

# The Harvester



*Preparing Souls  
To Serve The Lord!*



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## The Church I Could Not Ignore

Forest Stone Antemesaris

Growing up in a secular setting, there were no prayers before meals or bedtime, there was no mad rush out of the door on Sundays and Wednesdays, and I did not read the Bible (I did not even own a Bible). By the time I was in middle school, I began to identify as an atheist. By high school, my worldview cemented even more, and I was an adamant rejecter of God and antagonistic toward those whom I knew were Christian.

Before long, I became friends with the woman who would later become my wife. She was the top of our class in high school and a faithful member of the church of Christ. When I found out she believed in God, followed Jesus, and went to worship services three times a week, I was beside myself. We would often go back and forth discussing my different objections to Christianity. After some time, she invited me to attend a worship service with her at the local church of Christ. This is when I became introduced to the church I could not ignore. Though the human side of any collection of God's people is imperfect, when we collectively strive to be biblical and Christ-like, we can have an amazing impact on the sinful world around us. Here are a few characteristics of the church I could not ignore as an atheist.

### Impartial

I never expected to receive a warm welcome from a church. I had made my mind up about Christianity and Christians and assumed that they were too judgmental, closed-minded, and hypocritical to be

welcoming to me. I consciously looked and dressed the part of a person who was not a church-goer. I was a long-haired, skateboarding, rock-and-roll loving, outspoken atheist. I was that guy at school about whom churches warn their youth group. So, I figured I would be ignored, ostracized, and criticized by a group of Christians. However, by and large, the opposite occurred. I was overwhelmed by the friendliness I received when I first darkened the doors of the church building.

The church I could not ignore as an atheist obeyed the teachings of James 2:1-13—that is, they were impartial to the less honorable person in their assembly. James wrote to his audience by inspiration to “show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory” (Jas. 2:1, ESV). The example is given in the text of a rich man and a poor man walking into the assembly. In this hypothetical scenario, the rich man is given a place of honor and warmly welcomed while the poor man is made to sit on the floor or remain standing (Jas. 2:2-3). When Christians make these kinds of distinctions and treat people poorly based upon external circumstances, they become “judges with evil thoughts” (Jas. 2:4).

Though I was not wearing dirty, shabby clothing in the assembly, I did stick out. I was not dressed like everybody else and I did not look or talk like everybody else. Nevertheless, I was made to feel like people actually wanted me to be there. While this didn't convince me that God existed and Christianity was true, it did make me feel comfortable enough to listen to what these Christians had to say. Non-

believers are unlikely to come into our assemblies off of the streets, but if they do, how they are treated matters. God's people are harder to ignore when they treat unbelievers and seekers in an impartial, welcoming way.

## Genuine

The church I could not ignore was also genuine. As I began to know these Christians better, I realized that they were not just talking the talk; they were walking the walk. For the first time in my life, those who I knew professed Christianity lived consistently with their confession and were not merely putting up a religious facade for the sake of appearances. While hypocrisy does not prove Christianity to be false, hypocritical Christians will fail to win non-Christians with the gospel. Hypocrisy has dealt quite the blow to non-Christians' perception of Christianity, and the church I could not ignore as an atheist had to be made up of genuine people who strove day in and day out to serve Jesus to the best of their ability.

Even Jesus could not stand hypocrisy. He told the religious leaders of his day, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Mt. 23:27-28).

How we live around non-believers can either draw them to God or push them further from

Him. Jesus told His followers that they ought to let their light shine so that people may see their good works and give glory to the Heavenly Father (Mt. 5:16). When Christians have pure, genuine conduct, those who are not followers of God will be drawn to His light and could eventually end up glorifying God themselves. Peter told a group of sojourning Christians that they were to avoid fleshly lusts and have pure conduct around non-believers so that non-believers may see the good deeds of Christians and glorify God on the day of visitation (1 Pet. 2:11-12). It matters how Christians live their lives because genuine conduct is not only commanded by God and expected, but it can lead others to God and make the church hard to ignore.

## United

The first time I sat down with a Christian in a personal Bible study, I brought up how I objected to Christianity in part because there is a different church on every corner teaching different doctrine. I was shocked when the deacon I was studying with responded, "You are right, that isn't how it should be." For the first time in my life, I was sitting across from a professing Christian who was as bothered as I was about the religious division present in Christendom. It had never occurred to me that one could be a Christian without buying into the confusing, sectar-

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ian, different-church-on-every-corner way of thinking. The modern denominational landscape caused me (and causes many others) to doubt whether Christianity was true. I often thought, “How could a worldview that exclusively has the truth be so inwardly contradictory and divisive?”

It was a breath of fresh air to learn that the confusing setup of modern “Christianity” is not how it is supposed to be. Jesus spoke to this reality in His prayer before his betrayal and execution. After praying for Himself and His disciples, Jesus switches gears to pray for those who would follow Him because of the words of His apostles: “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn. 17:20-21). Jesus prayed that his disciples would be united so that the world would believe that Jesus was sent by God. The implication of this statement is that when Jesus’ disciples are not united, people struggle to believe that Jesus is sent by God. If the church is going to reach out to atheists, skeptics, and seekers, we must be united in love through the doctrine of God’s inspired word. When I learned that one could be a Christian without engaging in denominational sectarianism, the scaffolding I used to establish my false view of Christianity began to crumble.

## Prepared

Lastly, the church I could not ignore as an atheist was prepared. This attribute is the keystone of the church I could not ignore. The other attributes (impartial, genuine, united) opened my mind and softened my heart, but I still needed to sit down and investigate the evidence for Christianity. Being able to sit down with somebody who had logical, rational reasons for why Christianity is true, atheism is false, the Bible is more than another book, and Jesus is worth following was a watershed moment in my conversion. The culminating aspect of the church I could not ignore was members who obeyed this command: “always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you ... with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15).

I studied weekly with a deacon at the local church for a little over a year and nothing was off limits. We discussed challenges to naturalistic evolution and

its timeline, the false implications of atheism, the objective nature of truth, philosophical reasons for God’s existence (the cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments), the uniqueness and supernatural quality of the Bible, and who Jesus was and why it matters. Finally, I was convinced and convicted. After over a year of honest, open-minded study with a prepared Christian, I was baptized for the forgiveness of my sins.

Sometimes I wonder, what if nobody from that congregation felt like he knew enough to study with an atheist? What if every member of that congregation was content in knowing the bare minimum and were unwilling to learn more about the evidence for Christianity? What if nobody from that congregation had taken First Peter 3:15 seriously, as if it were not a command from God? I understand not everybody can be “the apologetics person” of their congregation, but in this day and age, churches that cannot reasonably defend their beliefs are becoming increasingly easier to ignore. The days of assuming and presupposing that others share our belief in the Bible and God are gone. We must be prepared to give a defense if we are going to successfully reach the world with the gospel.

## Conclusion

There are souls in our communities who believed as I did. They believe that God and His people are irrelevant, unimportant, and easy to ignore. Who is going to change their minds? We are. We can be hard to ignore by being impartial, genuine, united, and prepared. We can be hard to ignore by being unapologetically biblical and Christlike. We can make a change in this world for the glory of God by being the people God would have us to be. The world needs us. Let’s be hard to ignore. 🙏

**Editor’s Note:** Forest first delivered a sermon of this title for Polishing the Pulpit on August 19, 2019, amongst a series of lessons he preached detailing how he came from being a self-proclaimed atheist to a faithful member of the church of Christ. Several aspects of the lesson were encouraging, including: (1) the Gospel’s power in converting even atheists; (2) the kind yet uncompromising influence a Christian young lady; (3) the vital role a welcoming local church has in turning a heart toward God; and (4) the value of each church member preparing himself for the defense of the Gospel. We are thankful that Forest, when asked, agreed to write an article for the *Harvester* based on the lesson he preached. We appreciate Forest and his work in the Lord! —Brian



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The Florida School of Preaching has been training Gospel preachers for 50 years! Without your help, we could not be as effective. As each reader knows, money is required for supporting full-time students and for daily operations of the school. Throughout the school's history, we have financially operated more "in the red" than "in the black," but the Lord has always provided! There are several ways the Lord has provided: individual donations, local churches keeping us in their budgets, and being included in estates and trusts. For all of our financial supporters we are truly thankful! If you are not a regular financial supporter of the Florida School of Preaching, will you be a part of the Lord's providing? Individually, can you help us \$50 per month? As a local church, can you help us \$100 per month? If you would like the director to visit your congregation to let you know more about the school, please contact us. Most of the world's population is lost in sin and desperately needs Jesus, but "How shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14). —*Brian*



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