agreeing with).

## How I See the World

In my mind, humanity is divided into two groups: (1) people who follow Jesus, and (2) everybody else. It doesn't matter to me whether you call yourself a Christian, a Buddhist, a humanist, an agnostic, or an atheist. If you aren't following Jesus, you're in group two.

You might think that my including Christians on that list was a typo, but it wasn't. Jesus frequently—one could argue *always*—singled out "religious" people as examples of insincere or even fake followers. Think about his interactions with the Roman centurion, who was a hated terrorist in the minds of the Pharisees. Referring to this interaction with the centurion Jesus told the religionists, "I haven't seen *faith like this* in all Israel!" (Matthew 8:10, emphasis mine). He never referred to religious people in a similar fashion—ever.

The same is true today.

In my opinion, some professed Christians are not actually

following Jesus but are instead following religion. These people should more accurately be called religionists. Atheists are more honest about their unwillingness to follow Jesus, which is one reason I now enjoy interacting with them so much.

After the *Wall Street Journal* article came out, I began to get e-mails and phone calls from people all over the country. Some thanked me for what I had done, while others were appalled, offering comments like, "If you don't want to save his soul (for God's sake) give him my e-mail." This particular comment was provoked by a statement I made to the reporter that I don't hire atheists in order to convert them. Both Christians and secularists found this unbelievable, but I really meant it.

Keeping with that, I told Hemant that if he did happen to convert while surveying churches for Off The Map, it would have to be "off the clock." It wasn't that I didn't want him to follow Jesus (I did), but I wasn't going to use this experience to convert him.

Instead I was hiring him to help *convert Christians*, to provide us with the information we need in order to see how important it is for us to become more "normal" if we hope to truly connect with the people Jesus misses most.

To be honest, I don't really think of this as anything unusual. In my mind, I am just following the example the founder of our family business set when he used those we call *lost* to provoke those who call themselves *found*.

And when it comes to those Christians consider lost, who could possibly be more lost than an atheist?

## Casper and I

We aren't called Off The Map for nothing. We invite people to travel to new places in their spiritual thought life and explore the

margins where God is often secretly at work creating the next big idea.

After purchasing—or to be more accurate, *leasing*—a soul on eBay, I decided to head even further off the map. Hemant was offered an opportunity to write a book about his experience selling his soul on eBay. I decided to follow suit, but with a slightly humorous twist. Off The Map held a national contest to find an atheist who wanted to write a book with me, which is how I found the coauthor of this book, Matt Casper, or Casper for short.

You'll hear much more about this connection in a later chapter, but the short story goes like this: Some friends of mine in San Diego who lead what is called a missional community and have successfully blurred the lines between us (Christians) and them (non-Christians) got wind of our contest and told me I needed to audition their favorite atheist—Casper.

Casper is a copywriter, a husband, and a dad of two young kids. He is also a musician (or as he puts it, a "band guy") who writes songs about everything from dentists to deities. My friend Jason Evans, who leads the little community of Jesus followers I mentioned, also played drums in Casper's band, *Hell Yeah!* (That's the name of the band, not me swearing.)

Casper's dad is a retired teacher (whose workload included classes on contemporary religion, anthropology, and philosophy). He's also an atheist. His mother is a voice teacher and a singer, as well as a lifelong seeker of truth. She recently converted to Catholicism and currently leads the choir at her church. I flew down to San Diego to interview Casper and make sure he was really an atheist. How bad would it look if somewhere along the line he turned out to actually be an agnostic or, worse yet, a seeker? (We joked that he would need to sign a contract guaranteeing that

he wouldn't become a Christian until three years after the book came out.) I was hoping that Casper, at thirty-seven, would bring a seasoned atheist's view to the book.

Casper's age, life experience, and willingness to explore the evangelical church experience with me was inspiring and energizing.

He told me, "Jim, like many atheists, I started out calling myself an agnostic. It sounds so much less, I don't know, *challenging*. But eventually, I realized that being an agnostic means you believe there's some sort of supernatural force at work in the world; you just don't know what it is. I didn't think there were any such forces at play in the world that I saw, and I realized atheist was a better tag."

As a young boy, Casper attended church, usually wherever his mother was singing. When it came time to attend college, Casper went to a Catholic university, "but I didn't really realize it was Catholic until I got there and wondered, *what's up with all the crosses?*

"I probably started to become an atheist in college. I saw a lot of people going to Mass, vespers, and all that. Then I'd see the same people making racist jokes, getting drunk and belligerent—but getting it all forgiven with a few Hail Marys. So I questioned the validity of their faith and, in turn, the validity of what I thought of as my faith."

Casper spent the late 1990s and early 2000s living in New York City. He and his wife were both working in New York on September 11, 2001. "I thought a lot about praying around that time, I can tell you that much," he told me, adding, "But, as we eventually learned, the people flying the jets into the buildings were praying too, so . . ."

Casper's wife was pregnant with their first child at the time, and they had already decided it was time to leave New York—9/11 just reinforced that decision—so they moved to San Diego, her hometown, in 2002.

By the way, there's a very funny Christian connection here, too. As fate would have it, Casper's first job in San Diego was working as a copywriter for Outreach Marketing, one of the top Christian marketing companies in America. I'm not sure how he got by their atheist/unbeliever scanner, but he did.

His job—coincidentally? providentially?—was writing those postcards churches hand out to unchurched people in an attempt to get them to come to church. "I figured that the day I wrote one that made me go to church, I would have reached my peak," Casper told me at one of our first meetings.

Casper left Outreach within a few months—"I just didn't fit, for obvious reasons"—but his time there did result in an authentic and unusual friendship with Jason, who, unbeknownst to Casper, was a pastor when not working at Outreach.

Casper calls Jason "my kind of Christian: He walks the walk, and his goal is not to convert me, but to be friends and play music—at least I think that's his goal. . . ."

When I first told Casper about the book, he was immediately onboard but with one condition: "I can do this, but I need *you* to be as open-minded with me as you need me to be with you, Jim."

"What do you mean?" I asked Casper.

"I'm currently an atheist, Jim. I say *currently* because I am open to the possibility that I may learn something that will change my point of view. Jim, can you say 'I am currently a Christian' and be as open-minded as me?"

I nodded. Yes. Let's write a book.

## What to Expect from This Book

This is not a "tell me" book; this is a "show me" book. Casper and I spent the better part of the summer of 2006 traveling and visiting some of America's best- and least-known evangelical churches. We sometimes squeezed four churches into a weekend. We did most of our visits anonymously. The majority of churches we've included in this book have no idea that they are being featured. (Of course, we would love to hear from any of the churches we reviewed. You can post your thoughts for all to see at our blog: http://www.churchrater.com.)

This is the story of what happens when two guys with polar-opposite worldviews go to church together. As a Christian, I was overwhelmed by the experience of seeing something I took for granted, through the eyes of an atheist. It was simply life changing.

The church visits alone were eye opening. I think that once a month every pastor should send a group from his or her church to visit other churches anonymously. These people could then report back about what they think should change in their own church, based on what they've learned about how *not* to do church.

In this book, we devote one chapter to each church (except for "Emerging Church Weekend"). Each chapter tells our experience of "going to church." The chapters follow the chronology of our visits from beginning to end. We started at Saddleback in Orange County, California, and ended at the Potter's House in Dallas, Texas.

Because we had a limited amount of time and money (and both of us have day jobs), we had to squeeze in as many churches in the same geographical area as possible on each trip. And because the

evangelical megachurches of America cast such a long shadow, we chose to focus primarily on those, as well as on some of the smaller, emerging churches that stand in that shadow. If we had the time and the money, Casper and I could have easily visited dozens, even hundreds of churches. (Maybe we can get to them all in the next book!)

With a few exceptions, we did not interview the pastors or seek out any leaders. We attended as visitors and reported our experiences as such. We only spoke to those people who approached us, and we did not seek anyone out for his or her opinion.

This book presents our personal views. It is not meant to be academically objective. Why? Because the people who visit churches are biased, subjective, and see church from a very limited perspective—mainly, what's in it for me? (To find out more about how people really feel about church and to leave your thoughts, visit http://www.churchrater.com.)

In a conversation that led up to the writing of this book, my friend Thom Black told me, "We don't need another book on defending the faith; we need a book on defending the space."

What Thom was referring to is the sacred relational space that occurs when two people trust each other (particularly people who would normally not trust each other). Thom and I both believe that rather than learning how to become defenders of the faith, we should instead learn to become defenders of that space. Because when two people begin to trust each other, they can learn to like each other. And when that happens, the rules change—and then people change.

## *Defending the Space*

**In the fascinating book** *The Evolution of Useful Things*, the authors describe the development of ordinary objects like the paper clip, the fork, and the two-liter plastic Pepsi bottle. Although the subjects are common, the authors' conclusions are profound. My favorite lesson from the book goes something like this: *Hidden in every new idea are the seeds of its demise*.

For example, the aforementioned plastic Pepsi bottle. When glass bottles were new, they were all the rage. As their usage spread, the limitations of glass spread as well—mostly all over the floor. Plastic was already in use, but no one could figure out how to shape it into a bottle. After many false starts, the son of Andrew Wyeth (the famous American artist) eventually developed the plastic bottle. It was a boon to the soft drink industry, and sales took off. This was the early 1970s, and *biodegradable* was still a foreign word.

Maybe you can see where I'm going. The glass bottle was at one time an incredible innovation and a life-changing invention. However, due to its hidden drawbacks, that glass bottle would eventually be superseded by its plastic offspring. And today in our environmentally friendly world, we've learned that plastic bottles are just as susceptible to being replaced. Because *hidden in every new idea are the seeds of its demise*.

## Evidence That *Demands* a Verdict

Following the turbulent and very liberal 1960s, evangelical Christians became determined to stand up for themselves culturally, politically, and evangelistically. It was time to come out and stand

up for Jesus to be sure, but mostly it was time for Christianity and the church.

Since the mainline churches seemed determined to move away from proclaiming the gospel, the young evangelical movement saw an opportunity to differentiate itself in the marketplace of religious ideas. Consequently, a plethora of new evangelism ideas were offered by people like Billy Graham, Bill Bright, and others. Tools and programs like the Four Spiritual Laws and Evangelism Explosion—which reduced the amount of information a Christian needed to properly "present the gospel"—flooded Christian bookstores and church training programs. Whole new parachurch organizations emerged like the Navigators and Campus Crusade for Christ to carry the banner of this new evangelicalism.

As secularism continued to challenge what many saw as the Christian foundations of our nation, there seemed to be a need for a more thoughtful response. It was time for *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, Josh McDowell's modern-day apologetic that "proved" Jesus really did rise from the dead, which in turn proved that Christianity is the one true religion. Lee Strobel, a convert from atheism to Christianity, would later weigh in with *The Case for Christ* and other best sellers that followed in the footsteps of McDowell's apologetic approach.

These authors provided Christians a way to *defend the faith*—the expectation being that if we provide a biblical response to the arguments of atheists or doubters and essentially prove them wrong, they will be forced to admit the error of their ways and join us. (Short of that, we will at least experience the pleasure of intellectually humiliating them.)

As a young believer, I read books like these and memorized phrases from them in hopes of being able to prove non-Christians wrong. I had a little more incentive than your average Christian as I

had hopes of becoming a professional Christian (a pastor), so I really did need to know.

And here's where the seeds of demise come in.

Generally speaking, ordinary Christians don't like arguing their friends into becoming Christians. It just doesn't feel right. To be sure, we buy the books and really do want *someone* doing this kind of work. But the idea that we should *demand a verdict* from non-Christians seems like an approach a lawyer would take—and you know how people feel about lawyers.

Ordinary Christians like me know that when you start defending the faith, you also start losing your friends. On top of this, and largely due to evangelicalism's success in establishing itself as America's religion of choice, another cultural shift is occurring today. More and more Christians are tired of being perceived as mean, petty, demanding, and "right." For many of us, the only thing that attracts us to *apologetics* is that it sounds a lot like *apology*, which is what we actually feel more comfortable doing when trying to explain the church to our friends.

## Practices, Not Principles

Jesus didn't just teach principles; he taught practices. He gave people something to do. He didn't just teach them about forgiveness; he told them to forgive their debtors. He didn't just talk about love as a concept (*eros*, *phileo*, and *agape*); he told people to love their enemies. He didn't just tell people to think about changing their behaviors; he told them to repent (change their actions). Sure it's challenging, but it doesn't take a weekend seminar to understand what he means.

As the teaching profession has risen to its place of primacy in the evangelical church, so also has the focus on principles . . . because

that's how teachers think. With the proliferation of "The Principles of Everything You Would Ever Want to Know about Anything" seminars, it has become painfully obvious that what we need is not more information, but more formation. We need to learn once again to minor in principles and major in practices.

Those who enjoy defending the sacred relational space God has given them in their relationships with people have often developed a series of practices. These practices are attitudes that translate directly into actions. In fact, they often start in the opposite direction. We start practicing the practice even before we understand it or perhaps believe it, which often leads to surprising changes in us and in our relationships with people we normally wouldn't know how to relate to.

It might be something as simple as finding "conversation partners" from another faith or tradition outside of Christianity, people who can tell us why they choose their views over ours. It is also helpful to take turns telling these conversation partners what we find uncomfortable about our *own* beliefs.

Too often, conversations we have about our beliefs are too much like debates, and we spend our time looking for chinks in the conversational armor, spaces where we can insert an argument or launch a rejoinder. The practice of defending the space means *creating* and, obviously, defending such spaces. The practice of defending the space kicks in when we resist the urge to correct or attack and instead just listen (and maybe even take notes).

When learning something new (like riding a bike or parallel parking), the required movements feel awkward and counterintuitive. Under normal circumstances, we might even do the opposite of what we are being told to do. We have to practice the movements in order to

make them part of our everyday lives, and we typically have someone running alongside of us for a while until we find our bearings.

Casper and I hope you'll feel that way about our story. We hope it will give you the confidence and the nudge you need to launch out into new relationships with people you may currently think of as ideological enemies.

When it comes to connecting with non-Christians, it seems that a few of us have learned how to defend the faith, while most of us practice the ancient art of doing nothing; for many, the maxim employed by Homer Simpson applies: "Trying is the first step toward failure."

Thankfully, as it does not require high levels of intellectual or verbal skills, even Homer could learn how to defend the space. Defending the space means *we protect our relationships with non-Christians*—they're real people to us, not targets. I think of it like this: They're just like me, except they're not currently interested in Jesus to the same degree I am.

Between various chapters, I will explain the change in attitudes and actions—the practice—required when shifting from defending the faith to defending the space. Look for shifts

- from apologetics to an apology
- from talking to listening
- from strength to weakness
- from beliefs to spirituality
- from debate to dialogue
- from manipulation to intentionality

# Rick Warren's Church

***Saddleback***

**Casper and I drove** north from San Diego on I-5. For our very first church visit, we were starting at (or near) the top, in Mission Viejo, California—the mecca of mega, the foremost outpost of contemporary Christianity. But most everyone calls it Saddleback.

Standing on the corner where Saddleback Drive meets Purpose Drive (yes, those are the actual street names), I kept Casper in my peripheral vision, checking for first impressions.

"I heard they let first-time visitors park up front," said Casper. "I also heard, though I doubt it's true, that if you're saved here you get a T-shirt. . . . Look at all these people. I feel like I'm at a football game or something."

"So, how does it feel to be standing at the vortex of evangelical innovation?" I asked.

"Vortex is right; I feel like I'm spinning a bit."

We parked our Saturn amid a sea of SUVs and joined the exodus of people moving from the parking lot to the pews. There were several giant white plastic tents on the edge of the parking lot. I told Casper that was where the kids, teens, and tweens enjoyed services.

"That's where they enjoy circuses?" Casper asked. I couldn't tell if he was joking or not since the circus was the only other place anyone but a Saddleback insider would expect to see tents this large.

And the tents were just the beginning. We saw movement and activity and signage everywhere we looked: carts wheeling past with pastries, fresh fruit, and bagels, and people, people, and more people, most of them headed toward a set of stairs lined with

roses and divided by a waterfall spectacular enough to be located in the Mall of America.

I wasn't sure about Casper, but I have to admit I was already pretty much in awe of the whole experience, even though we were just barely past the parking lot. The size, the detail, and the campus were overwhelming.

Casper woke me out of my reverie. "Jim, look! It's a replica of Calvary on top of a replica of Jesus' tomb!"

We walked over and took a good look. I couldn't believe it. There really was an artificial replica of Jesus' tomb with a rock parked in the front door. It didn't look like it was a sacred shrine or anything, so we decided to try and roll away the faux stone from the faux tomb, but it was locked with a large bike lock and chain.

"Well, I hope they unlock it in time for Easter," Casper said. *I guess even Jesus' tomb isn't safe from vandals in Mission Viejo*, I thought, chuckling to myself.

Saddleback resembles something between a college campus and a theme park. It's a perfect testament to Southern California as well, with an outdoor café, outdoor seating, palm trees, and landscaping so manicured and perfect that it would make even Martha Stewart jealous.

As we ascended the steps beside the waterfall, I told Casper that this place got started on a credit card. Rick Warren got a five-thousand-dollar cash advance, bought some advertising, and went for it. The church spent the first part of its history meeting in plastic tents and got the first buildings up only recently.

"Wow, and now he's also like the best-selling author in the country, right?"

"Yeah, that's him, founder of Saddleback and author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, one of the biggest sellers in history."

"Smiles everywhere. Good policy," said Casper while we made our way through an unusually happy gauntlet of greeters.

I silently wondered why we Christians seem to believe that it's our God-given duty to appear unusually happy—especially at church. I was beginning to suspect that taking an atheist to church could be an invaluable experience for all of us.

Casper and I shook hands with everyone who offered them, grabbed our programs (which Casper called brochures), and looked for a place to sit. We wanted a seat where we would be able to see everything but still work and talk quietly. We found a spot in the upper level and broke open our laptops, which attracted not just a few curious glances from our nearby fellow attendees.

We had a clear view of the stage and the two or three thousand people sitting down below. I asked Casper if he liked the view.

"It's awesome. I can see Nick Lachey from here. Well, it's not really Jessica Simpson's ex, but the guy singing looks an awful lot like him. That band is something else: rock star up front, fifteen-piece string section, six horns, background singers, and the ultimate boomer icon—the lead guitar player has a Les Paul guitar with the sunburst finish."

I told Casper we were going to play a little game called Rate a Church.

"I'll ask you to rate a few aspects of their performance today, using five stars like they do on TripAdvisor.com. Let's start with the music. On a scale of one to five, how do you rate the music?"

"Two stars," said Casper. "That's all I can do for you here."

I had been pretty impressed with the performance, so I asked him why he went so low. "They're world-class players, they're not missing a note, the singers are in tune, the music is upbeat, and

they move seamlessly from one song to the next. What's missing?" I wondered.

"Well, yeah, for presentation and professionalism, they get a four or a five, but the music is too contrived, too slick, *too* professional, really."

"But that's a good thing, no? That should attract people, right?"

"Maybe people who like *American Idol*," Casper said with a smile. "I mean, don't get me wrong. I see the entertainment value, but when it comes to music, I like it pure. Too much polish and you lose the heartfelt power, you lose the soul of the music, and you're not gonna move anyone."

As I mentioned, Casper is not just a music fan; he is also a musician. His band frequently plays venues in and around San Diego. So when it comes to music, it's hard for him not to have a well-formed opinion.

Casper continued, "And the lyrics? 'Hope Changes Everything'? What does that mean? Hope changes nothing except your own feelings. *Action* changes everything."

Casper was taking his job seriously and really enjoying the imaginary microphone I was continually pushing in his direction. *Wow*, I thought. *We've only been in the building ten minutes, and the worship band and the music—what we Christians usually think of as one of the best ways to attract others to church—have been labeled contrived and soulless by Casper the Friendly Atheist.*

"Let's get into something more pertinent," I said. "What about the congregation, the people—what do you give them on a scale of one to five?"

"Well, it's pretty unfair to judge a roomful of people, but since you asked, they get a 2 as well, maybe a 2.5. I mean, they're

paying attention and all, but based on some conversations we've overheard, I get the impression that this is something simply on most folks' schedules—Saturday: cookout. Sunday: church. . . .

"I mean, we're talking about God, heaven, the afterlife, the nature of existence, and the universe, right? And to me it feels like most of them are just watching TV, taking notes, paying attention to a lecture just as they would in school, but not really engaged in the spirit of it all.

"Case in point: The preacher asked everyone to 'greet the people around you.' Well, I don't mean to throw cold water on your church thing, but frankly, I thought that was lame. Why do you have to *tell people* to talk with each other anyway? Why didn't someone *voluntarily* approach me? 'Hi. Welcome to Saddleback.'

"Maybe if the church weren't so huge, there'd be a better chance to really connect with people. Is this what it's all about, Jim? Is contemporary Christianity driven by the 'bigger is better' maxim?"

"Don't know," I muttered.

Tom Holladay—a teaching pastor at Saddleback who sounds and looks like the actor Tom Skerrit (albeit a bald, shorter version)—took the stage. This guy was good: conversational, great timing, props, and lots of stories that were touching as well as personal.

I've heard a lot of preachers, and Tom was easy on the ears compared to many of them. He also did a great job of keeping people engaged without getting too loud or going overboard: a funny anecdote here, a verse there, a life story to tie it all together.

I was pretty sure that Casper would break out of the twos and get close to a four with him.

"So, let's play Rate a Preacher," I said. "I give Tom at least a 3.5, how about you?"

"I give him a two," Casper said, looking a little sheepish but knowing he needed to be honest if he hoped to keep his job.

"But what about the stories? Didn't his anecdotes and the way he kept the crowd engaged do anything for you?"

"Well, I guess maybe we should make a distinction between presentation and content, Jim. He's a real good presenter, but when it comes to relevant content—the meat of the matter, the words that give meaning to the obvious passion on display—I think he comes up a bit short. Tell you what: Since he included a real-life story or two—the one about his father coming to Christ being the most personal and moving—he gets a 2.5."

Casper was proving to be a tougher critic than I had originally thought. Here we were at Saddleback—the Super Bowl of churches—and we were only giving a 2.5. Looking for another angle to help bump Saddleback's average closer to a three, I asked a follow-up question. "You said you were moved, yet you still don't seem to be all that enthused. What's missing for you?"

"Well, where is the call to action? The challenge to make this world a better place? Even when Tom told the story of his father coming to Christ, it was not about what his father did or how he emulated Jesus' example. The message was that you don't have to *do* anything. Just say a prayer, use the magic words, and you're in."

I imagined Jesus saying something like this, but not an atheist! I quickly ran through the Jesus movie I keep in my head—all the things he did and said in the Gospels blended together into one image—and I anxiously tried to recall one time when Jesus said, "Pray this prayer and you're in." I couldn't recall one clip where he did that.

"Are you saying that you would prefer that the pastor tell you directly what followers of Jesus are doing rather than what they believe? Would that be more interesting and compelling for you?"

"Exactly," he shot back. "*That's* what's missing for me."

"But you don't see the whole picture of this church. They're helping eradicate AIDS and helping people in the third world. I believe Rick Warren is in Africa right now, working on that exact thing," I said.

"I respect that; who wouldn't? But that's so far removed that probably the only way it touches most people's lives here is through some long-distance connection and maybe a percentage of their tithe. Where was the call to action for these people here? Why didn't Tom say something about that today?

"If I did believe in God, and that I was going to be granted eternal life in heaven, I would want to do something significant here on Earth, to live as much of my life as I could following the example set by Jesus when he was here on Earth—do unto others as you would have them do unto you—I don't know, maybe I don't know the real story of Jesus. . . ." Casper's voice trailed off, but his question was stuck in my head. This conversation was quickly turning personal, and I knew Casper actually *did* have a relatively clear understanding of Jesus' message. As a veteran Christian, I was quite familiar with the checkered history of our movement and had spent the last thirty years thinking about why it sometimes feels broken to me as well.

I tried to explain. "A while back (1,700 years to be exact) the church drifted into the religion business. I call it beliefism—the worship of the right beliefs—and what you're hearing today is a version of beliefism. Rather than Christians giving priority to *what*

*we do*, we've been taught a view that tells us what's really important to be known for is *what we believe*. Does that make sense?"

"I think I see what you mean, Jim. Based on what we've seen today anyway, the emphasis seems to be on simply *believing*. But does believing fix or change anything? I mean, the theme of today's sermon was 'don't give up.' Don't give up? Don't give up what? Don't give up coming to church? Don't give up believing in God?"

"Right," I agreed. "That's the basic offer the church makes to the marketplace. We tell people that they will find hope and life if they choose to believe in Jesus. Basically we say that our beliefs are better than the beliefs other religions are offering."

"I get it, but here's where it starts to feel unreal to me," said Casper. "The pastor kept talking about the problems the people in this church are probably facing in their lives . . . and yeah, we've all got problems. But we're sitting here in Mission Viejo, California. Half these people are probably worth a few million apiece, based on the cars and clothes I've seen today. I mean, how bad off can you really *be* here?

"Why the unrelenting focus on 'don't give up' for an audience that, when compared to the rest of the world, practically has it all already? The sermon stuck with telling people that their main objective is dealing with their own struggles, which are what? Crises of faith? Cash flow? Relationships? I know it's not about having enough to eat or a place to sleep tonight.

"I don't mean to be overly critical, but what if instead of asking people to pray a prayer in order to get into heaven, the pastor challenged everyone to go out and serve someone else here on Earth? Could you imagine if he told everyone here today to go out and make a difference *today*—donate two hours of their time at the local shelter, buy a new set of clothes for a homeless person; can

you imagine what a difference that would make in one day alone? Maybe he'll cover it in another message."

The service was ending, and someone asked us, "Are you guys spies?"

We turned around and met Randi, a young guy from India who was intrigued by all of our typing and wanted to know what we were up to. Randi would turn out to be the only person who spontaneously approached us the whole time we were on the campus at Saddleback.

"We're writing a book," Casper said, shaking hands with him.

"He's an atheist and I'm a Christian," I explained.

"Really!" Randi said, looking at Casper as if he had just sprouted another head. "I used to be an atheist as well, but mostly I was a Hindu."

"Hindu? So were you really an *atheist*, or just non-Christian? I mean, as a Hindu you had a spiritual framework; you believed in an afterlife of some kind, a higher power, right?" asked Casper.

"Well, yes," said Randi. "I was a Hindu, but I was looking for a way out of the endless trap of the caste system. My father told me that only one out of a billion make it to heaven and that most of us have to live multiple lives [be reincarnated] and over time become Brahmans before we can escape our caste. It takes thousands of life cycles.

"When I moved here and got a job as a computer engineer, I came to this church and heard that anyone can get into heaven if he or she believes in Jesus. If that is the case, I said, then I am a Christian, and you know what? I really have found happiness here in this place with these people."

"Wow." Casper seemed genuinely moved by his story. "I was

about to say it sounds kind of like you were switching health plans—Hinduism offers complete coverage after thousands of years, but Christianity offers salvation the first time around. It sounds like a step up for you."

Randi said it was more than that. When he came to Saddleback, he found a place where he truly felt he belonged, and that had as much to do with his coming to Christ as it did with simply coming here and being around all these people who feel the same way.

We said good-bye to Randi and began to wind our way through the Saddleback Mall. A whole new group filled the church as we walked down the steps and past the waterfall, the artificial tomb, the artificial Calvary, and the sea of SUVs, toward our car.

We stopped at a nearby café to review what we had just experienced and go a little deeper. I got out my laptop and asked Casper if there was anything that he admired about Saddleback.

"This may sound strange, but I admire their ability to target. I'm a marketer, so I know a thing or two about this. Rock music for the kids, more casual services for the young adults. I even saw this targeting in the wide range of options they offer their congregation: help for those in recovery, help for relationships, and so on. I think the next step would be to proactively offer that same level of support to the public, the less fortunate."

"How about Pastor Tom's story about his dad coming to faith—did that move you?"

"Not so much. What moved me more was Randi's story."

"Why his story and not so much Tom's story?"

"Pretty simple. Randi told his story, while Pastor Tom put on more of what I saw as a performance. It's really no contest. Randi was able to communicate more about what it means—to him, anyway—to be a Christian. And to my ears, that content creates a

much more engaging story. Tom was, pardon the pun, preaching to the choir, which meant little to me."

I understood what Casper meant about truly engaging people with personal stories. I told him about how long I'd been in the church, and about my own struggles to make sense of it at times. I explained that in many ways, those struggles prompted me to write this book.

"Exactly," said Casper. "Faith is a choice, and no one feels that great about choices made under pressure."

He paused a bit. "What about you?" he asked. "How did you find faith? Is faith something in your family? Did your parents have faith? Do your kids?"

Over a cup of coffee or two, I shared my story about how God encountered me, what I've done about it, and how my experiences with Jesus motivate me to keep trying to follow him and live a life that is real.

As we left the coffee shop, Casper turned to me. "You want to know what moved me the most today?"

"Let me guess: the faux tomb/Calvary combination? The waterfall with flowers?"

"Close, but no cigar. What really moved me was talking over coffee with you."

I was caught off guard by his transparency, but I understood what he meant. Casper and I were not just business colleagues; in a short time, we were beginning to enjoy and actually trust each other. Telling me that he or she trusts me is the highest compliment a non-Christian can pay me, and I felt humbled.

"Jim, if a complete stranger comes up to me and starts professing his faith, it's easy—*too* easy—to say that dude's nuts. But when people take the time to tell me about themselves, give me

some context for their story, give me names, places, and times, it makes more sense.

"A lot of times, people claim they've heard God talk to them, and I usually think, *This guy hears voices*. But don't worry; I don't feel that way about you!"

I was glad Casper and I were getting to know each other. And I was glad he didn't think I was nuts. I didn't think he was either. And I told him so.