

REVISED *and* EXPANDED EDITION

# **NO MORE CHRISTIAN NICE GUY**

When Being Nice—Instead of Good—  
Hurts Men, Women, and Children

PAUL COUGHLIN



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Paul Coughlin, No More Christian Nice Guy

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*To Sandy.*

For your support, encouragement,  
and more rejuvenation than you know.

*To Elliot, Garrett, and Abigail Coughlin.*

You and Mom are at the core of this conspiracy of good.

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# **The Good Guy Rebellion: Phase Two**

Manhood is the social barrier that societies must erect against entropy, human enemies, the forces of nature, time, and all the human weaknesses that endanger group life.

David D. Gilmore

A true gentleman—a chivalrous man—is just a bit more savage than most people imagine. . . . A man who is not roused to combat evil is no gentleman.

Brad Miner

Ever hear something so startling that it fails to startle? Wonder if you really heard it? The words haunt me still.

“Don’t do anything heroic.”

That’s what my former pastor said on a khaki, easy-breezy Sunday. He actually said it out loud and in public—without shame or regret. He said it with all the confidence that comes with being

at your post for far too long, for being out of touch with how real men are supposed to live in real time to the real glory of their God that should create some kind of real adventure to live. Yet I know that to him and many like him, that's just Hollywood talk. Telling your congregation to be un-heroic, I believe, is up there with adultery: It should get you removed from the pulpit. I know something about a man who committed some of the most heroic actions imaginable and beyond our imagination. And we are called to emulate him. To me, he's the greatest hero who ever lived. In my mind, those words are damned, a form of infidelity.

Those four profane words sailed over our heads that forgetful Sunday morning without objection and followed by weak coffee. I know because I looked around like an owl that nearly pulled off the perfect 360-head spin, like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist* minus the chunky split-pea soup. From my panoramic viewpoint, his comment didn't even register on our spiritual rector scale, and why would it among nice people who largely go to church to flee the world, not redeem it?

He told his entire congregation that in the face of danger and adversity, do not commit acts of courage or display a will of self-sacrifice for some greater good. Do not commit acts of moral excellence, he told us, but even more damning, followed to its logical conclusion, shun the greatest of all commandments.

We the admonished were told to stay away from the rough-and-tumble and heated side of *love*, where action, power, and purpose live. The kind of courage-love that rescues the needy, protects the vulnerable, and makes nations weep from gratitude and awe. He told us that this expression of disruptive love isn't necessary for those who follow, or claim to follow, God's only Son.

Heroes act while cowards chat. They make up a good portion of the exalted doers of God's will instead of the scorned talkers that Jesus' brother James wrote about. They are the minority who move past reason and emotion into the life-changing, history-making realm of action, providing purpose, significance, meaning, and other traits that make our lives count.

Having crisscrossed this nation and other countries for the last ten years since the first release of this book, I'm very glad to say that the Spirit of Anti-Hero that this pastor represents does not possess all of our pulpits. I have met many unsung heroes—bold, loving, and wise spiritual leaders whose names will likely never appear in the headlines before their obituaries. They do commit acts of moral excellence, and they fight like Christians, with courage, love, and truth. They do this and more without taking spiritual selfies so others can talk about how wonderful they are. I'm grateful to know them and count them among my friends and brothers.

They, too, speak out about the dangers of niceness. As Kip Jacob, senior pastor of SouthLake Church, located in a suburb outside Portland, Oregon, said, "One of the things about the suburbs is that we're nice. I did a study of the word *nice*. It comes from the Latin word meaning 'to ignore.' We are good at ignoring."<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, what I heard that Sunday is not rare either. There *is* a Spirit of Anti-Hero among us. Created as an extension of our fallen will and desire, it worships at the altar of the status quo, lusts for rigid certainty in all things, and cherishes numbing comfort and security. But what this spirit really loves is what's nice. We want pleasant, sweet, comely—and we will attack anything that threatens this snugly security blanket, including the real Jesus, who thank God was no angel. This spirit fears change, including real spiritual growth, which is rarely peaceful at the outset. This spirit must have been on the mind of Sigmund Freud, one of the greatest foes of Christianity and about whom much of *Mere Christianity* was written to refute, when he coined the derogatory term "wish fulfillment," which describes how people project their wishes (not the truth) as to what God and faith is really about in order to make their lives nicer but not better.

This spirit, this orientation, temptation, way of looking at life, zeitgeist—call it what you want—is wounding men in the deepest part of who they are: their God-made male soul and spirit. It's especially destructive to a certain kind of man who is already

prone to living dangerously safe and small, a kind of man hardly understood within our churches, and the kind of man who needs a very different spiritual prescription in order to live a loving and abundant life. I call him Christian Nice Guy (CNG), and he's everywhere. I was once counted among this legion until undergoing needed but reluctant soul work. Such men are made, not born, for reasons explained later.

Most sermons to men, much like most sitcoms, treat them as if they are dangerously immature or about to commit a violent felony. They don't minister to the CNGs who populate our pews. Such men don't overreact. They underreact to the spiritual drama that surrounds them on earth and in heaven. They aren't the overheated among us, the kind who cut you off in traffic then give you the bird, but the underheated: low-wattage, tepid, timid, fearful, anxious. But they're really nice. They worship at the altar of other people's approval, and the worst message they can hear is don't do anything heroic. That's like putting a stiff drink in front of an alcoholic.

There's a fire in the belly of most men, or at least there was at one time, as boys. For centuries sages have struggled to describe its origin and purpose. Plato wrote, "We are fired into life with a madness that comes from the gods and which would have us believe that we can have a great love, perpetuate our own seed, and contemplate the divine."

Remember when you felt this odd kindling within the blacksmith of your soul, probably as a child or young man, probably at play and outdoors with your body aglow from either heat or cold, creating, dreaming, dirty, sweating, thirsty, then doing something you were afraid to do but did it anyway? When you became a Christian and were enveloped by contemporary church precepts and expectations, did this cosmic spark, which we hold to be self-evident as true, good, and beautiful, grow or fade? Can you honestly say it's still alive, and if so, what noble endeavor can you point to as proof? Holding down a job and having a few rug rats? Heathens do that, too.



A man who stoked this fire hot and red was Jack London, who wrote *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* over a century ago. In a wonderful series on London's life, Brett and Kate McKay, at their Art of Manliness website, recounted how London pursued the "tang of living." He "was the type of man to have commanded other men. [He had] eyes to inflame youth, inspire men, madden women," wrote Frank Pease. The McKays quote another contemporary of London's, sculptor Finn Frolich, who said, "I never saw a man in all my life with more magnetism, beautiful magnetism. If a preacher could have the love in his make up, and the life . . . this whole world would be religious."

London's credo was said to be:

I would rather be ashes than dust!  
I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant  
blaze than it should be stifled by dry-rot.  
I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in  
magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet.  
The function of man is to live, not to exist.  
I shall not waste my days in trying to prolong them.  
I shall use my time.

London, like the Hebrew prophets, reveled in reminding his friends that "we are dying, cell by cell, every minute of our lives."

[London] subscribed to the maxim that "satisfaction with existing things is damnation." He referred to the journey of life as an "adventure path. . . ." His second wife, Charmian, believed that his "soaring idealism, which later, combined with an enduring practicality, made of him an extraordinary entity both as Doer and Thinker."<sup>2</sup>

Some men manage against the odds to keep the fire within stoked despite what they hear from culture at large and church culture in particular. It's a heated dream, a kind of restless leg syndrome of the soul and spirit that longs to do something grand. Build. Move.

Lift. Raise. Fight. Redeem. It makes us want to build bridges, not decorate them. This God-made fire is designed to keep us molten, pugnacious, and yearning to donate life to others. This male gut-fire that is real but difficult to fully describe is a gift to humanity when seasoned and coached by God's very Spirit, which converts it from raw power into refined strength. It can be a nightmare when it's not.

This fire in the belly bestowed upon men is a heavy gift meant to be spent on others. It's designed to burn us hot on our way to good deeds, but also depletes us, messing with our golf game. It's like the booster rocket that gets the Space Shuttle going before it flies under its own power. Ideally it lifts others through muscular expressions of faith and love in action. At least that was the plan. We've gotten way off course, and this book tries to get our true bearing. This fire, like all fire, brings life and also takes it. Some can't tell the difference.

Enter *No More Christian Nice Guy* roughly a decade ago. I was invigorated by playing my part in setting captives free from the CNG malady, but ill-prepared for the suffering that followed. It's difficult to explain how controversial this book was when it fell from the sky from a no-name guy from a city you have to search a map twice to find.

I still remember the blistering verdict of one literary agent: "Not only is your book unpublishable, it should never be published." Those words were as searing as what an old girlfriend told me while breaking up, a line I have won many contests across the globe for The Worst Breakup Line of All Time: "You just don't have what it takes to be my boyfriend." Perhaps I'll send that agent a copy of this book.

Many want to know what has happened since its first release. I quietly lost some very nice friends, was labeled a troublemaker, and won the ire of two groups that hate each other politically but share a philosophical tethering and bias against the hairier gender: the 1970s'-love-the-one-you're-with hippies who still dot our nation and rage against The Man, and the sweet-Jesus-never-

harmless-a-fly, mellow-yellow pastors who, despite the overwhelming evidence, still contend that Jesus was the sweetest guy to ever skip across ancient soil, singing love songs with snow-white doves circling his to-die-for hair and patting dear children on the head, sometimes pinching their adorable cheeks like a milky-fleshed grandpa. Some of these pastors were liberal, the kind who think that somehow the gospel can be spread through interpretive dance and jazz hands, but most were on the conservative side, which surprised me then.

Both view holders have a knee-jerk and dangerous response to the use of force and will, essential to a life well-lived, and both believe what is wrong with the world is men and the domino-like harm they create. They are both right to point out the atrocities of male aggression. And both are naïve and dangerous because of their inability to point out the quiet atrocities created when men don't use their innate power for what is true, good, and beautiful.

On the upside, *No More Christian Nice Guy* has saved people's faith, fortified the faith of others, helped thwart suicide, saved and strengthened many marriages, and launched many dreams and aspirations. "Your book saved my life," has been a common email subject line. It gave a young man in Czechoslovakia the courage to ask the woman of his dreams to marry him. They are expecting another child. It gave Jason Wilson, a powerful African-American leader in Detroit, the spiritual clarity to help rear disciplined, loving, and courageous African-American boys through a Christianized martial arts program. It gave a young Frenchman the inspiration and courage to become a missionary.

While speaking at a New Canaan Society conference in Monterey, California, I ran into fellow speaker Dr. John Townsend. To my delight, this author of the famed *BOUNDARIES* series told me he gave the original version of the book to his male employees because of how prevalent the Christian Nice Guy problem is. Interestingly, I received more requests to speak in charismatic churches than any other form of modern evangelical expression. This is surprising because I'm about as charismatic as Bob Newhart.

“Would you do it again?” I’ve been asked. In the words of James Joyce, a thousand times yes.

The one improvement I’m glad to see since this book’s initial release is that our culture is throwing fewer body blows at men for being men. Sadly, that is one of the few improvements I’ve witnessed.

I wish I could say it’s better for Jesus. He’s still all tambourine no lead guitar, still colorless, odorless, spiritually khaki, and ridiculously pleasant. That caricature leads to a slow, comfortable, numbing kind of death on so many levels for all, but especially for men. Nice Jesus must die because this imposter cannot lead to life, love, or real salvation from our own sordid ego and own sordid appetites. That Jesus cannot tether us to a robust commitment to reality, where men are meant to struggle, live, and mature. As David Shatz writes, “Turmoil and sacrifice, not comfort and placidity, are, by divine edict, the hallmarks of authentic religious life.”<sup>3</sup>

For many church leaders, particularly a decade ago, they just couldn’t get past the use of one word: Nice, as in, “What’s so wrong with being *nice*?” It’s a sacred word to them and nearly all who attend church where “He’s such a nice man,” is the greatest compliment possible. Yet we fail to recognize that the word is never used in the Bible to describe the character of God, his Holy Spirit, or his Son. Sometimes *nice* is a four-letter word.

As Led Zeppelin sang, sometimes words have two meanings: their dictionary description, and their connotation, which can be more relevant and penetrating regarding what people really think and value. It’s more the connotation of “nice” that was in my cross-hairs then and now, a distinction I thought I effectively explained. Historically, to be called a “nice guy” was sometimes an insult because it described one who was weak, ineffective, dainty, and unable to endure much. Like Pastor Jacob in Portland, I believe it’s a willful, intentional ignorance, meaning we’re accountable because someday we may well be judged by the good we *refused* to do.

Still, a genuinely nice person is beneficial in many ways but not good enough for what God requires of us, nor from a level-headed

secular standard either. When we browbeat a child to be “nice,” as well as an adult, what we are really saying is *cause no harm* and even provide some comfort. Amen to that. As an expert in the world of adolescent bullying, how I hope and pray more kids would be nice to one another. But more is required in this world that is sometimes at war against what is true, good, and beautiful—the three transcendent virtues historically cherished by most cultures and certainly by historic Christianity.

Now here is where part of the real rub begins. Nice people actually oppose good people who rock the boat, even when headed toward God’s will. More so, they label them troublemakers before they call them saints. It was nice and pleasant people who killed the prophets of old, who handed Jews over to Nazis, who opposed Martin Luther King Jr.’s efforts to end segregation. And it was seemingly nice people who yelled to Pilate to release the notorious prisoner Barabbas and crucify Jesus instead.<sup>4</sup> Pilate was so dismayed that he asked the crowd twice just to be sure, perhaps giving them time to change their hysterical and prejudiced minds that valued the status quo more than truth.

Christ was not a libertarian operating by the guiding principle of *do no harm*. He never took the Hippocratic oath, but we nice Christians have, thinking we have arrived morally and diminished by a glib and cavalier attitude that often follows. This Warrior of Light took it to the limit, and that limit is liberating love, born of courage and soaked in justice: “He came to proclaim justice to the nations.”<sup>5</sup>

Writes pastor Timothy Keller: “Most people know that Jesus came to bring forgiveness and grace. Less well known is the biblical teaching that a true experience of the grace of Jesus Christ inevitably motivates a man or woman to seek justice in the world.”<sup>6</sup>

Which brings me to an important point: Why would anybody want to read a book born a decade or so ago, perhaps one they have already read?

This revised version is more grown up, having earned some deep, deep wrinkles and scars. I was angry when I wrote the original. I

still am at what I say is a perversion and denaturing of our faith and the nature of men because it leads to untold suffering for others. That is what happens when the strong falter: the weak inevitably suffer, and injustice enters the vacuum and reigns. You will find a lot more about the nature and creation of justice in this revision, because as Cornell West said, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” We American Christians are more known for what we oppose than what we embrace. Love is the greatest embracement. By combatting injustice, we will change what we’re known for. And because justice is a portal experience, it changes us, kicking us out of the nursery spirituality we want so badly. By confronting injustice, we confront ourselves, leading to deep spiritual growth.

Thankfully, there are those in men’s ministry who understand that laboring on behalf of justice is necessary for the male soul. Two of the more dynamic and comprehensive leaders are Kenny Luck and the New Canaan Society. In Kenny’s Every Man Ministries program, justice is part of the “Get Going” phase of spiritual maturity. The New Canaan Society’s slogan is “Live Pure. Speak Truth. Right Wrong. Worship the King.”

I have played a small part in righting this ship. Soon after the release of this book, I started a justice organization because I noticed the book and my speaking engagements got men very spirited and proud to be known for love, faith, and courage. But I also discovered that few had a theater to exercise justice, a source of resistance that leads to spiritual muscles. So I created one called The Protectors, which combats adolescent bullying, the leading form of child abuse in the nation and most likely the world.

I also noticed that there wasn’t a faith-based solution to this form of abuse that stems from profound spiritual ailments, namely contempt and disdain toward others made in the image of God. So we created the only faith-based solution that we knew of at that time. And within three months we had more requests to speak in public schools than private Christian schools.

Yet in order to bring justice, love, compassion, and so much more to children across the globe, I had to actively oppose the Christian

Nice Guy teaching that surrounded and handcuffed me. Isn't that shameful? You will likely need to do the same if you want a real life.

I like to think that the original stayed in the lane of indignation, which is redemptive. But I know that's not true. At times I just let it rip, indicative of my maturity level back then.

The heat between these pages is still there but more focused, hopefully like a laser. The suffering I've experienced since first writing it has led to deeper, hard-fought wisdom, compassion, and grace. Like wine and bourbon, time has brought this revision other characteristics. I hope this and more comes through.

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There is a dirty little secret in publishing that I discovered within the last ten years or so: Most writers have one good theme in them. I didn't know it then, but I was a writer on the trail of something I could smell but couldn't name. I can name that theme now. It's the foundational virtue of courage, part of what the Greeks called *thumos*, one of three fundamental, God-given capacities that combine to create human wholeness and integrity. These three capacities are symbolized in the most popular movie of all time, *The Wizard of Oz*. Unlike the original, this revision puts a special emphasis on the Cowardly Lion. As the band America sang, "Oz never did give nothin' to the Tin Man that he didn't already, already have." The same is true for courage: We already have the ability flaming within us, and God's very spirit gives it to us as well (2 Timothy 1:7). It just needs help being grown and maintained. Much of the height, width, and depth of male life revolves around this elusive trait. This revision puts *thumos* on your spiritual radar like the original.

What you see before you may better be titled "revisited" than "revised." There is a lot of new information here. I even removed an entire chapter I don't think is necessary ten years later. Many topics addressed here are more fleshed out than in the original, and I hope more enjoyable to read as well. In many ways, this book could be called *No More Christian Nice Guy, Phase Two*.

When I first wrote this mini-manifesto, I did not have the benefit of including one especially illuminating report about church culture. In August 2012, the Barna Group released an extensive study about what women who attend church really think and feel but especially want. It's an eye-opening study because women make up the vast majority of pew people in America. The research group concluded that, by far, family trumps faith.

Though women project a calm, confident exterior when it comes to their faith, the research suggests their spiritual lives are rarely their most important source of identity. That role is taken up by the strong priority Christian women place on family. The preeminence of family was most overt for Christian women when it came to naming the highest priority in their lives. More than half (53%) say their highest priority in life is family. By contrast, only one third as many women (16%) rate faith as their top priority.<sup>7</sup>

Comments David Murrow, author of *Why Men Hate Going to Church*:

These stunning survey results give us a clue as to why Christianity is so rapidly changing into a family-centered faith; why Christian culture is feminizing; and why the gender gap in many denominations continues to grow. . . . Modern Christianity is brazenly marketing itself to its core constituency—married women. Without these women the ministry machine cannot function. Women show up. Women volunteer. Women give. Women buy stuff. Christian authors, songwriters, and preachers know the importance of married women—so they work very hard to satisfy their deepest desire. Like dangling a carrot in front of a horse, churches dangle the prospect of relational harmony in front of women to keep them giving and volunteering.<sup>8</sup>

When family trumps all else, including faith, whatever is safe, comfortable, and provides profound certainty—in a word, nice—is “good.” Nice people and nice messages are deemed “Christian,” and other people and messages that threaten this cozy psychological



and spiritual security blanket are considered suspect and dangerous. If we were honest, this would include many of the beloved people throughout the Bible, including Jesus. But we aren't honest. Instead, we circumvent this truth by only reading the sweet parts of Scripture, or what I call the NGB: Nice Guy Bible. It may well be the best-selling translation of all-time and responsible for many, many spiritual cavities. And so self-serving.

Nice is an idol in many churches where growth is very important, and women are key to that growth.

The natural extension of the Gospel of Nice is providing a manicured yard on which our children tread but are forbidden to get dirty, and if we have the bucks, behind gated walls where they always wear a helmet, are gluten free, and slathered in SPF 30 or more. Such pampering leads to the rearing of soft, compliant, and very pleasant young Christian men, or better, Christian veal, and by and large we're okay with this. This Christianized version of the "good life," nearly indistinguishable from the secular version, reminds me of what Nietzsche observed: "Niceness is what is left of goodness when it is drained of greatness." Until we get serious about rearing great kids, we'll be sinfully contented with nice instead.

Confronting this Gospel of Nice, in part by promoting life-giving justice, buys street credibility with a growing secular audience without pandering because it's organic to our calling. And it's needed spiritually, writes David Seamands: "A person who cannot feel anger at evil is a person who lacks enthusiasm for good. If you cannot hate the wrong, it is very questionable whether you really love righteousness." Do you know *anyone* at church right now who expresses anger at evil? If so, does this person constitute the majority or the prophet-like minority, a lone voice crying out in the wilderness? Nice people cannot and do not contend with injustice and its corresponding evil. Good people do.

To follow Christ through this glorious but ruined world, in our current glorious but ruined state of being, is to do more than do no harm. We are to be agents of love, light, and truth. This is an

innately offensive, creative, proactive orientation toward life. It is kingly and police-officer like—the kind of orientation that creates peacemakers who will be called children of God. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.”

To do so, many of us will need to broaden our perspective and come clean with our addiction to everything nice. Part of that addiction is to attend church solely to flee the big, bad world out there. Or to please our parents, some of whom have been six feet under for a very long time and won’t be resurrected anytime soon. We will need to reconcile the current tension that Howard Snyder sees between kingdom-minded people and church-minded people:

Kingdom people seek first the kingdom of God and its justice; church people often put church work above concerns of justice, mercy, and truth. Church people think about how to get people into church; kingdom people think about how to get the church into the world. Church people worry that the world might change the church; kingdom people work to see the church change the world.<sup>9</sup>

Did a primal sap rise within you right now? Did your chest heave and your belly strangely burn? Did the thought of partaking in something so deliciously subversive yet orthodox ever grab you? Because it grabbed all the prophets and it described a good part of the life and meaning of Christ, who was also asked if he was a prophet. In no part of the Bible does he say no. All but the living dead recognize Bonhoeffer’s and Snyder’s words to be true, but we also sense their danger. It’s risky business being kingly, protective of others through more robust expressions of love, and out there beyond the protective walls of the church. We might get hurt, maybe even harmed, which isn’t nice. *I didn’t sign up for this*, we think to ourselves, but upon reading the contract further (God’s Word), we did.

That is our venerated, God-created, cultural calling as men. A Christ-inspired love is the torch we carry deep into the world, not

because we are self-indulgent, look-at-me thrill-seekers, the spiritual equivalent of a selfie. How many go on “missionary trips” to exotic places not so much to help the needy but have their picture taken with them?

To be a man—even better, a contrary warrior of light—is inevitably to help create boundaries and change. This is why it’s Father Time, not Mother Nature, who carries an hourglass (time is our most unyielding boundary) and a sickle, which creates change through cleaving and separation. That’s why the quote from David Gilmore begins this book: “Manhood is the social barrier that societies must erect against entropy, human enemies, the forces of nature, time, and all the human weaknesses that endanger group life.”

That’s what sociologists and others call the archetypal man, give or take an attribute or two. But what about a Christian man?

Manhood is a social construct. It’s an amalgam of what women, industry, the military, and, until recently, the church, says it wants and needs a man to be. That list would include being a good and faithful father, a disciplined and creative worker, a steward of earthly resources, a competent and patriotic soldier, and a lover of God and doer of his will.

With this in mind, this revision claims that Gilmore is about as right as you can get, but with a major addendum—loving more than one’s tribe. Tribalism is responsible for much of the misery in the workplace, communities, and the war-torn globe where life is about “us,” not “we.” Jesus came for We. This work promotes a universal love that includes God and our personal enemies, a kind of love that is replete with courage and depends on faith in God to become actual through good works not yet completed or even apparent but prepared ahead of us. We rely on God to grace us with true manliness, which is to be magnanimous, our best and most noble selves. We play a role in expressing godly manliness, but we need God’s help to get over ourselves, in large part because, try as we will, we just don’t see the full measure of our own sin. Whether total blindness or partial blindness, let’s not get caught

in those weeds for now. Tiny blind spots kill every day on our nation's roads and in our individual souls. We need help, and God's grace is indispensable in this soul work.

This message isn't new, because in many ways it's a rekindling of chivalry, an age-old code to live by, and something that will become more apparent throughout the coming chapters. But one aspect I'd like to make apparent now, in part to cool the jets of those who think men are too dangerous to begin with, is that as modern-day knights we strive to help, not condemn, our fellow man, especially the weak and vulnerable, unlike that paragon of hate and publicity hound, the late Fred Phelps. His so-called Westboro Baptist Church, which was neither, gained national headlines for years through picketing with poisonous signs against homosexuals and soldiers. You will find no cover in this book to justify being a jerk, no channeling the Spirit of Fred. Instead you'll find a much higher calling and the encouragement of a greater spirit, the kind that moved legitimate churches and high schoolers and motorcycle riders to build human walls between the Phelpses, television cameras, and grieving military families while on their way to lay to rest their beloved sons and daughters. *That's* the kind of courage, love, force, and will provided in this work, cowboy.

What you're about to read is a before-and-after story, an intimate slice of the Christian Nice Guy phenomenon, which by now is chewing through yet another generation of troubled males. I was once a CNG who had a Damascus Road-like experience with Christ's real, rugged righteousness.

A path toward freedom awaits you, a path that begins with an explanation of where the damage began. This will show how passive Nice Guys are made, not born. The initial good news: *If you're a Nice Guy, that's not the real you.* There's something and someone stronger and better inside you who's waiting to be vitalized and released; the true you—the “you” God created—*can* thrive.

We'll take a look at what an earnest but troubling message from the church has done to men, creating an unintentional side effect

that we battle today: We choke on a Victorian Jesus, a caricature that has turned men into mice. We'll also examine the problems handed to men by our culture—a culture that at best is confused about genuine masculinity and at worst vilifies it. We'll see how Nice Guys lie to themselves and to the world around them, making matters worse for everyone. I'll explain how these streams of influence converge to drown a CNG at home, church, and work. Combining all facets of the conundrum is overwhelming; fortunately, we don't serve a soft Savior, and God has not destined us to be eternal Nice Guys.

This book is part inspirational, part instructional, and part manifesto. I'm a guy who has sat through more than thirty-five years of church and who has been tempted to leave in response to its misdirected disregard of men—of manhood—and the unnecessary suffering it has caused. I know many who *have* left; their testimonies haunt these pages. They're angry with their culture, their church, and their God, and sometimes their anger is directed at women. Nowhere in this book will you find a validation of abuse or any justification to mistreat another person. We'll focus on refining anger in general, retaining its energy and passion, so it can be transformed into a redemptive force by using it as an engine instead of the brake it currently is.

It's a higher calling, in part through a more comprehensive understanding of the unique impulses, desires, and orientation most men possess most of the time. When I was asked by *Nightline* after a men's conference just outside Nashville, "What's masculinity?" I gave the answer I give here: that in its most noble expression, masculinity is love bolstered by courage. Courage-flavored love—it may as well be this book's title. Courage helps us love organically: unsentimental, confrontational, sacrificial, practical, playful, powerful, prophetic, kinetic, unpredictable, and noble. Start throwing rotten tomatoes now, because it is superior to romance-comedy love, romance-novel love, and pretty much any show on Lifetime. Real love, says Frederick Buechner, "is not

an excuse for the mushy and innocuous, but love as a summons to battle against all that is unlovely and unloving in the world.”

Most people who invest time and energy into this work will do so for personal reasons. But there are larger issues in play. There continues to be a demise of guys in general, and a decline of fatherhood and male identity. “Guys are flaming out academically; they’re wiping out socially with girls and sexually with women,” warns Stanford University’s Dr. Philip Zimbardo. “Two-thirds of all students in special education remedial programs are guys. . . . Boys are five times more likely than girls to be labeled as having attention deficit disorder—and therefore we drug them with Ritalin.”<sup>10</sup>

“America is rapidly becoming a fatherless society,” writes Ray Williams for *Psychology Today*. “Or perhaps more accurately, an absentee father society. The importance and influence of fathers in families has been in significant decline since the Industrial Revolution, and is now reaching critical proportions.”<sup>11</sup>

Williams and many others, including David Blankenhorn, chair of the National Fatherhood Initiative, believes that a growing body of data tells us that “America is facing not just a loss of fathers, but also the erosion of the ideal of fatherhood.”<sup>12</sup>

This book matters because you matter. Yet fatherhood and fathering matter more. (*Fathering*, to me, is when a man displays a loving, guiding, and protective behavior upon children in general, regardless if they are his by blood. Many men who do not have children still father children in this way, as I have witnessed in more than twenty-five years of coaching.) A father’s presence has a peculiar calming effect upon children. I have had young boys cling to my leg during soccer practices, little boys who just met me. And fathers show us that play, a behavior men enjoy and commit far more than women, is serious business. As Ray Williams writes:

Play is both physically stimulating and exciting. It frequently resembles an apprenticeship or teaching relationships. . . . The way fathers play affects everything from the management of emotions to

intelligence and academic achievement. It is particularly important in promoting the essential virtue of self-control.<sup>13</sup>

While playing and in other realms, fathers tend to stress competition, challenge, initiative, risk taking, and independence. We are especially helpful in the development of empathy, something this world desperately needs more of. The list of what is good about fathers and fatherhood is longer than can be listed here. Christian Nice Guy and every other guy reading this book, you are more valuable and more needed than you realize.

It's time for Phase Two of the Good Guy Rebellion. It's a rebellion because portions of the church, for all its goodness and beauty, are still not giving men permission to completely embrace their masculinity and all of its traits. No wonder women outnumber men in every form of Christianity (with the possible exception of Eastern Orthodoxy). Outrageously, we mistake women's better attendance as proof that they are somehow more moral and spiritual, a false conclusion from flawed premises.

What you're about to read is on the edge—some will say over the edge—of what most of us have called “Christian living.” Not everyone will agree with my conclusions. I ask for your charity and for suspension of judgment till the end of the book; for now, allow me to seek the fix for a problem that in one form or another plagues many Christian men and many non-Christians as well. On this I think we'll all agree: It's time for a new approach, though it isn't really new. It's been hiding in plain view for a very long time.

# 1

## **Christian Nice Guys Aren't So Nice**

From the days of John the Baptist until now,  
the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing,  
and forceful men lay hold of it.

Jesus (Matthew 11:12 NIV 1984)

The ordinary man is passive. . . . Against major events  
he is as helpless as against the elements. So far from  
endeavoring to influence the future, he simply lies  
down and lets things happen to him.

George Orwell

Judging from today's checklist of what it means to be a nice Christian man, Jesus' behavior was so different from how the average guy in church is expected to behave that if you look at the record



honestly, we wouldn't pray to such a person. We would pray *for* such a person.

Exhibit A: Language so coarse and unbecoming that if a pastor proclaimed it from the pulpit he would be reprimanded and put into anger management counseling or else.

Imagine with me for a moment what would happen if Jesus were to appear at your church this Sunday and say a few of these bad boys from the pulpit:

"Hypocrites!"

"White-washed tombs."

"Fools!"

"Are you as dumb and dull as the rest?!"

"How much longer must I endure your company?!"

"Sell your cloak and buy a sword [today that would be a gun]."

"A brood of vipers fit for hell!"

Given how *nice* the church expects Christian men to be, we'd rush the pulpit and wrest the microphone from his hand. "*Tsk, tsk, tsk,*" we'd mutter scornfully. We'd wag our fingers, reminding him of the supreme importance placed on manners and appearances in this holy place. Some women, reaching for soap bars to wash out his mouth, would recite our unofficial church motto: "If you don't have anything nice to say, Jesus, don't say it at all." *He really should be ashamed of himself.*

Shame is big in church. Helps keep guys in line, or so we think. Keeps them humble. Supposedly. Mistaken for healthy guilt that can point a person back to a true north, we lavish shame on men for . . . being men. There is a not-so-unofficial belief that goes like this: When it comes to fitting into church culture, it's men who must take the longer delousing shower.

A more prophetic, challenging, provocative, and pugnacious personality—the kind exhibited by the real Jesus of the Bible—just isn't welcome for reasons we'll explore later.

Instead, we give the *Good Housekeeping* Seal of Approval to Christian Nice Guys (CNGs). We sit next to them in church unaware of the baggage they carry, how their identity is being

squashed, their will broken, and how the lives of those who love and depend upon them are diminished as well. Everyone loses when we follow a false ideal.

That Christian men are expected to follow a nonexistent Jesus hinders and frustrates those who possess a vital masculine nature but are told not to activate it. Making matters worse is how seemingly good, holy, and righteous many CNGs appear. They possess a seemingly “gentle spirit,” but in reality it’s often a spiritual shell game. I know. I played that dark scheme. Their “gentle spirit” is often cowardice and indifference in disguise. They are the kind who won’t say “Boo” if you set them on fire. Problem is, they also don’t say “Boo” when others are lit ablaze literally or figuratively—exposing their real orientation toward others: a defensive position toward life in general born of inordinate fear, leading to profound indifference to others. They are “kind” and “gentle” due to the need to please others, not because they really care about others. Somewhere inside they want to live a more truly abundant life, but they are too afraid.

Not so long ago I would have joined this mob shushing Jesus. That’s because, like many, I believed in a Savior who doesn’t really exist—a wooden Jesus who was perpetually somber, consistently robotic, consummately nice. He wouldn’t *think* of hurling sarcasm at anyone; his momma raised a nice boy with impeccable manners. Many inert sermons sadly portray him as *always* approachable, *always* calm, and *endlessly* patient. That’s fiction right up there with *The Da Vinci Code*: this mild Jesus has more to do with Eastern mysticism than with the Gospel record. He did *not* remain “above it all,” emotionally hovering above us silly little humans.

Instead, he got down in the muck and mire of life with us. He really lived; he really felt eye-watering joy and soul-crushing pain. The record shows that while those around him were indifferent and hardhearted, he was spectacularly tender. And when the cow-eyed and fearful herd was despondent through indifference and the sin of cowardice (Revelation 21:8), he flamed as hot as any Old

Testament prophet, pronouncing justice-promoting proclamations and hurling double-bladed axioms at many, but especially the religiously glib—those who had handled the sacred so many times that their hands became callous to weightier matters such as faithfulness and justice.

## Jesus, Supreme Nice Guy

When we reach those sticky parts of the New Testament where Jesus lost his cool and called people names, we still portray him as having a gleam in his eye or suppressing a kind smile, because Jesus would never be *that* rude. He wasn't really mad, because we believe all anger is sinful, says the underlying message. He just raised his voice a little to get everyone's attention, like a tour guide on a busy street.

I once treated exclamation points that followed expressions such as “hypocrites!” and “brood of vipers fit for hell!” as if they were merely biblical italics. *Jesus was emphasizing a point—he didn't actually yell at anyone.* Talk about spin. I did a lot of damage control for Jesus, when in reality, I was unknowingly creating damage.

This happened in part because early on in my church experience I was given an unauthorized translation of the Bible: The Nice Guy Bible. And I wasn't the only one. Though you won't find it in print, it's similar to Thomas Jefferson's version of the Bible in which undesirable sections are removed. For Jefferson, those sections were the embarrassing and galling witnessing of the supernatural.

But at least Jefferson was honest and forthright in his prejudice.

We are far less admirable because we do something similar but unofficial. Though we claim to believe in the entire Bible, “book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse,” we are fooling ourselves and others. We may read the entire Bible, or claim to, but we do not emphasize the dynamic parts that make us uncomfortable.

And I'm not talking hell, fire, and brimstone parts. I'm talking the parts where Jesus isn't nice, respectable, churchy.

Looking back, I played a role in its blasphemous translation—part of that pesky cognitive dissonance thing. It's an egghead term that describes the demanding stress one experiences when holding to contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values. I wanted to live in a world that was nice all the time, and have a Jesus who confirmed this belief as well. But I could sense that this wasn't true—even though I was being told from outside and from within that it was.

So I kept this distortion of Jesus neatly in my mind—the way a Nice Guy feels he should—until it was destroyed by an unusual and unexpected epiphany: Christ's humor. His blessed sarcasm helped me begin to see how he *actually* lived and talked, as opposed to how I'd thought. A mental fog lifted. At last my life received a long-needed clarity. I neared the red-hot bonfire of truth. A greater taste for life awakened.

I know it sounds silly, but the breakthrough followed a childlike formula: Nice guys aren't sarcastic. They don't deploy hyperbole. Yet Jesus did both. Therefore he wasn't a Nice Guy all the time.

It's an epiphany that has gobsmailed others, such as Joel Kilpatrick, author of *God, That's Funny*:

I remember being suddenly astonished at how much of what Jesus said was funny, absurd, exaggerated, sly, subversive or openly hostile. . . . Like the man who walked into a bar, Jesus is the God who walked into his own joke—the joke that is humanity. And like any comedian, he made sense of it with morbid mockery, scathing satire, and gentle playfulness. . . . God is funny, but he's not cynical, and his anger comes and goes quickly like emotions do; it doesn't metastasize into a personality trait.<sup>1</sup>

I began to ask questions like: How come when we ask WWJD? (what would Jesus do?) we almost always assume some form of quiet, mellow response, when he often spoke and behaved in undeniably rugged ways? If Jesus said we are to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, why have I heard countless sermons admonishing

me to live in innocence—a more gentle virtue—but precious few on how to apply wisdom and shrewdness, more rough-and-tumble virtues that sometimes require conflict?

How come my spiritual training compels me to answer any question asked of me, even when it's entrapping, when Jesus only directly answered something like five questions in all four Gospels? Sometimes he didn't even answer the question and asked a new one instead. If that were anyone else, we would label that person argumentative, divisive, and mean.

Looking back, I once believed this caricature of “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” because it was what I internalized during well-orchestrated church services designed to make God palatable to contemporary taste buds. I was told, though not in so many words, that the safe and pleasant route is really the best. Safe is too often sanctified. And it happened so slowly that the transformation, or better, demasculation by a thousand sermons, was impossible to spot.

CNGs are even told that by turning themselves into involuntary doormats for others (something they often mistake for sacrificial giving), they will somehow, magically, against all understanding of human nature and experience, lead others to Christ and themselves to an abundant life. Is this really WWJD? Do people really regard a worldview as true because its followers are nice, easy, and possess smooth etiquette?

Bill Hybels says that passive Christians repel non-Christians from the faith:

I've learned through the years that seekers are not impressed with spinelessness. . . . Most of the time, seekers . . . respect and admire Christians who aren't afraid to take a stand. . . .

Let me say it once more: Seekers have little respect for weak Christians. Deep down they're looking for somebody—anybody—to step up and proclaim the truth and then to live it boldly.<sup>2</sup>

On Day 20 of his book *The Purpose-Driven Life*, Rick Warren makes a similar observation:

Peacemaking is not avoiding conflict. Running from a problem, pretending it doesn't exist, or being afraid to talk about it is actually cowardice. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, was never afraid of conflict. . . . Peacemaking is also not appeasement. Always giving in, acting like a doormat, and allowing others to always run over you is not what Jesus had in mind.<sup>3</sup>

## **Hearing What We Want to Hear**

Sadly, I also heard what I wanted to hear. I colluded with this misunderstanding of God and of life because, like millions of other Christian Nice Guys, I couldn't handle the truth (or didn't believe I could). I couldn't fully experience his love because of the degree to which fear controlled me. When fear and its evil buddy anxiety are in your driver's seat, forget the incomparable abundance and freedom Jesus offers but also warns is hard to find.

As a kid I was conditioned to always be pleasant, not to bother others, and, for the wrong reasons, be quick to turn the cheek. I held the classic distorted Nice Guy view of myself and others, whom I saw as far more valuable and important. I believed I was defective and bad, not because of my sin, but because I existed. Others were worthy of respect, if for no other reason than to have their human dignity affirmed. Me? *Well, do what you want to me, because I—my thoughts, my feelings, my wants, my needs and will—don't really matter.* Other people were normal and valuable; I was a sort of subspecies, a child of a lesser god. This kept me from God's love and from truly loving others. The Jesus I heard about was always broken-hearted over my sin, which I kept making him pay for. He was worn out, tormented, aloof—a drained, pale man frozen in the iceberg of history's tragedy. He looked as if he needed saving, too. And his Father was angry and sorely disappointed with me, Mr. Screw-Up. Not all CNGs have this script playing in their mind. But many do.

How our pastor portrayed himself—the hero of his own stories—turned the problem up to an “11.” Sure he would admit to grumpiness once in a blue moon, or perhaps driving 30 in a 25 mph zone,

but that was about it. A victorious life just wasn't within reach for me because I couldn't emulate his seemingly conquering lifestyle in all things Christian. He also perpetuated a belief that he and his family were special compared to the rest of us, the ordinary and deficient herd. Humility was not his strong point, which created more problems for struggling CNGs like me because it fooled him into claiming knowledge and wisdom in areas where he was an amateur at best, especially when it came to the effects of human pain and suffering. His hubris, combined with his idyllic childhood, made him glib and cavalier toward the psychological wounds of the people he claimed to minister to. Counselors, among others, claim he was more than wrong but actually dangerous for CNGs to follow. He gave, but he also took away.

It wouldn't be till years later that I would see firsthand how his sweet Jesus Sunday sermon betrayed his Monday aggressive, cold, and accusatory behavior. Putting on a false front may be the way of rulers, but it should not be a character trait of church leaders. Though initially jarring and confusing, God used this behind-the-scenes experience to free me from the tyranny of comparison. I realized that if God can use a hypocrite like him, he can use a hypocrite like me.

This script and church experience (not to be confused with a life-affirming experience with God) ensured that my life would remain tiny, unnoticeable, and worse, innocuous. Moreover, if I could hide all this behind the guise of "Christian humility" and a "gentle spirit," all the better!

The demeaning and undercutting operating system owned my mind like a commercial slogan, a message I learned as a kid (a kid who went through some tough times, which I'll share later). You might perceive that the sorrow I experienced is more or less than yours, but let's not get caught up in that right now. It's the result that counts, and it's the result that keeps CNGs down.

The convincing, repetitive message of my inherent worthlessness helped to lay waste my life, stealing my passion, strength, but especially my courage. My name is Paul, and I'm a former Christian

Nice Guy who finally realized that what we call valorous niceness is often cowardly and sinful passivity in disguise.

## **The Mellow-Yellow World of Christian Nice Guys**

CNGs pretty much believe they should just let life happen to them. A large portion of the church tells them they should rarely if ever exert their will—that possessing passion, boldness, and intensity is wrong and “worldly.” *Those* qualities belong to “aggressive” and “proud” men. Many told me that it’s far more “Christian” to live limply, deny your heart’s desires, and keep your life in neutral because somehow, brother, this glorifies God. My former pastor’s words, “Don’t do anything heroic,” still anger me because I know the hole they make.

The church told me to worry more about sin than purpose. More about keeping up appearances than searching for and embracing meaning. More about what I shouldn’t do than what I should do. More about being nice than being good. Fear of failure, of falling short, of trying but not being perfect, has us paralyzed, immobile, and, eventually, indifferent. You can only take so much of that spiritual hamster wheel before you just stop running.

Women receive a well-meaning sucker punch as well. Writes Christian author and church leader Lynne Hybels in *Nice Girls Don’t Change the World*:

Since childhood I had dreamed of being a righter of wrongs, a force for good, a soul-soother, a world-changer—a dangerous woman! But what had I been instead? A “nice girl,” an innocuous people-pleaser. Good at going through the safe, socially accepted motions of life, I had lost all sense of passion, giftedness, or dreams. . . . I tried very hard to make what I thought were God-honoring decisions about life. If there were rules to follow, I followed them. If there were pleasures to give up, I gave them up. . . . I was determined to earn God’s love. I was also convinced that part of earning God’s love was earning everybody else’s love, too—pleasing everybody, keeping everybody happy, being very nice.<sup>4</sup>



Think about how pleasing the illusion of a conflict-free life is to the ears of Nice Guys. Who can confront them with criticism if they don't do anything noticeable? No one goes through the embarrassment of getting a speeding ticket when inside a parked car.

Conflict isn't always bad. It can lead to health, clarity, and a better life for all. Some of us are sinning right now because of lack of conflict. Still the predominant wind is this: Christian men, avoid conflict—especially with your wife. Yet conflict properly handled with respect, humility, and dignity can be a portal toward greater intimacy. The best marriages are not the ones where “we haven't argued for thirty years.” Have you seen some of these couples? I want to shake their hands, not to congratulate them but to search for a pulse. Many of us don't argue because we've given up. We often mistake endurance for commitment. How is that intimacy? How is that love?

This no-conflict commandment is exactly what CNGs don't need to hear because they use it as a hiding place. They rejoice in the widespread acceptance of this misconception and the illusion it creates because conflict is their kryptonite. Contrary to fine-tuned façades, this avoidance has little to do with the virtue of being kind, or worse, a “gentle spirit,” though they are grateful, even prideful, for such appearances. It has everything to do with the vice of fearful passivity and, for many, its root cause, the sin of cowardice.<sup>5</sup>

This condition doesn't mean that CNGs limp through all areas of life. They can manage, for example, to hold down a good job that requires they enter into conflict, because it's amazing what we will do for ~~love~~ money. I know a CNG whose life's goal was to retire early. It's the only thing I ever heard him speak about with any passion. He was a coward with his violent wife and was unable to control one of his children, now a criminal. But I can tell you with my hand on a stack of Bibles that church people say he's the nicest guy you can ever meet.

Niceness is the psychological armor of fearful and sinful people pleasers—those who care more about safety and comfort than

truth, goodness, and beauty, than hope, faith, and love. So whether explicitly or tacitly, visibly or covertly, fear cripples Christian Nice Guys until they face it with faith, honesty, and integrity. Then, in stunning reversal, these fears behave like the demons that possessed the man Jesus healed: They ask for permission to inhabit pigs instead, because *they* can't handle the confrontation, and it's a kick to watch them scamper. But there's that dreaded word again: *confront*. I want to show you how to confront this fear—the schoolyard bully that haunts CNGs into adulthood. Like all such bullies, it's weak but strutting. Mostly bluff. Fear can't handle God's truth about you.

Think about it, Nice Guys: Wouldn't it be great to view conflict as an event you could enter into with moderation, tact, and wisdom, the way you've seen other men embrace it? To be freed from the shackles of niceness, a fearful vice that takes on the deceptive posture of virtue, an idol that distances you from God and others? Marriages would be saved, our culture would have a real and dangerous warrior of light, children would get a dad to admire, missions would be launched, and God's redemptive plan would transform yet another dark realm of this messed-up world.

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Maybe it's killing you right now. You're thinking, *What's wrong with being nice?!*

That all depends on what we mean when we use this unstable, chameleon word. Think about the “nice” people in your life, and then ask yourself: Do they stand up to anything? Do they ever get indignant like Jesus about anything that doesn't happen to *their* family, children, purse, or wallet? They don't think they have it in them, but they do because God did not give them a cowardly or craven spirit, as Paul wrote to his timid prodigy Timothy.

Can you name one national holiday or holy day in honor of a nice person? It's good people who get the holiday love, the ones who make nations weep in gratitude for their muscular courage and love in action. Nice people make great late-night television

hosts and sometimes give us killer recipes. That's about it. It's better than being a dictator, but for the believing community, it's not enough. Causing no visible harm to another is not our baseline behavior, the standard against which we are measured.

"Nice" can't confront this world's sources of pain, the way Jesus did and commanded us to do as well. Niceness makes people pliable and agreeable, not good. Somehow we have mistaken niceness for righteousness, when the Bible says that the righteous are as bold as lions. Good grief, nice people are anything but bold. Many just hide in timid politeness behind misleading smiles. I once did.

The meaning of the word *nice* is as unreliable as the people it describes. Today it is synonymous with "pleasant" and "agreeable," but it has also meant "unmanly," "unable to endure much," "dainty," "reluctant," "ignorant," "to ignore," and "difficult to please." Nevertheless, remarkably, Christian men can be shunned in church and home if they are not unfailingly pleasant, agreeable, and in possession of impeccable manners. These attributes of niceness are taken to be expressions of a Spirit-filled life, yet none of these words or concepts are listed as attributes of God's Holy Spirit.

Besides, the mind of a Christian Nice Guy is anything but pleasant or agreeable. For reasons we will explore, these men are often secretive and manipulative. They harbor hissing resentments, and, given all the games they feel they need to play just to survive, their wives (*if* they can hold onto one) may come to question their own sanity.

Here's a quick but not exhaustive self-test to help you discover if niceness is gumming up your life. If you answer yes to one or two questions, the Nice Guy problem is in your blood and it may well get worse. Answer yes to three to five questions, and you're a runaway train of destruction—with a deceptive smiley face on the locomotive. Stop what you're doing, clear out your schedule, and get busy with your life. If you have a husband, boyfriend, son, or grandson who you suspect is a CNG, take this test for them and go with what your gut tells you. Try not to overanalyze each question. Usually the first answer that pops into your mind is the

accurate one. Don't show him the result. Just keep reading. You'll get a detailed road map of where to go from here.

## **Faith Life**

- Do you dismiss or never discuss parts of the Bible where Jesus isn't nice?
- When wondering "WWJD," do you assume a pleasant response?
- Do you think conflict and anger are always sins?
- Are you the guy at church who never says no to an assignment, even if it harms your other responsibilities?
- Do you think that being nice, observing all etiquette, and knowingly allowing yourself to be used by others always leads others to God?

## **Home Life**

- Are you attracted to or married to a woman who needs to be rescued? Do you think of her as "a diamond in the rough"?
- Do you lack leadership in your family?
- Do you make your wife the emotional center of your life?
- Are you unclear with your wife about your sexual desires?
- Do you often settle for unfulfilling sex?
- Do you let contractors and others walk all over you and the financial needs of your family, often driving your wife crazy?

## **Work Life**

- Do you find yourself saying one thing to one person but something different to another?
- Do you smile even when you don't like what's happening to you, then rant or fume about it later?

- Do you hide your mistakes, even when the consequences are little or none?
- Do you find yourself working for abusive bosses?
- Do you make less money than you know you should?

## **Life in General**

- Do you feel embarrassed when people compliment you?
- Are you envious or deeply uncomfortable when you see other men express deep emotion?
- Do women like talking with you, but then show no romantic interest?
- Do you think it's selfish to have your own wants and desires?
- Do you think avoiding conflict will make your life better?
- If someone is angry with you, do you automatically believe or sense that they're right to feel that way?
- Do you hide your flaws, even from those close to you?
- Do everyday fears often stop you from moving ahead?
- While dating, do you think the way to a woman's heart is to be the nicest person she ever met, never disagreeing about anything?
- Do you think being nice will make you stand out among other men?

## **Profiles of the Christian Nice Guy**

Place yourself in the two-faced world of a Christian Nice Guy: On the surface you appear happy, pleasant, and seem to exude humility and meekness. You turn your cheek to most every injury, insult, and injustice, not because you are following Christ's command (though that's what you tell yourself and others), but because you unilaterally fear conflict. You are nice not because

you are virtuous, but because you lack virtue. And during those rare moments when you do protect yourself or others, it's usually overblown and causes needless pain for everybody. (Hence the infamous term *passive-aggressive*, which is usually born of fear and anger and sometimes even rage, and is usually perceived as powerlessness in disguise.) You lack the ability to speak the truth in love, which is fundamental to both a fruitful and assertive personality, the very kind of personality you desperately want but can't seem to obtain.

Outside, and especially at church, you're warm and friendly; you appear to care about others. Inside, however, you may carry frustration and rage, because you are doubly haunted: You get to experience the weight and consequence of your own transgressions (many of which you try to hide through timid lies) *and* the weight and consequence of believing that you are inferior to your fellow man and that you lack intrinsic worth as a human being made in God's image, imbuing you with glory and honor. Refer to all this as psychobabble if you want (I once did), but realize you might do so at your own peril. The Bible clearly tells us how to approach this: We are to "encourage the timid, help the weak" (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Do you manipulate others in creative ways, through what I call the Niceness Doctrine? I'm going to be nice to you, and now you owe me niceness in return. If you don't, you're a bad person, and I won't like you. So there—deal with that! Do you especially control your wife and children, who then suffer in silence? Does your inner angst come out suddenly and sideways? Does it anger you that others seem to have unquestionable power in your life, while you feel helpless? When your wife is sexually unavailable, do you get back at her with sexual fantasies that include other (known or nameless) women? Do you steal from your boss as a way of retaliating for mistreatment of you?

If so, I intend to blow your cover—for your own good. I want the Nice Guy fallacy to be acknowledged as the sham it is. If you take ownership of your life and the issues that keep you passive,

then what you may call a catastrophe is likely the beginning of a better life for you and for those who love you. You don't need to walk around with a scarlet *P* on your forehead and be seen as passive; you *will* need a willingness to try something different that will lead to something better.

Later I'll explain how to escape the lifestyle that diminishes CNGs. Honesty and integrity will flourish in ways you always wanted but couldn't enact. An unfamiliar power will flow once your "disease to please" is dealt a substantial blow. Confidence, always so elusive, will replace crippling fear. Dreams will be dusted off and bolstered by newfound shrewdness, wisdom, and the good kind of cunning—three qualities Jesus exercised and said we should also. Purpose will finally enliven your days and bless your sleep. Hope will grow, and with it a daring belief that God—your greatest critic, you thought—is really your supreme advocate. Your better life will become a living testimony to his redemptive power and grace.

For Christian Nice Guys who presently feel surrounded by foes, this new reality will erase many dilemmas, phobias, and accusations—inner demons that collectively form a circular barbed-wire fence with no apparent gate. When a man perceives himself to be trapped inside, those immediately outside—those wanting and needing his love, his affirmation, his protection, his provision—are left confused and disillusioned. Sons are hit between the eyes, struggling with what it means to be a man, because in our earnest attempts to make them kinder, we've made them softer, bolstering their inability to launch as productive men themselves.

Wives, girlfriends, and daughters are among the hardest hit. When I talk about this powerful topic, they shake my hand, sometimes even grab my elbow at the same time the way some preachers do while greeting you as you leave. They look deep into my eyes and say with a heavy heart, "You just described my husband . . . boyfriend . . . father." They don't condemn their men; their basic goodwill toward them is still intact, but it's wearing fast. "What can I do?" they ask me.

A wife asks why her Christian husband won't stand up to defend and protect their family; she also doesn't understand why he's always nice to others, yet secretly so cold and moody with her.

Friends don't know why their Christian buddy won't walk alongside them and make himself available during difficult times.

A worried mother asks why her son won't speak up for himself, even though it's ruining his senior year in high school.

Another begs me to help her son who allows himself to be bullied throughout his school years. He hates himself and others, yet he refuses to defend himself the way "good Christians" don't push back.

A grandmother tells of being tired of seeing men portrayed as worthless fools in the media. She knows her grandsons are watching, marinating in this shame-producing poison, and she worries for their souls.

A boss wonders why his Christian employee won't get his department into shape, even after many meetings and warnings.

Coaches of Christian kids pull their hair out because they are so nice they don't know how to compete with courage and integrity.

Children are confused as to why their Christian father appears to be such a strong and stable presence at church—always smiling and nodding—but then seems to physically and emotionally abandon them when they most obviously need protection and affection.

A woman likes her Christian boyfriend, but can't deny the lack of some necessary spark. She feels horrible, perhaps even ashamed that it's not there, and wonders if there's something wrong with her, not him. She practices in her mind those dreaded words to say and hear: "Can't we just be friends?" Or "You have a great personality, but . . ." The CNG thinks to himself, *Dogs have personalities, too*. He secretly loathes that this always happens to him, and he blames God (though he tries to be nice about it). *How come Nice Guys don't get the girl?* he asks himself in smoldering



resentment since, after all, this is what he's been told at church (while still forcing his painted-on smile).

A pastor scratches his head and wonders why some of the men in his church just can't "get their act together."

The chair of a state political party and school superintendent in a beleaguered community are mystified as to why Christian men rigidly avoid social and civic activity.

Some of these puzzles once shrouded my life as well, so please know there are no stones in my hands. Just empathy and some sound guidance that I'm excited to share with you.

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Never trust a warrior who cannot cry. That's an Irish proverb I'm quick to quote during men's conferences, because what I'm saying here is not an excuse to be a jerk. It's about being whole, fully alive, like Jesus. We can trust him because, though he battled for what's right, he also wept over what's wrong. We are called to be conformed to this—his true tough-and-tender character.

No one is good unless he bears within his character antithesis strongly marked. That's an egghead way of saying that no one is good unless they are both tender *and* tough, the way God is. "He has qualities of both austerity and of gentleness. . . . God expresses his tough-mindedness in his justice and wrath and his tenderheartedness in his love and grace."<sup>6</sup>

Not tender *or* tough. There is no contradiction here. Instead we find completion. It may play a role in what St. Irenaeus meant when he penned that immortal touchstone: "The glory of God is man fully alive." I used to think this statement by Irenaeus was erroneous. My spiritual training led me to believe the glory of God was . . . sterling theological minutiae . . . discerning the "End Times" . . . continual church attendance even when the message is mush and doesn't lead to the abundant life. I used to think Irenaeus was a heretic. Today, I'm not sure if anyone has illuminated the soul of Christianity more than in those eight touchstone words.

I know. You still have reservations, confusion, and even anger over what I've written so far. You believe parts, but think the meta message is so “un-Christian” that you're tempted to give up now. Try this thought on. The softer virtue of kindness is sometimes made from the seat of profound strength, such as a strong personality intentionally throttling back, even allowing himself to be insulted for another's good. Niceness is a knee-jerk reaction that is almost always in response to the disease to please others, even when the situation requires boldness and courage.

Every one of us has the capacity to donate and invest life into others through the fertilizer of prayer, words, and deeds. Niceness doesn't fertilize. It may not poison, but it doesn't spur life either. This is because niceness stems from neutrality and weakness, leading to spiritually yellow lawns. If this isn't clear now, it will be, pinky promise.

To move into kindness and away from niceness, we have to burn our Nice Guy Bible, a kind of Church-ianity porn for men (and also women). This forbidden translation makes life deliciously but dangerously one-dimensional, the way porn makes “love” all about nonstop sex. It creates spiritual voyeurs who don't really have to work hard to have their needs and wants met either. And you remain the star of your own movie—washboard abs and full head of hair and all! Ignorance and ego, what a lethal combo.

The NGB propagates safe and simplistic fantasies in a world where the right thing and the hard thing are almost the same thing. God designed life this way so we will mature, because only mature people really know how to live and love. In case we forgot, it is always about living and loving.

That is what this book attempts to do: to bring you closer to full life so then you can donate this life to others, your wife, children, other children, our nation, and the world.

To get there, we have to kill mellow-yellow, docile, unemotional, Lotus-sitting Jesus, drinking kombucha and finding us little humans mildly amusing while trying to clear his head of conflict and division, “contemplating all,” as Tennyson put it.