

Foreword by William Paul Young

JIM HENDERSON & MATT CASPER

AUTHORS OF *JIM & CASPER GO TO CHURCH*



SAVING CASPER

A Christian and an Atheist Talk
about Why We Need to Change the
Conversion Conversation

Advance Praise for *Saving Casper*

Jim Henderson has been, in our generation, a key leader helping Christians talk to atheists. No one I know has spent more time at this or cares more about it. I enjoy Matt Casper's company too. Their dialogue is an enjoyable and enlightening experience. I have had many *aha* moments in their company.

BISHOP TODD HUNTER

Professor of Evangelism and Contemporary Culture, and author of *Christianity Beyond Belief* and *Our Favorite Sins*

Jim is a smart and humane Christian. Casper is a smart and humane atheist. A book by either man would be worth reading. But put them together and you have something . . . super-smart and deeply humane. Christians, atheists, and folks in between will gain a lot by hanging out with Jim and Casper in the pages of this book.

BRIAN D. MCLAREN

Speaker, activist, and author of *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?*

If you're convinced we need dialogue more than debate, and if you're interested in true conversation rather than conversions for the evangelism stat sheets, this is the how-to book you've been waiting for. With remarkable transparency, vulnerability, and generosity, Jim Henderson and Matt Casper model the relationship-building that stands the best chance of taking Jesus public in a changed American culture.

TOM KRATTENMAKER

USA Today contributing columnist and author of *The Evangelicals You Don't Know*

It's rare to find a book Christians and non-Christians will like in equal measure. *Saving Casper* is one of those singular books that accomplishes the feat. Funny, poignant, authentic, brilliant insights . . . I could go on, but you get the idea. And you need to get this book.

JAMES L. RUBART

Author of *Rooms* and the Well Spring series

Fresh, relevant, and filled with humor and honesty, *Saving Casper* offers a satisfying glimpse of what it looks like for two people with different beliefs to be in respectful dialogue. It's obvious that Jim and Casper have a strong relationship despite their differences. And isn't that what loving our neighbor really means?

MARY SCHALLER

President of Q Place

Anxious about evangelism? End it with *Saving Casper*. This is the Jesus-way of sharing good news.

JONALYN FINCHER

Vice president of Soulation.org and author of *Coffee Shop Conversations: Making the Most of Spiritual Small Talk*

Saving Casper is wonderfully uncomfortable and beautifully provocative! Personally, I now long to have more Caspers in my life in order to continue my own growth in faith. As a pastor, I hope the people I serve will read this and desire the same. Yes, it is time we commit to stay in the room with each other!

DAVE RODRIGUEZ

Senior pastor of Grace Church, Noblesville, IN

I am an evangelical. I believe I am called to encourage people to know and follow Jesus. But too often we in the evangelical community push people to recite the "sinner's prayer" without letting them know that following Jesus is more than simply a fire escape. Jesus' main instruction is for us to love God and to love our neighbor. Yet, when I ask Christians how many non-Christians they have as friends, the answer is usually zero.

I am touched by the relationship between Jim and Casper, and I highly recommend this book for those followers of Jesus who want to know how to interact with outsiders.

GENEVA VOLLRATH

President and CEO emeritus of Stonecroft Ministries

Praise for *Jim & Casper Go to Church*

Anyone interested in contemporary evangelism, especially pastors, will enjoy and learn from this humorous and heartening travelogue.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

An instant favorite . . . a great read for making you think. It is a reminder that how you perceive your ministry may not be the same as how those you minister to perceive it.

KENT SHAFFER

Founder of Church Relevance

A road trip book with a difference—and an eye-opening account of two solitudes in genuine dialogue.

MACLEANS MAGAZINE

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.

BISHOP TODD HUNTER

Professor of Evangelism and Contemporary Culture, and author of *Christianity Beyond Belief* and *Our Favorite Sins*

Jim Henderson is one of the most creative, committed, insightful, honest, affable, and downright interesting people I've met. That makes me want to hear what he says and read what he writes.

BRIAN D. MCLAREN

Speaker, activist, and author of *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?*

Jim & 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 & 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

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Saving Casper: A Christian and an Atheist Talk about Why We Need to Change the Conversion Conversation

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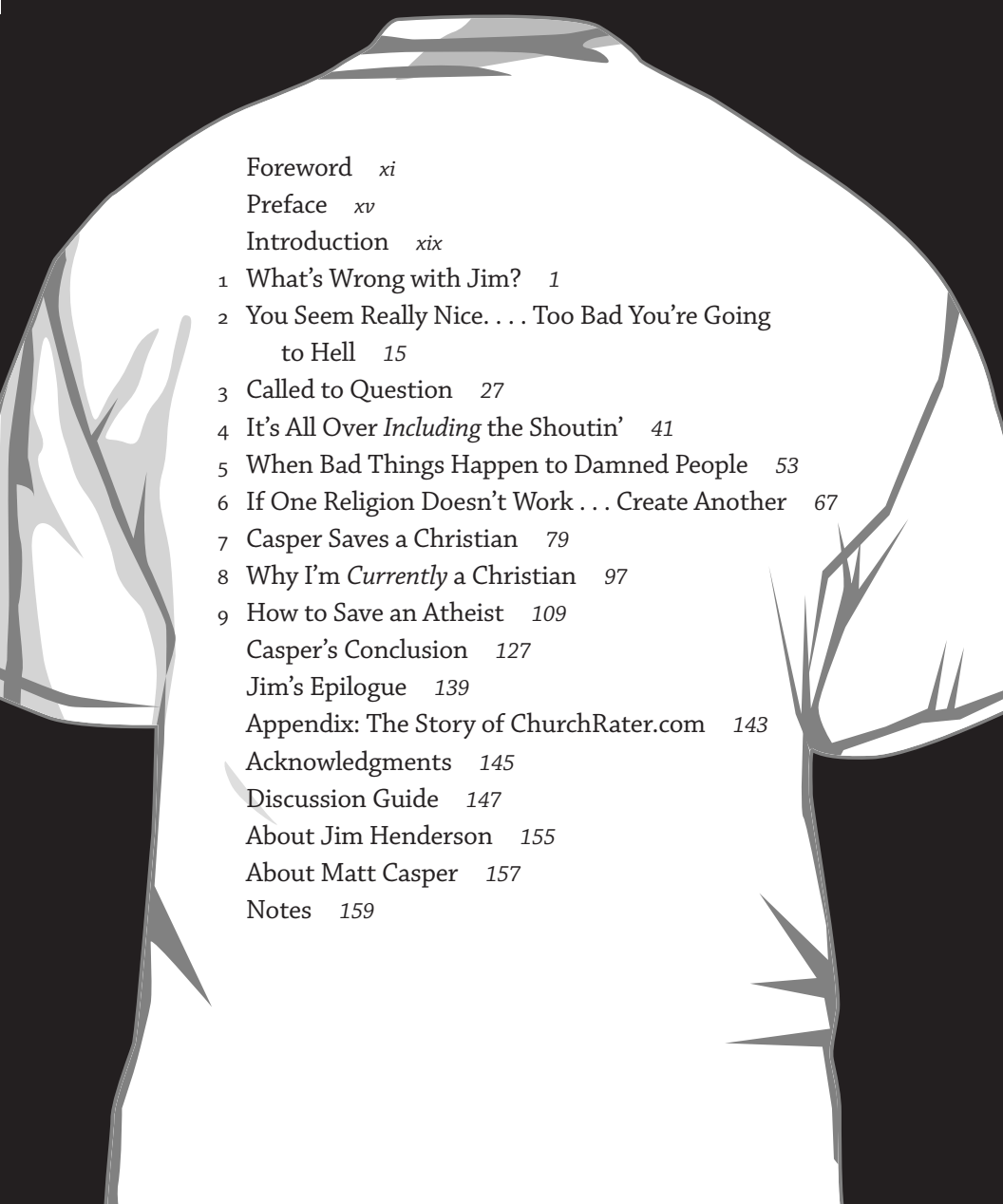
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Foreword

I am not a big fan of categories, those real or imaginary boxes onto which we slap a definition or label so we have somewhere to put groups of people. Labeling is much easier than the messy discomfort that often arises out of relating to an actual human being.

I do acknowledge that boxes have a profound utilitarian purpose, whether it is for marketing, mission, misunderstanding, or manipulation.

Categories *can* be helpful in aiding our understanding and navigation through this cosmos in which we all dwell, but also powerfully divisive and destructive to relationships. Categories are both good and evil. It is important, for example, that children learn the difference between *me* and *them*, parent and nonparent, safe and not safe. But categories meant to establish helpful boundaries often turn into walls that frame prisons both for the “other” outside and we who are inside.

If I may use a word that I generally dislike, there is a *principle* regarding the difference between living inside fluid and dynamic organic categories and constructing inflexibly hard and defining boxes into which people and ideas are shackled—and from which

any breath of life is exhaled. This truism is expressed in Jesus' potent statement that the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath.

Even though the manipulation of consumer choice has become an intricate science in the realm of marketing and consumerism, marketing experts recognize that people are constantly caught in the flow of movement. The future is not the simple extrapolation of the past and present; there is a ghost in the machine—the human being who is fundamentally nondefinable and therefore part of the realm of mystery. However, less skilled and more brutal in its persistent construction of categories is the religious community.

It would be great if we lived isolated in a cave and could create all the boxes we wanted; no harm, no foul. But we don't. We live in community, and many of us battle against an entitled sense of moral and/or religious superiority and our tendency for cramming everything into tidy, mentally crafted boxes. The bigger complication arises when we are dealing with living human beings who don't fit so easily, and we feel compelled to cut off the extra bits that bother us or don't make sense.

One of the easiest religious expressions of “us” vs. “them” is the use of the two boxes “believer” and “unbeliever.” Simple, at least in the way I grew up; Christians are in the believer box and everyone else isn't. But as we were educated in our Christian worldview, it became obvious there were people whom we thought were “believers” who began to defy the edges of our box, either because of their behavior or variances in their doctrinal theology. Now a decision had to be made regarding whether these people still qualified as believers or had slid back into the unbeliever box—or, easier still, had never been true believers in the first place. I was personally plagued with the nagging sense that the only real difference between myself and “them” was that I hadn't gotten caught yet.

The truth is, every human being is somewhere on the journey

between belief and unbelief. In fact, every belief implies unbelief. This is why questions themselves are so important, because they access our paradigms and rationalism and challenge us in our transformational journeys and relationships.

That's what Jim Henderson and Matt Casper do in this book: Ask questions. Challenge each other. Listen to each other. Care about each other. And relentlessly resist boxes of all kinds, choosing instead the path of learning together.

It doesn't end there. We have been taught all manner of new terminology—new theological and doctrinal words and meanings by which we begin to label the innumerable boxes upon boxes upon boxes. Some are prettier than others, some crude and rude, some slick and glossy. And with every reworked division, the believer box is reduced in size, the qualifications to be a member becoming more complicated and convoluted. Some boxes are easy . . . Mormon, Muslim, Buddhist, and Atheist, which are no-brainers, right? Some boxes, like that for the Jews, because of Jesus being their Messiah, have a secret door into the believer box—if not today . . . later. But even inside the believer box, there is plenty of uncertainty. This is especially true when we learn that the believer box is actually sealed and we may not really know what box we're in until the time of the grand future unveiling. So, we either work ourselves to the bone hoping to prove our worthiness, or we spend our lives perpetually in doubt.

I believe everyone is a believer, and everyone is an unbeliever. I believe that the Holy Spirit has been poured out, as the Bible says, "on *all* flesh." I believe we are called to tear down all the walls of these myriad boxes. I believe the living label we will place on the resulting, massively expanding and incomprehensively awe-filled box is "Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God," and that everything is by, for, through, and in him.

I know that Matt Casper is an unbeliever. (He is an atheist

after all!) I know Matt Casper is a believer—he told me himself. Let me share with you a few of the things Matt Casper believes. He believes in love: Not just any old blind romanticism, but other-centered, self-giving love. The love that exists inside him and is profoundly called out of him is most clearly seen in relationship to his children. Matt Casper also believes in life, this wonderfully intricate design of expanding elegance. Matt Casper believes in truth—that there are ways we are supposed to relate to one another that are simply indisputable. Matt Casper believes in evil—that many times the way we treat one another is wrong, absolutely wrong. Matt Casper believes that kindness is more real than abuse, honesty more than lies, dialogue more than division, authenticity more than hiding, integrity more than disintegration. Frankly, *Saving Casper* made me wonder if Matt Casper believes more than a lot of Christians.

What if believing is an activity and not a category? What if it involves beginning to see in such a way that our very being is freed to be the incredible creation that is true? After all, belief is not just a bunch of stuff the head thinks. Rather, belief is ascertained by the way in which someone lives life. It is expression, not ideology.

Saving Casper is the call to break down boxes and categories, revealing how to live out your beliefs through the bold and risky path of genuine, respectful relationship.

So, who is the believer now?

William Paul Young

Preface

JIM: Prior to writing *Jim & Casper Go to Church*, I had this idea that paying unchurched people to go to church and tell me what they think might yield some interesting insights into how nonbelievers view Christianity, and might give Christians an outsider's perspective on what we can do to improve our public image. This unusual hobby eventually evolved into a live event I called An Interview with Three Lost People, at which I interviewed non-Christians in front of a group of Christians.

This was how I first met Matt Casper. He was one of the lucky "lost" people I threw on stage in front of a room full of three hundred pastors. At the time, I knew Casper was "lost," but I hadn't yet heard that he was an out-and-out atheist. However, as fate would have it, he was. Casper's atheism wasn't a problem for me, but I knew it might be for many Christians.

One reason Casper's atheism wasn't a problem for me was that I already had plenty of experience with atheists. In fact, a few years earlier, I had been the winning bidder when an atheist college student named Hemant Mehta decided to auction his soul on eBay.¹ In exchange for my \$504 "purchase," I asked Hemant to attend several church services, write reviews, and

do radio interviews with me—which is where I first observed that many Christians had an unusual reaction to atheists. They seemed much more energized than they were around garden-variety “lost” people.

That’s why I wanted to work with a real live atheist for the book I was planning. Simply put, atheists draw more attention from Christians than almost any other subcategory of non-Christian. Even more important, they provide a perspective on Christianity unlike any other group of nonbelievers—a perspective that can often be a blessing.

Samir Salmanovic, a Christian leader in interfaith dialogue, suggests that atheists are “God’s whistle-blowers.”² He explains the blessing that atheists can offer to religious people:

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam need atheists, both those who are constructive and those who are less so. Religion deserves to be challenged. This deserving is of two types. First, religion *deserves the pain* of criticism and correction because of its failures to live up to its own ideals. Second, religion *deserves the blessing* of criticism and correction because it has often been a precious catalyst for justice, peace, and beauty in the world.

God does not have an ego that can be wounded by our disbelief about God’s existence. God, I suggest, would prefer a world where humans love and care for each other and this planet even at the expense of acknowledging God, rather than believing in and worshiping God at the expense of caring for one another and the world.³

If atheists are God’s whistle-blowers, I knew I needed one to help me with my project—to help us Christians live up to our own ideals. That’s why I asked Casper to join me.

A couple of years after we first met on stage during An Inter-

view with Three Lost People, Casper and I decided to keep our conversation going. I told him I wanted him to attend some of America's largest churches and give me his unfiltered feedback. I told him I was a former pastor and a follower of Jesus, but that I would not be trying to "save" him along the way. If he got saved, that was on him. We detailed this story in our first book together, *Jim & Casper Go to Church*.

Saving Casper is, to some degree, a continuation of the conversation we started in *Jim & Casper Go to Church*; but, more important, it is the ongoing story of our friendship and mutual quest for understanding. In it you will find many questions remain unanswered and many more bubble to the surface. But in those questions are some solutions we hope will begin to change the conversation about conversion, faith, church, and God, and how they relate to all of us.

Introduction

JIM: After reading *Jim & Casper Go to Church*, many people said there was one question Casper asked that kept echoing in their minds. Following almost every church visit—after seeing, in many cases, the spectacle, the lights, the music (and in one case, an actual fog machine)—Casper would turn to me and say, “Jim, is this *really* what Jesus told you guys to do?” A simple question that I think many Christians today are still trying to answer.

Casper’s words are certainly blunt, but I’m sure they resonate with you. Maybe you’ve wondered, as I have, why we Christians talk about, but rarely measure, how we’re doing with our mission to reach “lost” people. Maybe it’s because we’re not doing as well, or as much, as we say we’re doing. Whatever the reason, from my perspective, this is exactly why we *need* people like Casper—to tell us the truth as they see it. Of course, his feedback is subjective—insights from one person who is outside the church—but if we don’t look outside the church, how else can we determine how our mission to *reach* people outside the church is going?

As I see it, if feedback from atheists such as Casper can help us reach the world for Christ, then why not listen to what they have to say? Also, based on my experience with other atheists, I believe they are uniquely qualified to critique us. Here’s why:

- Many atheists put the Bible in the same category as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*—as a fairy tale—a viewpoint that is especially important to hear for those who have grown up in a belief system that unequivocally accepts the Bible as God’s Word.
- Atheists have zero brand loyalty to Christianity or any other faith-based system, so they’re quicker to call out artificiality and manipulation.
- Many atheists believe that religion in general is actually *dangerous* for mankind. Given the fact that Jesus never instructed His followers to go into the religion business, it helps to have someone notice when we’re getting a little too comfortable with the religion label.
- Because Christians often claim the moral high ground from the stance of our biblically based beliefs, atheists can help keep us grounded by asking us questions like, “Is this really what Jesus told you to do?”

Those are my perceptions. However, what I believe about atheists may not be what they believe about themselves. Luckily, I have a friend named Casper, who happens to be an atheist, and I get to ask him directly.

Here’s the number one thing Christians say to me behind Casper’s back: “Jim, I appreciate your desire to ‘connect’ with him, but give me a straight answer. Is Casper saved yet?”

Here’s why I think Christians ask this question: They’ve been taught to value above all else something that didn’t especially concern Jesus—namely, the finish line (a.k.a. the prayer of salvation). But if we use as our standard what I’ve come to think of as a “finish-line fixation,” we’d have to agree that Jesus was an evangelistic failure.

In John 4, we see Jesus engage in a conversation with a Samari-

tan woman and illustrate the ways in which religion can be good. One could assume (after all, this is Jesus!) that the conversation would naturally culminate with Jesus challenging her to repent, or in modern-day evangelical parlance, “accept Him as her personal Savior.”

But that’s not what happened. Look closely at the exchange and you’ll see the genius of Jesus, the master *discipler*, at work. The Samaritan woman tosses Jesus an evangelistic softball when she says, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he” (John 4:25-26). The Samaritan woman sets up the perfect opportunity for Jesus to convert her, but He simply reveals that He is the Messiah and leaves the ball in her court.

Jesus is unquestionably bold in asserting His Messiah-ship, but He fails to challenge the woman to cross the finish line. Because you and I know the end of the story, and because this is Jesus we’re talking about, we give Him a pass. However if this were a case study for Evangelism 101, Jesus would get an A for boldness and . . .or follow-through.

Here is a person who could easily get run over by a stray water buffalo on her way back to the village, and yet Jesus lets her go without closing the sale. The Samaritan woman was practically begging for Him to call her down to the altar, and instead He lets her walk. I believe Jesus simply obeyed the impulses the Holy Spirit put in His heart. He let the Holy Spirit take the lead.

Jesus called people to follow Him, to be His apprentices. Conversion is *part of the process*, but it’s not the first step. Often it’s not clear exactly when the conversion threshold is reached or how it comes about. It’s mysterious. Ask your friends and you’ll hear a hundred different stories about how they “came to Christ.”

We do know how human beings are apt to change, and it

doesn't match up with the way Christians have been trained to engage with nonbelievers.

You might say, "But thousands of people are coming to faith every week in churches all over America. We see them on TV!" And you would be correct, but millions more are staying home. We don't see *them* on TV.

I have had some pastors suggest the following: "Well, that's their fault, Jim. There are plenty of churches for them to go to." Again, they're right on the nose, yet the people vote with their feet by propping them up on Sunday and playing video games.

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus doesn't mention anything about people going to church; rather, He directs His followers to go out and make disciples. Jesus did not need to use manipulation, fear, or force to win hearts. He simply demonstrated love. And when Christians embody the Christ they want others to see, it's always a good thing.

Jesus never led anyone to the altar and never guided anyone through the "Sinner's Prayer." But that wasn't His goal. He didn't set out to make converts; He sought disciples. In fact, He seemed far more interested in the *starting line* than the finish line. Jesus didn't tell us to *save* anyone: He told us to *make disciples*. And the difference between *converts* and *disciples* is simple. Getting someone to agree with us is a lot easier, and yet more fleeting, than convincing someone to "take up their cross and follow."

With that in mind, I would ask some direct questions:

- When was the last time you led someone to Christ, personally praying with them to accept Christ as their personal Savior?
- How many times in your Christian life have you actually led someone to Christ?
- How many people have you yourself disciplined, starting

with the prayer of salvation and studying with them as they matured?

- When was the last time you invited a coworker, friend, or fellow student to church with the expectation that they would come back?
- How many people have you not invited to church because you weren't sure how to explain it to them?
- Have you really memorized as much of the Bible as you should to be equipped for "convincing" your friends that they should accept Jesus?

Harsh? Maybe. But if we are to understand what is really happening in our efforts to convert people, and how to make conversion "stick," we have to be brutally honest with ourselves about expectations and reality. How many of us want to have to answer the most difficult questions that everyone who cares about evangelism will face:

- Has anyone you loved and tried to witness to died without accepting Christ?
- Do you feel responsible for their likely eternal destiny?
- Has this motivated you to double down, study harder, and witness more, or to pull away, feel bad, keep the sense of failure to yourself, and essentially drop out of evangelizing altogether?

I believe that millions of Christians suffer from what I call Evangelism Frustration Disorder (EFD). Do these symptoms describe your evangelism experience?

- Chronic guilt over your unwillingness to "witness" to your friends and family.
- Spiritually debilitating depression over your "lack of boldness."

- Obsessive channel surfing and book buying to find the coolest new evangelism program.
- Anxiety when the pastor mentions evangelism or the great commission.
- Giving money to “on fire” Christians who *will* witness to assuage your feelings of guilt about *not* witnessing.

If researcher George Barna is right, the vast majority of evangelical Christians might actually be suffering from EFD. A Barna survey of non-Christians showed that

- 4 percent had been invited to attend church with a friend, and had;
- 23 percent had been invited to attend, but declined;
- 73 percent had *never* been invited.

Barna concludes: “Perhaps the most obvious observation is that most unchurched people are not being pursued by anyone.”⁴

This leaves us to ask, “Why?” Why aren’t ordinary Christians—people who say they care deeply about reaching non-Christians with the Good News—inviting people to church?

Here’s my best guess . . .

Something has changed culturally. As technology has bridged the distance between us, it has also created a more insular society in which people don’t connect personally. More and more, connection happens in a digital vacuum. But it’s not all bad news for the church. Sociologist Robert Putnam thinks he sees a silver lining in what many Christians imagine is a cloud of doom for organized religion in America.

In a report by Dan Harris of ABC News, Putnam says it’s possible that the current spike in young people opting out of organized religion could also prove to be an opportunity for some: “America historically has been a very inventive and even

entrepreneurial place in terms of religion. . . . Jesus said, ‘Be fishers of men,’ and there’s this pool with a lot of fish in it and no fishermen right now.”

“In the end,” Putnam concludes, “this ‘stunning’ trend of young people becoming less religious could lead to America’s next great burst of religious innovation.”⁵ It’s through innovation that we are most likely to win converts, but innovation is never—and I mean *never*—achieved without a few failures along the way.

It is this turning point that brings me to the purpose for this book. It isn’t to answer the question of the state of Casper’s salvation. It isn’t to offer a tutorial on how to successfully snatch the soul of an atheist from the grasp of Satan. Our purpose is to swing open the doors of communication and demonstrate how honest and respectful conversation can open more hearts than all the preaching, Bible quoting, and fear mongering ever will.

For this reason, we have chosen to structure the book as a discussion in which I, Jim, will be the moderator, raising questions for Casper to answer and offering insights that we hope will allow each side to peer into the world of the other for better understanding and relationship building.

CASPER: I don’t remember if I identified myself as an atheist when I first met Jim for his “Interviews with the Lost” thing. All I knew was that he was looking for “lost” people and I thought it was probably best to just call myself “lost” rather than “atheist” because the latter label seems to scare the pants off a lot of people.

When Jim called me later to see if I wanted to audition for his next project, traveling to churches and writing what eventually became *Jim & Casper Go to Church*, he asked if I was an atheist. I remember having to think about it. Am I? I

ran down the list of qualifications to be an atheist, as I saw them: Do I believe in a supernatural God? Currently, no.

Turns out that, for me, the list of what it takes to be an atheist is pretty short. So I remember saying to Jim, “Yeah, I believe I am an atheist. . . . I hope that’s not a problem.” Jim said, “No problem. I basically need you to be an atheist for this project. So are you ready for an adventure?”

I said yes, obviously, and the good part then (and now) was that I really wasn’t sure what to expect from this adventure—which made it ideal, as there was no way I could be disappointed. No expectations = no way to be let down. To me, it sounded . . . well . . . fun. Traveling a bit throughout America with a guy who seemed pretty cool—nonjudgmental, intellectually curious, into music. I figured I could count on Jim not being up in my face with the, “Have you thought about where you’ll spend eternity?” thing the whole time. I figured I was safe from the hard sell.

It’s not that Jim never shared his faith with me or that I was opposed to hearing about it. Actually, I was (and still am) interested, probably because he was also interested in me and what I believed in and cared about. We talked about feelings more than faith, music as much as God, and we found some common ground.

It made me wish that more people would just take it easy and introduce their faith a little more slowly. I have realized in talking with Christians over the past few years that no one is going to keep the attention of a nonbeliever by starting a conversation with Bible verses and language a nonbeliever can’t relate to. It’s common sense, really: If you want to engage with someone, you have to speak their language first. That’s what I do . . . for the most part, anyway.

But what really made this project most appealing to me

was that, like most human beings, I was and am very curious about the Big Questions: Why are we here? What's the meaning of life? What happens after we die? And if exploring these questions would take me to about a dozen buildings where the people inside said they had the answers—or, at least, that's what I thought I would experience—well, that sounded pretty cool. As it turned out, I wasn't given The Answers—not even wrong ones. What I was met with was the old hard sell and the Hollywood-style hard sell in some cases.

I didn't get it then, and I don't think I get it now. I just remember thinking at the time, *Wow . . . bummer. Most of these churches are basically businesses.* Sure, many of the people we met along the way were people of deep and unwavering faith, but from my vantage point, they had that faith whether they were in a church service or not.

And when we ended up writing about our Sunday visits where I got these first impressions, plenty of people took us to task, saying, "It's not fair to judge a church based on a single Sunday visit."

I say, "What?" because I always thought the Sunday morning church service was the preferred point of entry for outsiders—the place where Christians proclaim, "Hey, outsiders! Come on in! See what our God and our faith are all about!" So like Jim, I thought a Sunday visit would be the ideal time for a church and its people to share their faith, but that's really not what I found.

Instead, most churches were about loud music, bright lights, and demands for money . . . at least that's my main memory. I also remember sermons that seemed less about what it means to be a Christian than about how hard it is to *stay* a Christian—like "Don't Stop Believing!" which really only made me think about a "small town girl living in a lonely

world.” And again, the main things I remember from some of the megachurches were the appeals for money.

I don’t remember Jesus asking for money. As a matter of fact, there’s something in the Bible about not being able to serve two masters, right? But at some of these giant churches—with their waterfalls and TV shows and gift shops and private-plane-flying preachers—it seemed like they’d picked master #2.

Jim referred to me as his “whistle-blower.” I would probably just call it unfiltered feedback from someone outside the fishbowl, as it were. Otherwise, it seems to me that books written by evangelicals *for* evangelicals to help evangelicals connect with non-evangelicals are like an auto repair manual written by someone who has never seen or sat in a car trying to explain how to drive or fix a car to someone else who has never seen or sat in a car. When the basis of your argument comes from a point of reference that is alien to the other person, you are stalled out of the gate. Seeing as there is nothing most churches would like more than a chance to save folks like me from whatever it is you think I need saving from, I’d think that some honest feedback would be useful.

JIM: So that is what Casper offers us: *honest feedback*. You’ll see as we progress through this conversation that Casper will be straightforward and honest about his observations. As anyone who has met him knows, it isn’t because he’s trying to be critical or to beat up on Christians. I believe it’s truly because he wants to give us all a glimpse of what he sees, in hopes that it will help us clarify our message and intentions.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH JIM?

JIM: Before we can explore how Christians can better relate to their atheist friends, neighbors, and family members, it is important to address some of the common misconceptions Christians have about what atheists think. As Casper and I traveled and spoke with Christian groups, certain questions came up time and again. These are also the questions I mentioned in the introduction, so let's give Casper an opportunity to answer them here because they not only reveal the preconceived notions that many Christians have about "godless atheists," but they also prevent many believers from even daring to start a conversation with a nonbeliever, and they stand in the way of our ability to communicate effectively with nonbelievers when they gather enough courage to trust us with their questions.

Casper, we've heard that atheists see the Bible as a fairy tale, and that people like you think the Bible is complete fiction. True or false?

CASPER: I know there are some atheists and other nonbeliever groups who see the Bible—and the Koran and the Talmud and

the Book of Mormon—as a collection of fairy tales, but there’s no way that applies to all of us. Personally, I know there’s a lot of history to be found in the Bible and there’s a lot of help to be found in it as well. I don’t disagree with much of it at all.

I will confess, though, that I struggle with people who believe every word to be 100 percent true from beginning to end since there are so many contradictions. I always wonder how these folks reconcile the discrepancies. There are blogs and entire websites devoted to explaining these complications, but the “Sunday school” answer usually seems to be that mankind can’t divine the will of God (but the blogger or website author will certainly give it a shot!)

From some atheists’ perspectives, well, those contradictions are used as proof that the whole Bible is malarkey. I think it’s a moot point, but I also think it might help some Christians to keep in mind that using the Bible as some form of “proof” is a nonstarter for most nonbelievers. Christians need to remember that nonbelievers also “non-believe” the Bible, and perhaps even “non-believe” the Bible more than they “non-believe” in God.

Speaking for myself, I think the Bible has a lot of important, moving, and wonderful stories, but there are also a lot of rules that may have applied back then but don’t really apply now. (I mean, come on: How many Christians are really following the command not to wear clothes of mixed fiber?) But the best part of the Bible for me has always been the words of Jesus.

Jesus’ words, as recorded in the Bible, make almost uniform sense to me, except for the supernatural components. (But I feel the same way about the teachings of Buddha: It all makes sense except the reincarnation parts.) And Christianity is really all about Jesus, right? I mean, it’s *His* name on the box.

So though I may struggle with many aspects of the Bible, most of what Jesus said is inspiring and enlightening for me. And one thing all our church visits taught me is that the Bible can be used in these discussions the way some people use statistics: selectively. And now, like so many of the pastors we saw during our church visits, I, too, find verses from the Bible to support what I'm saying and gloss over those that don't.

JIM: My relationship with Casper is partially a learning experiment. I frankly consider it a privilege to hang out with someone (whom I believe) Jesus loves, and have him tell me as we go along the path together what he is and isn't experiencing relative to my perceptions. I want to closely compare and contrast my social construction of reality with his, and this begins with his perspective on the tenets of the faith I want him to embrace.

If I don't *hear* Casper, if he's simply a target or an object of my evangelistic desire, what do I do when he fails to fulfill my expectations? What do Christians do with nonbelievers as a whole? Where do we start if we can't defend our faith with the very handbook that we were given to instruct us? Well, Casper has given us a pretty big hint on that one: Jesus.

Some Christians believe that atheists unfairly target Christians over other people of faith. What do you say about that, Casper?

CASPER: First I would ask, Is this an accurate perception? Maybe it is, but I prefer to look at things on a case-by-case basis. Some might say Christianity is the most hypocritical faith—for example, many Christians in America claim to worship a God of love, but at the same time they're okay with gross prejudices, violent discriminations, and mass murder by the military—and therefore maybe Christianity is the most worthy target.

Some might say that most atheists are former Christians, with damage, and that is what makes them categorically hate Christianity. Others might say Christianity is “safe” to target because going after Islam in a similar fashion could quickly get ugly and violent.

For me, I just understand Christianity more than any other religion and therefore have more specific questions about it. I was raised in America and attended church as a child. I even went to a Catholic college, though not for the Catholicism. I have never been Catholic. I didn’t even know what Ash Wednesday was about, so imagine my surprise freshman year when I suddenly saw everybody walking around with ashes on their foreheads. I’d point it out—“Hey, you have some dirt on your head”—and they’d say, “Ha-ha, very funny,” and I’d say, “No, really, you do!” I felt like I was in the twilight zone.

Anyway, I am definitely experienced with the Christian “brand.” And maybe this makes me—atheist or not—qualified enough to speak about the issues I have observed in American Christianity, having been raised around it.

But just because I know far more about Christianity than I do about Islam, for example, doesn’t mean I have “brand loyalty” to it or to any faith more than another. When you’re an atheist, you don’t have a horse in this race. When someone says they believe in an all-powerful God—and I don’t believe in gods of any kind—why would I say one god I don’t believe in is better than another god I also don’t believe in? And in this case, it looks to me as if Christianity and Islam are worshipping the same God anyway.

I think it can actually be a benefit (even an honor) to have so many nonbelievers more interested in Christianity than perhaps any other faith, because, when handled well, their

interest gives you more opportunities to share what you believe and why.

JIM: Sharing your faith is intimidating on a good day, but going up against people who are well-known for their faith (or lack of it) is a whole other level of scary. Have you ever had the opportunity to “Save a Celebrity”? Someone famous, like Bob Dylan or Lady Gaga. Well, I have! I am going to tell you this story as an illustration of a choice we have. The direction we choose to go has a direct correlation to perpetuating the perceptions of Christianity that Casper just covered.

In 2009, I was invited to do an interview with Ira Glass, host and creator of *This American Life*. Ira is one of America’s best storytellers and a certifiable rock star to about two million people who avidly follow him on the radio.

He was famous, he had an audience, he was an atheist, and he was asking *me* about evangelism! Here was my big chance to “Save a Celebrity”! How did I do? You can listen to the interview in the *This American Life* archives, but let me spare you the digging and the wait.

Realizing that millions of people would be listening and that God might be giving me this unique opportunity to “preach the gospel” to an audience of exceedingly difficult-to-reach cultural elites who definitely skew non-evangelical (read: *seriously* unsaved), I basically bombed. Here’s how the conversation went.

Ira: Jim, isn’t it true that your version of evangelism actually leads to *nothing*?

Jim: Ira, as I see it, I have two scenarios. Scenario 1 is I “witness” to you and valiantly attempt to save you right here on the radio. But if history is any indicator, and barring a true miracle of divine intervention, you

will most likely reject my offer. I then go back to my supporters and claim victory, even though you said no, because our evangelism paradigm provides me an “out.”

As long as I *try* to save you, I still get “points” for being courageous enough to boldly preach the gospel. Another evangelistic loophole I can use is to claim that Jesus said people (especially famous people like you) would reject me. So even though you remain lost and on your way to my hell, I actually win! And, oh, one other thing: *You and I will never speak again.* But hey, this is spiritual warfare and losing a possible relationship with you is simply collateral damage.

In scenario 2, I say something like, “Ira, is there anything that I believe to be true about Jesus that you want to know more about?” I’m transparent and direct. I keep things real without placing undue pressure on our relationship. Instead of my pushing something on you, this approach requires that you *pull* something from me. You say yes or no and I answer. If you’re interested in following Jesus right now, I say, “Cool, let’s talk or pray.” And if you say you’re not interested in following Jesus right now, I say, “Cool, let’s grab a coffee and talk about your show.” You and I continue to hang out and learn from each other and see what happens.

I told Ira, “I choose scenario 2 every time.”

I said this not because I was afraid to give him *my personal testimony* or tell him about Jesus. I’d already done that with hundreds of people. Nor was it because I was trying to be progressive, relevant, or postmodern. And it’s certainly not because I don’t believe in conversion.

I chose scenario 2 for a simple and very strategic reason:

People typically come to faith (or buy a car, choose a school, or invest their money) as the result of an influential relationship with someone they trust and are conversant with.

So you see, we can either continue to give nonbelievers ammunition for their aversion to the faith, or we can back away from our conversion checklists and leave doors open for them to walk through as they grow more curious.

Casper, do you think there is anything useful in religion? Some atheists say that religion is always dangerous.

CASPER: Always dangerous? Of course not! The best thing I ever heard about this—and I don't remember where I heard it—was that religion is a good thing for good people and a bad thing for bad people. It's totally subjective. For example, I love it that Jim has faith. It drives him to help others. I hate it that a guy like Fred Phelps, the leader of Westboro Church in Kansas, who pickets at the funerals of AIDS victims and soldiers killed in combat, has faith. His so-called faith drives him to behave monstrously.

You can point to the wonderful things Christians do to serve others and make the world a better place. You can also point to the bloody slaughter of the Crusades. I don't think there's anything but a subjective answer to the question. Religion is a good thing when it inspires people to help others. But it has also proven to be a very bad thing in many other ways.

Casper, what about your team's version of Fred Phelps? (Yes, I'm talking about Richard Dawkins.) Would you agree that atheists are the ideological enemies of Christians?

CASPER: Good grief! *No!* Different does not mean we're at odds. I mean, come on! I am very different from my children,

but we're not enemies. Women are different from men, etc. And as far as Christian ideology goes . . . well, it seems to change from person to person, so I have to consider people on a case-by-case basis. I think anyone who calls himself a Christian would be well served to do the same with atheists: *case by case*.

I can understand why Christians might consider Richard Dawkins their ideological enemy as he does nothing but attack them; but don't lump me in with him. And I will do the same. I consider Fred Phelps my ideological enemy—because he seems to stand only for discrimination and seems to think it's appropriate to share his twisted views when people are at their most heartbroken—but by no means do I consider all Christians to be my enemies.

And I know some folks think I've been hard on prosperity preachers; but the truth is, I do not consider them my ideological enemies. I see them more as Jesus' ideological enemies, since it seems they are using Jesus' name to make themselves wealthy.

JIM: One of the most influential books I've read is called *To Change the World*. In it, professor James Davison Hunter analyzes what it actually takes to "change the world." He suggests that Christianity suffers from idealism:

Idealism misconstrues agency, implying the capacity to bring about influence where the capacity may not exist or where it may only be weak. Idealism underplays the importance of history and historical forces and its interaction with culture as it is lived and experienced. Further idealism ignores the way culture is generated, coordinated, and organized. Thus it underrates how difficult it is to penetrate culture and influence its direction.⁶

Perhaps more than any other Christian practice, modern day evangelism beliefs and practices emerge out of the mix of idealism and denial concerning the agency of sin, culture, and complex human experience. The inflexibility of so much idealism is what produced the Crusaders and people like Fred Phelps, who put such horrible black marks on the history and perception of Christianity.

This same attitude is what makes people such as Richard Dawkins just as ineffectual. Are you okay with alienating everyone you are trying to influence just to make your point? Are you content to feel you've made a good argument at the expense of potential relationships? It's one thing to have a set of ideals you strive toward; it is another thing to be so stringently idealistic that there is no room for individual experience.

Do you think Christians are failures if they don't fully embody Christ? In other words, do atheists expect all Christians to act just like Jesus?

CASPER: Isn't that what being a Christian is all about? You don't have to be an atheist to expect Christians to act like Jesus. You only need to be able to read the Bible.

JIM: That pretty much says everything we need to know. Of all the directives, missions, callings, and charges, the one thing—the *only* thing—we are really expected to do is show others why we claim Jesus, why we want others to know Him. If we aren't doing that, and if Casper is a good barometer of the view from the other side of the fence, then we can't possibly expect atheists to have an interest in being on the bandwagon.

However, the reason this feels so daunting is because of the *false belief* many of us have been taught: "When conversion is done right, it is dramatic and instantaneous."

We have this image in our heads because modern-day evangelicalism has put it there, meaning the preponderance of salvation stories that are preached, printed, or produced for Christian TV are fast, furious, and fantastic.

But in my experience, that's not how things typically go down. The truth typically has a bumpier road, one filled with unexpected stops and detours. Have you ever heard an evangelist tell a story like this?

"When I was six years old, I went to the altar. When I was ten, I walked away. When I was sixteen, I got saved at youth camp and then when I went to college, I dropped out and started taking drugs. I lived with a girl for five years and she got saved, and for five more years I said no. Then I lost my job, so I asked my girlfriend and her church friends to pray for me. I got a job, so I felt guilty and started coming back to church, and I recently gave my heart to the Lord, but I'm not one hundred percent sure about the whole tithing thing and Jesus being the only way and all that stuff."

You haven't heard a story like this because it's "too normal," and if evangelists are anything, it's "not normal." We Christians like our evangelists to be different and *on fire*.

You're lost, then you're found, then you're filled with God's love and spread the Good News until you die and join God in heaven. No wavering or wandering allowed.

The only problem is that's not how people usually experience faith or come to faith. The fact is, for most of us, faith is fluid. Researchers Nick Spencer and Peter Nielson tell us:

Wandering is part of the journey itself. We do people's stories and indeed the whole business of "finding faith" a disservice if we envisage it as a simple, predictable, linear path, from which we deviate at a cost. Awkward as it may be, people's journeys are personal, unpredictable, unique,

and marked by meanderings. Sometimes, walking away from the path is part of the journey.⁷

People are open to new religious experiences and are experimenting with them more than ever. When someone says they're Wiccan, Christian, or atheist, it might be more accurate if they added the word *currently*, as my friend Casper does. (If you read *Jim & Casper Go to Church*, you may recall that this is one of the first things he ever said to me—that he was “currently an atheist”—because he believes, as I do, that beliefs and faith are fluid and subject to change.)

People wander in and out of different faith experiences, including atheism, agnosticism, and Christianity. My hope has been to shine a friendly but powerful light on the fallacy that conversion is a straight-line kind of experience because statistics and stories prove that it's actually a squiggly line.

In 1992, an exhaustive study of over five hundred Britons who had come to faith in the previous twelve months found that sixty-nine percent described their conversion as gradual.⁸

The gradual process is the way in which the majority of people discover God and the average time taken is about four years: models of evangelism which can help people along the pathway are needed.⁹

It bears repeating what researcher John Finney found in his research: “*Models of evangelism which can help people along the pathway are needed.*”

I have been encouraging and developing models of evangelism that help people along the pathway for the past fifteen years. I've often done this in collaboration with other people who take chances with the ideas the Holy Spirit puts in their hearts; but as with all inventors, many of my ideas end up on the floor.

However, like the path that led from the Palm Pilot to the iPhone, if you aren't willing to fail, you really aren't willing to even try. Failure is the only way you can, in some wonderful cases, *succeed*.

As you can see, Casper is his own kind of atheist. Or as he has told me many times, he's someone who "happens to be an atheist." He's unpredictable and unabashed, and in his own words, he's "okay with being wrong. . . . You usually learn something then, right?" Perhaps he's a lot like you.

Followers of Jesus who sincerely care about connecting with what I call "the people Jesus misses most" need a new map, something that helps us navigate relationships with people like Casper. It is my desire for all people to know Jesus. I want Casper to know Jesus. But if in the process of trying to make Jesus plain to him I become artificial or mean, then I've stopped being like Jesus.

I used to think that if I lost a friend in the process of evangelizing, it was okay with Jesus. But if I do that, pretty soon I'll end up with no non-Christian friends and no one to evangelize. I no longer believe this is the outcome Jesus had in mind when He told us to apprentice people in the ways of His Kingdom.

That's why this is not another evangelism how-to book. Instead, we're exploring the unseen but incredibly valuable world of how to have a transparent friendship with someone who holds a very different view of life. This is also why I'm writing this book *with* Casper rather than *about* Casper.

With Casper, I enjoy a fresh set of eyes to help me see our world from a completely different perspective. In this book, we share not only what we learned from our church visits, we also share what we learned from our personal visits with each other as friends, business partners, and co-explorers.

And Casper—somewhat in response to what so many people

have asked me but mostly as part of our growing connection and relationship—shares with me just what he thinks it might take to “save” someone like him.

For some readers, the success of my “experiment” can only be measured by the status of Casper’s eternal soul, and they won’t be satisfied with anything less than a cut-and-dried, tied-with-a-fancy-ribbon solution. Life is rarely that neat and tidy, and the journey of faith is never straight and narrow.

Albert Einstein once said: “Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.”¹⁰ From a mathematical perspective, that is perplexing. From a spiritual perspective it’s as simple as understanding what really matters in God’s eyes.

In a fascinating book called *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea*, Charles Seife explains that at one time the number zero was actually considered dangerous. “The Greeks so despised zero that they refused to admit it into their writings, even though they saw how useful it was.”¹¹ Why? “Zero clashed with one of the central tenets of Western philosophy. . . . The whole Greek universe rested upon this pillar: there is no void.”¹²

The only cultures that allowed zero in their numeric systems were Arabs and East Indians. The Greeks and those influenced by Greek thinking rejected this “invisible” or intangible number because allowing it into their thinking would imply not knowing. This would also allow for a universe that was not closed—and by extension, no longer controllable by the religious authorities.

As Seife points out, the Greeks believed that “within zero there is the power to shatter the framework of logic.”¹³ Consequently, they blocked its usage in the West for more than two thousand years until eventually the advancement of knowledge and the need for better technology demanded its acceptance.

In similar fashion, during the time of Jesus, the Pharisees

feared His “invisible” counting system. Jesus took small things—ordinary people and unspectacular events, such as having dinner with someone or spending a few minutes with a woman who interrupted Him on His way to heal a young child—and turned them into big experiences in people’s lives.

God “counts” differently from the way we do. He sees the invisible realities and how they influence the visible relationships we live in. He isn’t afraid of including invisible numbers—unknown factors—in His counting system. God’s values are different from ours. God’s economy operates on capital that doesn’t fit in our system. God keeps records using an entirely different rubric.

My hope is that through this conversation, you will see a new way of counting what God counts. Most of all, I want you to know that your life with God counts, and that, just like Jesus, you can follow the Holy Spirit on this adventure of connecting with the people Jesus misses most so they can discover His winsome and powerful love.