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Chapter  
**Inside Outside**  
*Why I'm Nervous at the Circus*

"Raymond is married. He has children. Good, good family.  
God-fearing. Church every Sunday. All of us. God-fearing people.  
We're scared to death."

*Everybody Loves Raymond*

I was 16 years old and my church was putting on yet another play. Dozens of people were involved in the production. It was a big deal, and by big deal, I mean it was a massive hit with the residents of the Pearly Gates Senior Citizens Home.

If you've never been in a church play, you may be surprised at how un-churchlike some people can get behind closed curtains. It's a battle for stage time. Just imagine Broadway meets *Braveheart*, with a hint of *Toddlers and Tiaras*.

I've never considered myself an actor in any way at all, and drama kids always made me uncomfortable. (If you don't know why, then I'm betting you were a drama kid.) Still, I enjoyed participating in my church's productions, because it was a chance to be around people I liked, and I felt like I was accomplishing something for God.

Surprisingly, I liked being in them even though I never got a leading role in the cast. I was always Man #3 or Townsperson #4. If someone got sick, I would get to be Man #2 and have a few lines, but I was never important enough to have my own lapel mic. I had the roles where you had to awkwardly lean over and speak into someone else's mic hidden on their vest, so it looked like you were having an intense conversation with their neck.

This one particular night was different though. They wanted an opening act. Due to my love of *Saturday Night Live*, I'd written a comedy skit with a friend, and the church leaders asked us to open the night with it. Of course I jumped at the chance to have my own lapel mic. This was going to be my chance to have more than two lines.

More on my big acting break in a moment. First, let me give you a little backstory.

I feel like I am Benjamin Button of the church. I was born a 75-year-old uptight, conservative who knew what was right and what was wrong. I was passionate about God, the Bible, and becoming the fourth member of DC Talk.

Back when I was in high school, I really tried to be the kind of Christian I was supposed to be, or what my perception of a Christian should be. I wore Christian T-shirts. I prayed before I ate lunch. I carried my Bible in my backpack just in case anyone on the basketball team wanted to ask me how to spell *Habakkuk*. I tried to invite my friends to church events as often as I could. It was my counteroffer to not being invited to any of their parties.

At church events, I'd often hear these amazing stories of how some kid from the middle of Arkansas saved his entire high school by just wearing a Christian knock-off T-shirt, like *GAP: God Answers Prayers*. I'd feel guilty because I wasn't having the same success with my T-shirt evangelism.

Surprisingly, no one at school wanted to attend my church events no matter how much I asked. Not the plays. Not the youth group pizza parties. Not even the battle of the bands. What part of no alcohol, Bible memorization, and abstinence didn't sound like fun?

I couldn't comprehend what it was like not to go to church. People would say, "Yeah, I go to church." But what they really meant was, "I go twice a year." For me, I didn't just go to church—I lived there. I ate there. I got mail there.

I grew up in the Bible Belt of America. Not just the belt, but also the Bible pants and Bible shoes. I was in church nonstop, and I couldn't understand why it was so hard to get someone to come even just one time to a place I went to all the time. That must be how Sears employees feel, too.

All right, so back to my big lapel mic moment . . .

I thought this time my friends would finally come see the awesomeness that was my church. They would finally hear the Gospel presented in a totally cool and relevant way—with catchy song and dance numbers performed by middle-aged, tone-deaf white people. They would finally want to know Jesus and come to church. And they would maybe, I don't know, put me on their shoulders and carry me out of the sanctuary like Rudy.

At this point in time, I had been praying for three specific friends from school to come to my church. I hadn't been able to get them to come to a church event yet. I would mention them at prayer meetings. I wrote their names in my Bible. I really did care about them and wanted them to know Jesus like I knew him. I hoped my opening skit would be the perfect opportunity to finally get them inside the church walls.

(This was a classic church "Bait and Switch" maneuver. Just like the youth group bait and switch: "Hey, we're having a pizza party! Oh, what's this Bible doing here? I guess we should just open it and see what we end up talking about.")

The night of the play I looked through the curtains and there on the very front row I saw not just one, but all three of my friends. I thought, “This is the night! This is what I’ve been praying for. They will see this production and start coming to church with me.”

I was excited and nervous at the same time. The same way I feel when I go to a Chinese buffet.

I went out onstage, with my very own lapel mic, and performed my skit so well, I’m pretty sure it would have brought Will Ferrell to tears. Immediately after, I rushed out to the foyer by the front doors to get a drink of water and saw all three of them heading outside. They said, “Hey, that was hilarious, Jon! We’re glad we got to see you do it.”

I excitedly responded, “Thanks, but wait until you see the rest of the night!”

“Oh, we have to leave, but we’ll see you at school tomorrow.”

I was speechless. I must have blacked out for a moment because I don’t really remember what I said. I was just trying to get them to stay. I think I mumbled something and used a lot of hand gestures.

But they didn’t stay. There was nothing appealing to them about sitting through a play that had cost thousands of dollars to produce. They didn’t care about the lights and music. They didn’t care about the prayer cards we had prepared for the end of the night. They didn’t really want anything to do with my church.

What they wanted was to be my friend.

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For years I stayed locked up inside the walls of my church. I liked it there, but I never knew what was really outside of it.

Many churches have a sign at the exit of their parking lot which reads, *You are now entering the mission field*. I understand the intent behind a sign like that—if you’re inside the church walls, you’re secure. You’re here to be spiritually fed and not challenged. You’re safe within these walls. But out there? That’s where the lost people are. Out there is where people need God the most.

I went to a small Christian school until I was in high school. My dad was a part-time pastor. My mom was a children’s church teacher and was involved with a variety of other ministry groups. My sister, Melissa, led the music in our youth group. I was inside the church all the time.

Here’s a quick breakdown of my typical Sunday when I was in high school:

<u>Time</u>	<u>Activity</u>	<u>Location</u>
9:30 a.m.	Sunday school	At church
10:45 a.m.	Sunday morning service	At church
12:15 p.m.	Quick trip to Taco Bell for 39 cent tacos	Approximately 1 mile from the church
12:30 p.m.	Youth choir practice	At church
2:00 p.m.	Regret my Taco Bell decision, pray for mercy and healing	At church
2:30 p.m.	Possible nap or friend hang out	Preferably close to church so we could easily get back to church
5:00 p.m.	Youth leader meeting	At church
6:00 p.m.	Sunday night service	At church
7:30 p.m.	Friend hang out	Someone's house close to the church

Now here is a breakdown of the rest of the week:

Monday night

My high school's Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting. Luckily, you didn't have to be an athlete, because I didn't have any time for sports with all of my church activities.

Tuesday night

Youth band practice, possible racquetball afterwards with church friends. Maybe play in a church league basketball game.

Wednesday night

The best and biggest night of the week—youth group. Followed by Wendy's or a movie at someone's house.

Thursday night

Lead my small group. Small groups are weekly Bible studies. Some churches call them community groups or cell groups. Calling it a cell group always freaked me out a little bit because it sounded like we were all going to be

stuck in prison. Actually, “prison” would probably describe Bible study for some people, though.

Friday night

Go to the movies with friends from church. Nothing R-rated.

Saturday night

Go to the other cool youth group in town, and then go back to my youth group for a Saturday night prayer and worship service.

This schedule would shift throughout my high school years, but it is no exaggeration of my teenage life.

I don’t regret it, though. I don’t blame my parents for sheltering me. I don’t blame any pastor or leader for pressuring me into church. I liked church. I liked church people and doing church activities. I liked getting to use my gifts for the Lord. I learned how to play guitar and piano because of church. I had an outlet to speak, perform comedy, and get into writing because of church. I have millions of hilarious, fun, and meaningful stories of youth choir tours, mission trips, and tons of other events.

I think I will always like church, and I’ll be on the front lines to defend it when people want to tear it down. There are wonderful people in it who really care about their communities and their neighbors. There are many people I know who have given so much of their time and money to help others.

Yet, for all the good the church has to offer, I fear that it can become its own barrier to its people. It can become shut off from culture. It can close itself off from changes happening all around it.

The walls we put up to block out the evil of the world become the walls holding us inside. Walls that have us constantly stepping away from a world Jesus stepped into.

It makes me think about Luke 10:2:

*[Jesus] told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”*

What hits me is Jesus doesn’t say, “Ask the Lord of the harvest to bring the harvest in.” Instead, he specifically says to pray that workers would be sent out.

Out.

We pray the Lord will bring the harvest in—inside our walls. American churches spend millions of dollars each year to make Christmas and Easter Sunday impressive productions, not far from the amount spent on a regular Sunday morning’s wow factor these days. I don’t even know if I’m against all of that.

Sometimes I wonder what the Apostles could have done with some intelligent lighting, a smoke machine, and skinny jeans.

I'm all for good programs and catchy events. I'm for choir specials, church plays, youth retreats, and kids camps. I'm for keeping the doors of the church open in a myriad of ways. But I think if we spend most of our time praying for people to come to us, we are missing the Great Commission's command to *Go*.

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I remember going to the circus when I was a kid and being amazed when the acrobats would come out and perform. Their routine was always the most stressful part of the night for me. The trapeze swinging. The tightrope walking. The acrobats stacked on top of each other juggling fiery batons. All this without the safety of a net.

A lot of this anxiety came after I watched *Batman Forever* and saw Robin's whole acrobat family, The Flying Graysons, fall from the top of the big tent and die. I was amazed, and yet, so nervous, watching these tightrope walkers go back and forth on such a tiny little line of wire. From where I was sitting, the line was so thin it looked like they were walking on air. I just knew I was going to watch Robin's family plummet to their death at some point . . . or watch Two-Face come in and shoot-up the place.

I often feel like an acrobat myself. Minus the leotard. I'm up at the top of the big tent trying to balance on a tightrope between two sides, the church and the rest of the world.

Each side is demanding I make up my mind, but I don't want to make up my mind if my heart is in both places.

Which side do I lean more towards? Which side do I end up falling into? Is it possible to balance on this wire between the two and never choose one side to fall on?

Why do I have to choose?

Have we only been given one choice? You can either love the church and hate the world, or you can be accepted by the world, which means ignoring, or even mocking, the church.

Maybe I'm not the only one who feels like I am balancing between the two sides. Maybe you feel like an acrobat too. Maybe that means there are more than just two sides to be on.

In the pages to come, I will share my personal stories and thoughts I've gathered on my journey through both of these sides, and in between them.

Let's take an introspective look at Christian culture and the rest of the world it seems to disconnect from so easily. Why is there a divide? What is the church's

perception of the world around it? What is the world's perception of the church?  
Can we find a way to bridge the ever expanding gap that has grown between them?

I believe we can find some peace between a church that fears the world and a world  
that misunderstands the church.

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I hope you enjoyed the first chapter of *Unbalanced!* If you haven't signed up for the  
email list yet to find out when and where to get the book when it comes out in June,  
make sure you [sign up here](#).

Just for fun, I thought I'd include the list of chapters so you can get an idea of where  
the book will be going from here. Thanks for reading and please share this!

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