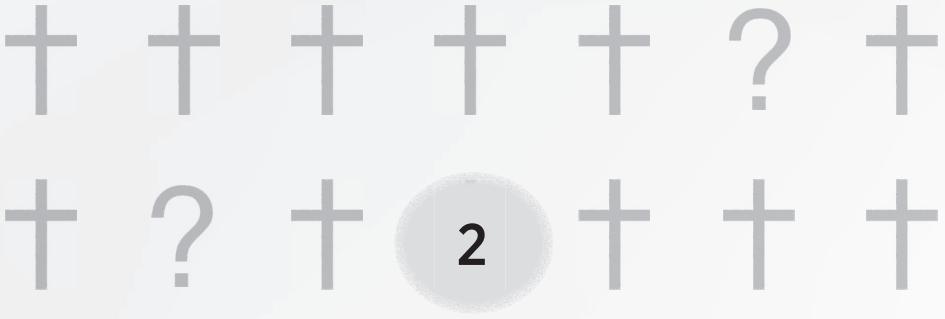


THE  
**UNSAVED  
CHRISTIAN**

REACHING CULTURAL  
CHRISTIANITY  
WITH THE GOSPEL

DEAN INSERRA



# Religion without Salvation: ?

## Characteristics of Cultural Christianity

Do not flatter yourselves of being good enough, because you are morally so; because you go to church, say the prayers, and take the sacrament, therefore you think no more required; alas, you are deceiving your own souls.

—GEORGE WHITEFIELD

Brad and Sophie Camp are, by most standards, good people. They do things as a family and try to keep their kids involved in various activities. They are considering trading their SUV for a minivan, something Sophie said she would never do. They try their best to have dinner as a family when the kids' schedules permit it, and when the family dinners actually happen, they always hold hands around the dinner table and say "the blessing." When it's her turn to pick the prayer, their four-year-old daughter always picks the "Johnny Appleseed" song: *"Oh the Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord for giving me the things I need, the sun and the rain*

*and the apple seed, the Lord is good to me.*” She learned this “prayer” at her faith-based preschool where she goes twice a week while Sophie heads to the gym for her yoga class.

On Facebook, a recent family photo on the front steps of a church building has more than one hundred likes and dozens of comments about their beautiful family. The day before, they had gone shopping to get the girls new matching dresses for church. The nine-year-old wasn’t thrilled about having to match her baby sister, but Sophie told her she could change clothes as soon as they got home. The Camps are in their midthirties and go to church only about once every three months, because they are just so busy. The extended family on Brad’s side has a beach house and they try and get down to it for the weekend whenever the weather is nice. It is also a real hassle to get all the kids out the door on a Sunday morning. (Miraculously, they are able to get everyone ready for school each morning, but nobody has ever brought that up.) When they are in town, they try hard to be at church because it means a lot to Papa and Nana, Sophie’s parents.

Papa is a third-generation member of the church and has taught in the same adult “Sunday school” classroom for thirty years. He sings in the choir every now and then but doesn’t like some of the new music they’ve been doing since the church hired the “new guy.” Papa serves on several committees at the church and never misses a Sunday. Nana’s entire social life revolves around the church, and she is always so thrilled to see the grandkids there so she can show them off to her friends. She and the other ladies teaching children’s Sunday school tell the girls that they changed their mom’s diaper in the nursery when she was a baby.

Church is a “good thing” in the Camps’ eyes, especially for the kids, since it is a place where they learn good moral lessons. And when they finally do make it, they admittedly feel good about

themselves—and it gives the kids a chance to wear their monogrammed “church clothes.” Being seen as the family that doesn’t take the kids to church would be embarrassing to Nana, and the passive-aggressive comments at family gatherings would be unbearable. Even when the Camps lived in a different state for Brad’s job, Nana would ask Sophie every Monday on the phone whether she “took my grandkids to church.” It drove Sophie crazy. Now, being back in the same town, she can’t even lie about their church attendance. Attending a different church than Nana and Papa’s in the same town would be worse than not attending at all.

Plus the experience is comfortable. During the worship service, the new minister speaks for twenty minutes about loving others. Jesus is portrayed as a great example of this, since He helped the poor (the church’s Habitat for Humanity ministry gets a shameless plug). The pastor doesn’t talk about sin, repentance, or the blood of Jesus, but gives a very inspiring message, as usual. After church, the Camps always head to Papa and Nana’s for lunch, and the kids can’t wait to change into their regular clothes. Brad and Sophie have found that they fight less if they occasionally give this four-hour sacrifice to Sophie’s parents, as it doesn’t seem to impact the rest of their normal day-to-day routine.

This is the life of a typical Cultural Christian family.

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## **WHO’S FAKING: A QUICK LOOK AT OTHER TYPES OF UNSAVED CHRISTIANS**

Not all “unsaved Christians” are Cultural Christians. While my focus in the book is going to be on cultural and nominal Christianity, I will take a moment to identify other kinds of people

who appear to be believers but, according to Scripture, are not. Two primary kinds of unsaved Christians presented in the Bible are:

• **The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing:** Jesus warned His followers to "be on your guard against false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravaging wolves" (Matt. 7:15). Burk Parsons reminds Christians that "false teachers creep into the church not because they look like false teachers but because they look like angels."<sup>1</sup> This is a completely different animal than nominal Christianity. Whereas a Cultural Christian might avoid serious church commitment or think it's unnecessary, the false teacher often digs deep into a community and can pose a serious threat to the church by manipulating and misguiding people. Scripture warns that false teachers:

- Create division (Rom. 16:17)
- Deceive with flattery (Rom. 16:18)
- Appease people by departing from sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:3)
- Lead people astray (Matt. 24:11–13)
- Take people captive through bad philosophy and theology (Col. 2:8)
- Seem to have spiritual power and authority to deceive even the elect (Matt. 24:24)
- Are bringing upon themselves a swift destruction (2 Peter 2:1)

• **The Hypocrite:** This is a person who wears the mask of a Christian in order to be seen and admired by others, with no desire to actually follow or worship Christ (Matt.

6:5–6). This person is exclusively external, and only concerned with having the “veneer of public virtue to cover the rot of private vice.”<sup>2</sup> John Blanchard calls hypocrisy “nothing better than skin deep holiness.”<sup>3</sup> While the false prophet might be seeking to deceive others to a false gospel, the hypocrite seeks to deceive others for their own pride or appearance. Like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, these people often have a skewed, elitist view of their own morality, yet are unmistakably missing the fruit of a heart changed by God. This kind of unsaved Christianity is perhaps more individualistic, but this, too, is different from nominal Christianity, as the hypocrite is likely aware of his own moral dissonance.

Entire books could be written on each of these unsaved “Christians,” but it is important to specify that these are not the groups I will be discussing in this book. Cultural Christians are those who genuinely believe they are on good terms with God because of church familiarity, a generic moral code, political affiliation, a religious family heritage, etc. Cultural Christianity is largely based on *confusion*, whereas the hypocrite and the false teacher have a “Christianity” based on *deceit*.

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## Middle School Awakening

My exposure to Cultural Christianity began primarily with my own upbringing. I grew up going to church every Sunday, unless I was sick or out of town. Our family would say a memorized prayer before eating together at the dining room table each night: “God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food.” This type of

prayer is a nightly tradition for many Cultural Christian families with young children. I owned a Bible, which was given to me after my confirmation at the neighborhood Methodist church, but I don't remember reading it. I knew about Noah and the Ark, David and Goliath, and that Jesus helped a lot of people.

In middle school, a pretty girl invited me to a Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) "huddle meeting." I played sports and believed in God, and did I mention she was pretty? So I went. FCA was a great time, and I went every week to the huddle meeting with other classmates. We would hear something the kids called a "testimony" from athletes who played football for the Florida State Seminoles, and I thought it was the coolest.

As the school year went on, it was time for our fall retreat. I had never heard of one of those things. It was a one-day event in a camp-type setting held about an hour from where I lived. The thought of getting on a bus and spending the day with my friends and playing in sports competitions sounded like my type of thing, and I signed up as quickly as my parents agreed to let me go. After dodgeball, kickball, and some relay races, we had our assembly time. The speaker was a large man who had played professional football, and I remember thinking his muscles were bigger than Hulk Hogan's. He told really funny stories and then starting talking about our need to trust in Jesus, that He died for our sins and rose from the grave.

Up until this FCA retreat, if anyone had asked me if I was a Christian, I would have said yes without hesitation. But if you had asked me why I claimed to be a Christian (nobody ever had), trusting in Jesus and that He died for me would not have been my answer. And as for sins? I didn't really have a concept of my sinfulness. I got in trouble every now and then, but I figured the real



bad guys were people who were in jail and the Russian tag team I would watch each Saturday in pro wrestling.

The speaker gave what I now know is called an “invitation” to respond to his presentation of the gospel. At the time, I had never been to an event where the speaker had asked anyone to “come forward” and trust in Jesus Christ. He counted to three and asked people to come forward who wanted to be saved from their sins by “giving their lives to Jesus Christ.” The preacher talked about the blood of Jesus and heaven and hell. He told the packed basketball gymnasium of middle school students that we needed to ask God to forgive us for sinning against Him, we needed to repent of our sins, and become followers of Jesus.

Dozens of students stood up and walked forward to meet with FCA staff members to give their lives to Jesus. I didn’t move, because as far as I was concerned, I was a Christian. Sin, Jesus’ blood, and my need for repentance were new things to my ears, but I was fairly certain I was okay. My reasoning was simple: I believed in God, I wasn’t of any other religion (like Judaism or Islam), I went to church on Sundays, and I was in FCA. I had never thought about trusting in Jesus because nobody had ever told me I needed to do so, but I figured since I went to church already, I was fine and probably had already done all those things.

Then something happened that opened my eyes, truly freaked me out, and changed my life. The speaker said, “There is one more thing I want to share for some of you still in your seats.” He then read the words of Jesus from Matthew 7:21–23.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in



your name, and do many miracles in your name?’ Then I will announce to them, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers!’” (Matt. 7:21–23)

I don’t remember his commentary exactly, but he shouted that there were people in the room who went to church, came from good families, said a prayer before meals, but had never trusted in Jesus Christ. “You are no more a Christian than someone who doesn’t believe in God at all, and that will lead you straight to hell! God will not let sin go unpunished. You need forgiveness for your sins, and only Jesus can give you that forgiveness because He took on the punishment that you deserved, even though He had never sinned.”

I know that’s not always the best way to share the gospel, but it certainly got through to me. He gave a second invitation, and I believed he was speaking directly to me. I walked down to the front completely freaked out. I had thought hell was for really bad people who committed crimes like murder, not for someone like me. It is where evil dictators went, not middle-schoolers from nice families who went to church and had a picture in the Olan Mills church directory to prove it. This muscular, enthusiastic preacher

was talking about a Jesus with whom I was unfamiliar. “The gospel” in my mind was a kind of music where people wore choir robes and clapped. I had no idea it was about Jesus dying on the cross for me, or that His death even mattered. I walked forward,

prayed to trust in Christ with a staff member named Walter, and I was angry. Don’t get me wrong, I experienced joy over this great news about my sins being forgiven, but I was upset. How

**How was it that I had been to church my entire life and nobody had ever told me this news?**

was it that I had been to church my entire life and nobody had ever told me this news?

## Getting Uncomfortable

My story is far from unique. We can trace its roots back to Matthew 7:21–23, and unfortunately, that “family tree” is still spreading today. Being a self-identified Christian for cultural reasons, rather than the good news of the gospel, is commonplace in America.

This widespread complacency and ignorance should call the church to action.

Let’s circle back to the fictitious Camp family.

If asked about their faith, they wouldn’t be uncomfortable, but would respond with answers about going to church and being good people. Church is a place where basic social expectations are met in the name of morals, family, and tradition. This is understandable, since the idea of church isn’t linked much to belief in Jesus or any demand the Scriptures would place on those who claim to be Christians. It is very important to the Camps that they be viewed as good people, the way they portray themselves on social media. They want to be seen as a well-rounded American family that goes to church when they can. The Camps are not defensive or awkward when it comes to questions about their beliefs. They certainly believe in God and, as far as they are concerned, they always have and always will.

But if the conversation moved to questions about Jesus, salvation, and the gospel, it would be a different story. They might nod

**Being a self-identified Christian for cultural reasons, rather than the good news of the gospel, is commonplace in America.**

and smile, but suddenly they'd feel awkward because they would be clueless about what any of those questions about Jesus and the gospel have to do with them personally. They already see themselves as Christians. "Salvation" is something only the crazy guy on the street corner talks about. It is for the extreme people, the weird religious types.

One might assume that the most tragic component of the Camps' story is their cluelessness about the gospel. But there is something deeper to their sudden awkwardness in a theological conversation that makes it very difficult to present the gospel: the tragic reality that the Camps don't believe they actually need Jesus. They have had plenty of exposure to Christian lingo, they were at church as recently as Easter Sunday, they know about Jesus, and their "faith is important" to them. This beautiful, loving, moral, American family is "Christian" without Christ.

When we think of unreached people groups, we envision intrepid missionaries taking the gospel to a place where the name of Jesus has never been spoken. But many American pastors are faced with a similarly daunting task: to bring Jesus to a place where He is admired but not worshiped, where God is a grandpa in the sky, where many of their congregants are "good people" who don't know they need to be saved. Like their New Testament counterparts from Matthew 7, they know religion, but don't realize that their religion is the very thing from which they need to be saved. I try to imagine the faces of those calling "Lord, Lord" when Jesus told them that they wouldn't be going to heaven. Their religious résumés were something to admire, yet Jesus wasn't impressed—He was outraged. Rather than calling them good people, He called them "lawbreakers."

To modern-day Cultural Christians, just like the religious people in Matthew 7, the idea of being "saved" is unnecessary.

After all, they're good people who live moral lives. Cultural Christians have faith and they don't consider themselves atheists, but their god is a generic deity rather than the God of the Bible. My friend Matt back in the seminary parking lot would have called them "over-churched and under-reached." They could also be called "almost-Christians." But sadly, an almost-Christian is as outright lost as an atheist who wouldn't go to church on his best day, even if Nana insisted. Like the fictional Camp family, and like I did at thirteen at the FCA retreat, these people need Jesus. But they are so difficult to reach because they believe they already have Him. He is just a Jesus without a gospel, and that is no Jesus at all.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

- What is the spiritual temperature of your own heart? Your own household? Your local church? Your community?
- Do you live in a place where Jesus is admired but not worshiped?

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