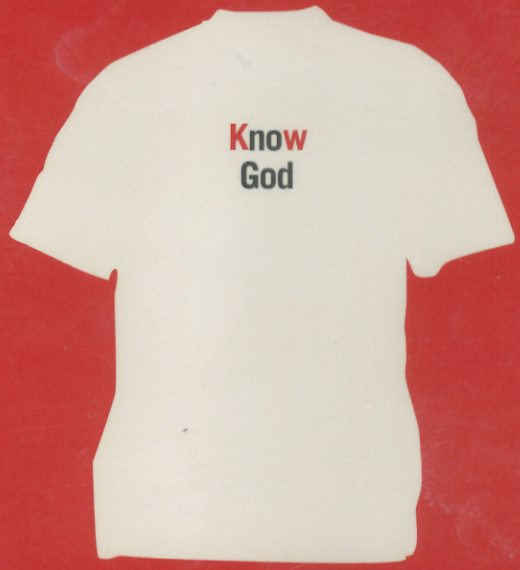
JIM HENDERSON & MATT CASPER

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

Most Christians have been immersed in church culture for so long that they have no idea how non-Christian guests might interpret what they see and hear at a worship service, or what might inspire them to come back.

Longtime Christian Jim Henderson decided there's only one way to find out: Ask what they think. So Jim hired atheist Matt Casper to accompany him to twelve churches and to enter into a discussion about what he found there.

This book chronicles their journey through a wider array of church experiences than many Christians have in a lifetime. In the process, it offers a glimpse into a kind of relationship that Jim believes more Christians need to open themselves to—authentic, respectful, transparent friendship with nonbelievers.

As Jim and Casper traveled the country—visiting a range of congregations from fundamental to Pentecostal, from megachurches with 20,000 members to house churches with only fifteen—they collected valuable insights into what nonbelievers see, experience, and feel as visitors to our midst. What are Christians doing right? What do we need to do better? What does a nonbeliever find attractive—or repellent—about Christians and church communities?

If you're ready to hear real responses to these tough questions, join Jim and Casper—an ordinary Christian and an ordinary atheist—as they engage in this remarkable conversation about faith.

2007

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.

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.

CHURCH, L.A. STYLE

Dream Center

(L.A.)

As we drove into the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, I told Casper a little about the history of Angelus Temple, a.k.a. the Dream Center, and its famous founder, Aimee Semple McPherson. ("That name rings a bell," he said.)

I was glad a bell was ringing for Casper, but I wondered how much he really knew about Angelus Temple. This place had grown out of one hundred years of very complex evangelical history that most Christians don't even know about. I tried to explain.

"A partially blind African American preacher named William Seymour came to L.A. in 1906, holding meetings near Azusa Street, where people began getting healed and speaking in tongues."

"Ah, speaking in tongues. I've seen a bit on TV. You probably know the guy—Robert Tilton. What a show that guy puts on!"

I let that ride as a fair-enough comparison, knowing that it was fruitless to explain the theological nuances of glossolalia.

"So, tongues, healing . . . what happened next on Azusa Street?" Casper asked.

"Well, the ministry expanded and more and more people—from the city and eventually from the suburbs as well—came to his meetings and 'got the Holy Ghost,' as they liked to call it."

"Yes, I believe he's a relative of the Casper family: Casper the Friendly . . ."

"Yes, Casper," I said. "That's funny." But I was on a roll now and wasn't going to let some cute atheistic humor throw me off.

"Eventually this movement touched a woman named Aimee Semple McPherson, who in 1923 built this church where the Dream Center now meets. She called it Angelus Temple, and she

was *outrageous*. One time she even rode into the sanctuary on a motorcycle to attract attention to the church."

"What?"

"Listen, that's just the half of it. Aimee hated the sound of change clinking in the offering plate, so she was known to lower clotheslines down from the ceiling for people to pin dollar bills to.

"Aimee also tried to fake her own kidnapping so she could run off with her radio engineer. More than a month later, she 'miraculously' reappeared and was warmly greeted by her church upon her return.

"But out of her (very human, to say the least) leadership, a whole denomination has sprung up called the Foursquare Church, which now has thousands of churches as part of its network. And this church we're attending today is where it all began."

Then, we turned a corner. "Look, there it is!"

"Where? Is it next to that sports arena?"

"No, Cas. It *is* that sports arena."

"Cool," Casper said. "I like it already."

"Why's that?"

"Well, it's right here, in the heart of the city. Amidst the poor and suffering. To me, that makes more sense than building a campus out in the middle of nowhere. Put your church where people need it most. I also like the fact that there appears to be a very solid mix of people heading inside."

"This church is seriously multicultural," I said. "African American young people and a lot of Hispanics as well." This was the first time we'd seen this mix of ethnicities in church.

"You know what?" I said. "If the Dream Center had been in existence when I signed up with Jesus some thirty-five years ago, I probably would've gone to church here."

Casper asked me why.

"I started my Christian career in a seventies version of this kind of church. Hundreds of passionate young people fired up with revolutionary-like fervor gathered to pray, sing, shout, jump, and dance every Sunday."

"Yeah, and look at all these people. It's kind of like what we experienced in the parking lot at Saddleback, where thousands of people were all headed to the same destination. Except here, it feels like the people are a little more connected."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's like it's more organic; these people appear to be walking to church from their homes, not from their Hummers. They greet each other from across the street. It doesn't seem as much like a church service as it does a neighborhood event . . . at least from the outside."

"It's the Pentecostal Church vibe you're feeling," I explained.

"So will we see some healing and speaking in tongues today?"

"Let's see what happens," I said, hoping nothing too weird would take place, while the ghosts of my Pentecostal past whispered, why not?

We took seats in the balcony, where we'd be able to get a better view. Casper immediately picked up a scent unfamiliar to me.

"Wow! A fog machine—and check out that camera crane!"

"Where?"

"Right next to the laser lights on the left-hand side of the stage."

When the band took the stage, the house started rocking! The young musicians looked very sharp, not only in person but on the eight-by-ten stadiumlike projection screens.

Casper asked, "Is this Sunday morning or *Saturday Night Live*?"

I asked Casper what he thought about the music.

"Well, I find myself reflecting on my assumptions when I go see bands in clubs, and I wonder if they're applicable here."

I asked him to elaborate.

"Well, for instance, what goes on backstage? I doubt they're partying with groupies or anything. One, it's church, and two, it's Sunday morning; but then I think, we *are* in L.A."

I told him that when the band is backstage its members are probably praying for God to help them deliver a good worship service.

"Well, it looks like their prayers were answered. Everyone is pretty fired up."

"What do you think of the message in the music?" I asked.

"Kind of the same thing as we experienced at Saddleback, Jim: 'We will stand up and fight and leave this world someday.' Frankly, all the language about fighting makes me nervous. I understand I'm in church; I understand that everyone here worships Jesus; but the way they're saying his name over and over and over again, until it's just another word or—hey, are those guys ushers or bouncers?"

Casper pointed to a couple of heavyset guys standing near the stairs.

"They're ushers," I told him. "But they're also probably ex-cons—guys who would make good bouncers. I know this church pulls a lot of people from the community to do work here; they also work with people out of prison, giving them a hand up as it were."

"Well, I have nothing but respect for that . . . and for those huge guys, too."

The band started with about three up-tempo numbers and then segued into a raise-your-hands ballad.

"Get 'em fired up, then drop the ballad," said Casper.

And then it was time to meet the preacher.

"We're soooooo glad you're here today; something spectacular is going to happen to you, I just know it." It was Pastor Matthew Barnett, the thirtysomething pastor of the Dream Center who took the stage as the professionally prerecorded video announcements went to black.

"He kind of looks like Ryan Seacrest—or maybe that's just what I'm thinking because of the *American Idol* vibe of the band," said Casper. I was starting to see how much Casper and I were on the same page.

"Let's welcome the teams from Texas, Kansas, and Colorado," the pastor said.

"There are teams here?" asked Casper.

"Yeah, but not sports teams; these are teams of people who have come to volunteer to help with the Dream Center."

Pastor Matt then invited new visitors to explore the facilities, and even to use the gym.

"They have a gym?"

"Yeah, and they also have a lot of beds here to help the homeless and drug addicted."

"Wow," said Casper, appearing once more to be genuinely impressed. I could tell that this particular revelation addressed his ongoing concern for a call to action in the church. And it was about to get even better.

"And remember to come to church the rest of this week; we're hosting the L.A. Pastors' School," Pastor Matt exhorted. "You don't want to miss this week; it will be *the greatest week* of your life. We'll be taking pastors out on the street because that is the main thing they need. They've had enough success principles.

We're going to take them out to meet people on the street and to help kids who are poor. *That's* what changes pastors more than anything else: getting them out there on the streets and letting them share the blessing."

"That's a call to action!" said Casper. "He's talking about being on Hollywood Boulevard, helping people. The church is in a poor neighborhood, too, which is where Jesus would like it, right, Jim? This is closer to what I was looking for—some kind of call to action. These guys are actually helping people, and the diversity of the attendees seems to be pretty representative of the urban area where they are located.

"I can relate to this part of the church, but I don't understand why they need to do the big show. Why don't they just help people and call it good? Why the fog machine, camera crane, multiple screens, PowerPoint, and the lights, lights, lights?"

"Casper, look at all the young people," I said. "Do you think they would show up if there wasn't a big show?"

"Okay, but is that what Jesus told you guys to do? Put on a Christian rock show that's visually and sonically indistinguishable from a non-Christian rock show, change the words, and call it church? Is that pulled from the Bible?"

I had been wondering when Casper would get around to asking me about how Jesus was connected to church, but I didn't expect it quite so early in our project.

"Jesus didn't really say much of anything about how we ought to do church. He did talk a lot, however, about how to *be* the church, and what to *do*—like helping the less fortunate and those who are poor in spirit. But Casper (and this is going to probably come as a shock to you), as far as I understand it anyway, Jesus never intended for the institution we call Christianity to form into a religion."

"Jesus never meant for Christianity to become a *religion?*" Casper seemed truly surprised. "Jim, I've seen enough TV preachers to know that what you're saying is nothing short of heresy."

"Jesus mostly talked about the Kingdom of God coming to Earth, and he told his followers to pray for it to come to Earth just as it is in heaven. But he personally only mentions the word *church* twice."

"Hey, I'm not even a believer, yet I feel somehow inclined to burn you at the stake!"

I told Casper I appreciated the thought and the kind word, but that, as an atheist, his tongue-in-cheek outrage was misdirected since he is in even more trouble than a so-called heretic.

"Well, our *heresies* aside, I think the light show and all that, for me anyway, does less to attract and connect me than to disconnect me. But I'm still not convinced when you say that Christianity was not meant to be a religion. It's the biggest religion in America, right?"

I thought I could kill two birds with one stone here and explain to Casper that in reality, his view and mine were somewhat intertwined. "Jesus came to start a movement that would advance his mission of bringing reality, sanity, and love back to planet Earth. But, to make a very long story short—and remember, Casper, this is only one view of Christian history—this plan got hijacked early on by some religionists who managed to institutionalize the movement. The result of those efforts is largely what you and I have come to think of as Christianity.

"And not only that, Cas, but a lot of what happens at church is really just cultural stuff. Preachers don't usually call it that, but churches adapt to the culture they identify with and take on the communication style they feel most comfortable with. The Dream

Center is a hybrid of classic Pentecostalism mixed with L.A. street culture and ethnic diversity. It's Christianity, L.A. style."

"Interesting," said Casper. "Because I just heard the pastor tell how this church is 'not like *religious churches*. . . . We go out in the street; we work with the people.' And when he said that, I thought, *Well, explain the thousands of dollars spent on that camera crane alone. How does that help you work with people?* I can't really tell what this church stands for, Jim. Is it helping people or growing the organization? Is it a community or a religion?

"Each church seems to want to say how it's different, yet the basic show is the same: sing, preach, pray, collect money. Sure, the style, the way they go about doing it has a different feel, look, and sound in each place, but—again, speaking as an atheist—for one to have a connection to God seems so astounding in and of itself. Why give it such a formulaic treatment?"

"I hear you, Casper."

Our conversation was suddenly interrupted when Pastor Mike Rogers, who Casper pointed out had a "Larry the Cable Guy kind of aura," took the stage. His job was to deliver the call to offering, and he did it well.

"This world—our bills—tell us we're broke," said Mike. "But we gotta heed God's Word. I was in the hospital getting all kinds of bad news, but God said I was okay."

Then Pastor Mike paused dramatically, looked at the audience, and slowly asked, "Now, whose report you gonna believe?" The crowd went wild.

And then he said, plain and simple, "The reason God healed me was because I gave." And the buckets—literally white plastic two-gallon buckets—were passed. *I could use a couple of those on one of my painting jobs*, I thought.

"That's a pretty direct appeal, Jim. I mean, the guy basically said, 'Give money, and God rewards you.' No denying that logic."

I told Casper that in my experience, Pentecostals seemed to be especially committed to making that connection, and that it probably is more of a sociological function than a truly spiritual one.

"Care to expand on that one, Jim?"

I did. "Pentecostalism has grown over the past one hundred years primarily among the poor and socially marginalized. As that group matured they began to look for symbols of God's blessing. Money has always been on the table as a sign from God."

"I know I feel a bit better when I have money than when I don't," Casper interrupted.

"Exactly. Pentecostals appeal very directly to human needs and hold out the hope of a God who cares about the here and now, which may explain why it is not only the fastest growing segment of Christianity, but also the fastest growing social movement in human history, with over 100 million adherents."

After the offering was collected, Pastor Matt called some dads to the stage in honor of Father's Day. Most had stories about how God had granted them longevity and blessed them with healthy, happy children.

A nineteen-year-old dad told how he had come to Christ and quit drugs, and how his belief was affirmed when God used him to help a man walk again. The crowd took that story in stride with the others—but not Casper, the sharp-minded and on-duty atheist. Unaccustomed to the casual language Christians often use to discuss the supernatural, he was brought up short by this comment.

"Did he just say he healed someone who couldn't walk?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Well then, why in the world is he wasting time hanging out in this building? Doesn't he know that there are thousands of people in this city alone who need his touch? And why does this building have handicapped ramps if one of the congregants has the power to heal those who can't walk? How can people here just nod their heads to a story like that? To me, that is truly astounding! This man can heal people: Get out there, then! There are people who need your help!"

I took Casper's monologue into consideration. Here is something that we churchgoers often take for granted. But to nonbelievers, a comment like "God healed me" is on par with saying, "I grew wings and flew around the world." All I could say at the time was "Good point, Cas." Fortunately, Pastor Matt saved me from having to answer Casper's very complicated questions (I'm sure you know the feeling), and soon we were both back to taking notes on our laptops.

The sermon was about Father's Day and included seven challenges for fathers. They were:

1. Be patient. Don't be too demanding at home.
2. Be predictable. Be consistent in your behaviors with your family.
3. Be practical. Don't play favorites. (For this, he used the example of Joseph and his coat of many colors as an example of how *not* to be practical.)
4. Be present. Be home as much as possible. (He used the story of Chuck Swindoll Jr., who said his dad was "never there for him," explaining how the family suffers when a man puts religion before family.)

5. Be positive. Lift people up with your words, don't put them down. "Cursing is not bad words; it's saying bad things." (Casper said this *really* resonated with him.)
6. Be pliable. Your kids will not be copies of you, so be flexible with who they are.
7. Love life with your kids. Show them that life is bigger than their block, and that the biggest thrill in life is not Magic Mountain but serving God (though a surprise trip to Magic Mountain is in no way a bad thing).

As we walked to our car, I asked Casper about the sermon.

"I really liked it," he said, much to my surprise.

"Why did you like it?" I asked.

"Well, maybe he caught me on a good day—it is Father's Day after all, and I'm a dad myself. And the messages—rather, the challenges—he relayed were not entirely faith dependent. Some of this stuff I'm actually taking home with me."

"Was there anything you didn't like?"

"You know me, Jim: I'm always able to answer both sides of the question. I didn't like the way the pastor got choked up, as if on cue. It was almost a deal breaker for me. It seemed so contrived, so manipulative. I wondered, *Who is that stuff for? The congregants? Himself?* It's certainly not for first-time visitors like myself. But you know what I realized? The theatrical catch in his voice may be more about being in L.A. than being in church."