







## Dan Merchant



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO BEIJING

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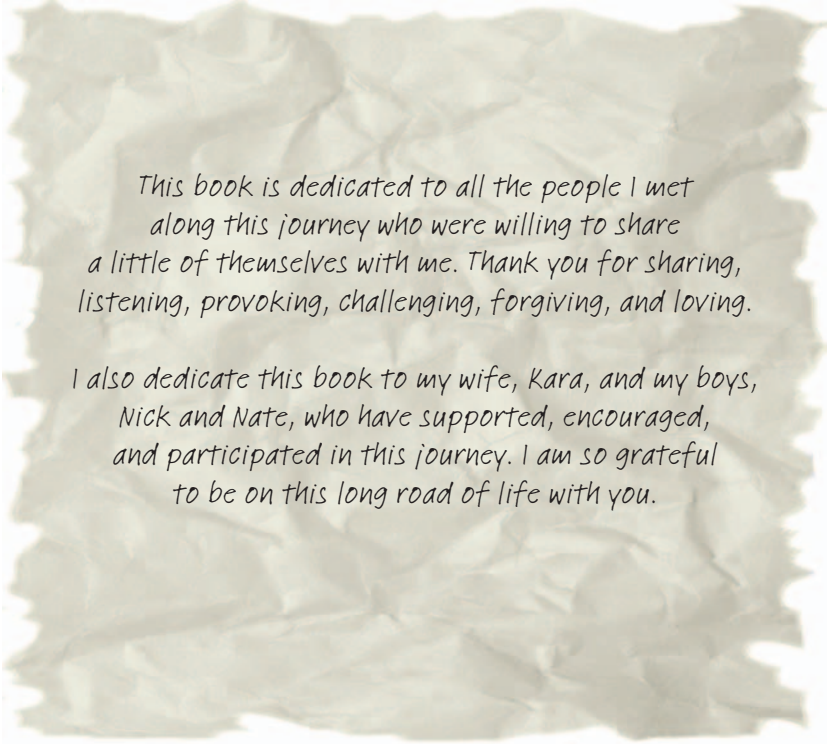
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*This book is dedicated to all the people I met along this journey who were willing to share a little of themselves with me. Thank you for sharing, listening, provoking, challenging, forgiving, and loving.*

*I also dedicate this book to my wife, Kara, and my boys, Nick and Nate, who have supported, encouraged, and participated in this journey. I am so grateful to be on this long road of life with you.*



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# Chapter One



## bumper-sticker CULTURE

I think America has become a bumper-sticker culture—we're way too comfortable with one-way communication. We like to tell people what we think, but we don't like to listen, and I fear we've lost the fine art of conversation—which explains why I was standing in Times Square on a late Tuesday night in December dressed like a human bumper sticker. Call this a creative attempt to resurrect dialogue and understanding—or as my wife affectionately put it, "I can't believe you're going to go out in public in that stupid suit just to have a conversation with a stranger." Yes friends, desperate times demand desperate measures.

I should let you know that I was taping my "adventures in conversation"—if I could actually engage people in genuine conversation, whose beliefs might vary from mine, then I wanted some proof for the skeptics.

Crossing Broadway I strode confidently in my Bumper-Sticker Man Suit toward Jimmy the cinematographer, who kept pulling his headphones off and making that "I can't hear anything" face.

"The wireless won't work with all this interference." He shrugged. I followed his hand as he gestured at the plethora of glowing video screens, neon signs, and electronic billboards that define Times Square. I noticed the ABC television studios across the intersection and the MTV studios above me. I was probably not the only guy on the block with a wireless microphone.

"Could be the radios in the taxi cabs," Jimmy thought aloud.

"The interference could be caused by small bursts of evil emanating from MTV," I said with a straight face.

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After twenty years of friendship and labor together, Jimmy merely cracked a smile and kept working, “You’ll have to go handheld.” He pitched me the stick microphone.

I noticed a couple strolling down the wide New York City sidewalk toward us, “We’re on,” I whispered. My eyes got wide as I gestured at the pair with my eyebrows. It might have looked like a nervous condition to the untrained eye, but Jimmy understood my subtle signal and in a flash he had the camera on his shoulder. Young Jim Bob from Wichita, Kansas, spun his finger in the air to indicate “we’re rolling.”

As the couple approached they couldn’t help but be drawn in by the mesmerizing power of the bumper-sticker suit. Their momentary bemusement was all the opening I needed.



“Hi, can I ask you five quick questions for a documentary film we’re making?” The tall handsome man with gray hair and beard, glasses, and a gray jacket—who reminded me a little of Harrison Ford—exchanged a quick glance with his cute, bespectacled companion. “Okay, sure,” he answered and introduced himself as Lou.

DAN: How do you think the universe began?

LOU: With a big bang.

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- DAN: Where do you think you'll go when you die?
- LOU: Nowhere.
- DAN: Just in the dirt someplace?
- LOU: From whence I came.
- DAN: Anytime you can work poetry into an answer you're in good shape. All right, third question: Name something Jesus Christ is known for.
- LOU: [thoughtful pause] Raising the dead and caring for the poor.
- DAN: Those are two pretty excellent feats. Okay, name something the Christian people are known for.
- LOU: Today? Selective hatred and intolerance.
- DAN: The ball kinda got dropped somewhere along the way?
- LOU: Between Jesus and the Christians I think it was dropped a long time ago.
- DAN: Okay, last question: I've heard the phrase "culture wars." Do you know what this phrase means?
- LOU: The culture wars? Sure, it's secular culture that's based on reason opposed by religious culture based on superstition.
- DAN: So following Jesus is a superstition or are you saying religion, in a broad sense, is superstitious?
- LOU: Believing in Jesus . . . [Lou breaks up laughing] I don't believe I'm doing this . . . yes, following Jesus as He is followed today, as a religious icon, is superstition. Following Jesus, the man, who is probably, in some way, a Son of God, is not.
- DAN: I appreciate the distinction; I see where you're going with that. In conclusion, I'd appreciate it if you'd take a moment to gaze upon my suit. I am Bumper-Sticker Man. Is there a particular emblem or bumper sticker that speaks to you?

Lou took a moment to study the bumper-sticker suit before selecting a favorite.

- LOU: Let's see . . . I like "God Spoke and Bang It Happened." I think that fits nicely with Darwin and the Jesus Fish—not a Jesus Fish but a Fundamentalist Christian Fish.

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DAN: [laughs] Thanks. The whole idea with this suit, well, it seems to me like complex ideas are being reduced to simple bumper-sticker slogans and that seems good enough for a lot of people. What are you finding?

LOU: I find that I agree with you. Complex ideas are reduced to bumper-sticker statements and there is no conversation between the two extremes that are represented on your costume. I shouldn't say costume—on your clothing, sorry.

DAN: No, I'm not offended by "costume" because we're having an open dialogue; this is how we do it. We're actually having a conversation.



Lou and I shook hands and shared a final laugh. I have to tell you I was exhilarated by this chat with a smart and interesting person . . . who doesn't believe what I believe. I loved that Lou was open to the idea that he and I could enrich our national conversation together by respecting each other and sharing with each other.

In a way, the Bumper-Sticker Man suit was my twist on the time-honored tradition of the believer on the street corner with the sandwich board. You know the classic "Repent or Burn," "Repent Sinner," "Jesus Loves You," and even the more friendly "John 3:16," but somehow, over the years

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this one-way, one-sided approach failed to foster engagement and mostly just alienated folks he most wanted to connect with. That approach always seemed like, “I have the answer, and you don’t. Come over here and I’ll tell you why you’re screwed up.” Even if we do have the answer, do you think anyone is going to listen to that?

And as a believer, a Christian, a guy who loves Jesus, these street preachers would offend me because they assumed I needed them to lecture me, to save me. They never asked where I was coming from, and it didn’t seem as though they cared. Well, I wanted to know why the gospel of love was dividing America, and if I was going to find the answer, I would have to do more listening than talking . . . but first I had to get people to talk.

A group of twentysomethings moved loudly down the sidewalk, laughing and shouting. A mischievous looking guy in jeans and a sweat jacket grinned at me as he and his crew waited at the corner for the traffic light. His name was Jeff.

DAN: Can I ask you five quick questions? They’re easy.

JEFF: Throw ’em at me.

DAN: How do you think the universe began?

JEFF: Big bang.

DAN: Number two: Where do you think you’ll go when you die?

JEFF: Hopefully heaven.

DAN: Number three: Name something Jesus Christ is known for.

JEFF: Magic tricks . . . I mean miracles. No, I mean magic tricks.

DAN: What is your favorite magic trick? Like card tricks? The disappearing goldfish?

JEFF: I’ll go with water into wine, my friend. That ain’t a bad little trick.

DAN: Number four: Name something Christians are known for.

JEFF: Fanaticism? Is that a word?

DAN: Sadly, yes. Number five: Have you heard this phrase, the “culture wars”? What’s with all this us versus them stuff?

JEFF: I don’t know, I guess we all don’t fit together.

DAN: Pick a bumper sticker . . .

JEFF: I’m gonna go with “Overturn Roe v. Wade.” That’s a winner.

## Lord, Save Us From Your Followers

The Five-Questions approach served two functions. One, it was a quick and playful way to engage people, and two, it quickly set the parameters. Based on how they answered the five questions, I better understood where my new friends were coming from, which allowed me to have a more interesting and fruitful dialogue with them (and, hopefully, they with me). Of course, sometimes the questions turned out more to be something for them to name than questions. But let's not nitpick.



Despite the late hour, Rosie had a bouncy step, a big smile, and great laugh—but this is the city that never sleeps, isn't it? She was in her thirties, wore a colorful knit cap, and was of Jewish heritage.

DAN: Question number one: How do you think the universe began?

ROSIE: The universe began? Hmmm . . . it developed over time.

DAN: All right, number two: Where do you think you'll go when you die?

ROSIE: I think I will probably go away and . . . I think I will no longer be here when I die. And I'll be, hopefully, a good memory for my family and friends.

## bumper-sticker C U L T U R E

- DAN: Question number three: Name something Jesus Christ is known for.
- ROSIE: I'm thinking of . . . being condemned at the cross or however it is we're supposed to say it. I don't know what it was that He was, but I know He was put up on that cross.
- DAN: It wasn't much of a picnic, whatever you want to call it.
- ROSIE: That was the image I thought of initially so that's what I went with on your question.
- DAN: That's excellent. I want to remind you that there are no wrong answers.
- ROSIE: Oh, good.
- DAN: Fourth question: Name something the Christian people are known for.
- ROSIE: Hmm . . . trying to get other people to be Christian would be one answer I'm thinking of. [laughs]
- DAN: That's come up once or twice in your days?
- ROSIE: I've heard that, yeah. [laughs]
- DAN: Lastly, I've been hearing about this thing called the culture wars. Have you heard this phrase?
- ROSIE: To be honest, it's not too familiar, but I'm assuming that it has something to do with different religious groups thinking that their position should be the most powerful.
- DAN: You know what? Bottom line, you're probably close. I think they're referring to the hot-button issues like abortion rights, gay marriage, whether or not to teach intelligent design in schools . . . what do you make of these skirmishes?
- ROSIE: I think, for the most part, that everyone should mind their own business and let everyone do individually what they want to do—as long as they're not imposing their opinion on others.
- DAN: A “live and let live” type deal?
- ROSIE: I would say so.
- DAN: Great, Rosie, thank you.
- ROSIE: You bet. Take care. Peace.

## Lord, Save Us From Your Followers

The thing about the bumper-sticker suit that stops people is the dichotomy on parade. Most nut jobs on the street who are wearing a ridiculous getup like this only display their own point of view. It becomes clear to any onlooker: *This guy is just going to shove his idea of the world down my throat, and I don't need it.* That wasn't going to work for me; I wanted the bumper-sticker suit to mirror the debate we're having in our country. The suit is an invitation of sorts to anybody who wants to have a conversation. That's why I went out of my way to represent as many points of view as possible with the bumper stickers and emblems. You can see people trying to reconcile why there is a Jesus Fish positioned next to the Darwin Fish, a "Real Men Pray" sat next to "Free Jesus," "Where's My Church, Dude?" contrasted with "Vote Pro-Life," and so on. All the assumptions go out the window: *Hey, whose side is this guy on anyway?* I hoped this playful complication would signal to people that I was "open," I was willing to listen, and my main priority was to jump-start a dialogue in this country.



There are some in America who think religious values have gained inappropriate sway in the public square. These folks fear the influence of faith and



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is what I studied, and I'm not looking up any more numbers. In 2000 the population of the United States was pegged at 281,421,906, and I seem to recall hearing that we recently eclipsed the 300 million mark, so if 2000 is too ancient for you, please feel free to consult an updated census. But it really won't make much of a difference and besides they're only numbers and don't reveal the nuances of an individual's belief system. So there! See what happens when I get aggravated? It's not pretty . . . sorry about that.

Okay, so according to the 2000 U.S. Census, 75 percent of the people in the U.S. identified themselves as Christian. The split is about 50 percent Protestant and 25 percent Catholic, and within that number 125 million American citizens identified themselves as born-again or an evangelical—which strikes me as an astounding number! A couple of other sources suggest the total of evangelicals may be closer to 80 million and the National Association of Evangelicals is 30 million members strong, so my conclusion is . . . that's a lot of followers.

Since numbers demand context before any real meaning can be applied, here's a few comparisons for those of you scoring at home: the combined number of atheists and agnostics matches the 2.5 million members of the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, which, coincidentally, is about equal in number to those practicing Native American spiritual traditions.

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And while we're playing with numbers, let's add the godless atheists and agnostics together and combine them with the Native Americans and you have roughly five million people, which is about the total number counted in the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender community. Of course, there is some question as to how accurate the GLBT total in Census 2000 is, since



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that specific question wasn't asked, but that's the trouble with a census—the information is limited by whoever is asking the question.

Here is one question that was specifically asked: How often do you attend church? Of the population, about four in ten won't attend church all year and about four in ten will attend more than once this month. So the numbers are tricky: 75 percent checked the Christian box ("Well, honey, I'm obviously not a Hindu, what box do you want me to check?"), but only 40 percent felt strongly enough about their faith to find a church and attend regularly. Of course, I'm not disqualifying your faith if you don't attend church regularly; I'm just saying *numbers lie*.

I hear people on TV ranting about "Nine out of ten people believe in God . . . therefore we should throw Darwin out of school, sing 'Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore' before class, and all vote Republican." The numbers are interesting, don't you think? Nine out of ten Americans believe in the existence of God? And to think we could only get four out of five dentists to come together on that sugarless-gum controversy.

Nine out of ten people, really? (And, hey, I heard this number straight from Diane Sawyer's lips when she was interviewing Mel Gibson on *20/20* when *The Passion of the Christ* had taken the country by storm.) I suspect that of the nine, not all are picturing the God who parted the Red Sea. There's



## bumper-sticker C U L T U R E

probably somebody who still believes Clapton is God, though Slowhand has slowed down a bit in recent years (although that Robert Johnson covers album is expertly and lovingly rendered, I have to say).

Maybe this is my own personal issue, but I have a hard time believing a check in the box can tell us anything meaningful. The raw numbers are incomplete, and I needed more detail, hence hitting the streets as Bumper-Sticker Man to ask Americans what they really believe to be true.

DAN: How do think the universe began?

MORGAN: I guess I'm a believer in the Big Bang theory. But, I think if you research it you see how . . . just the idea of that happening there has to be some sort of intelligent force behind it, you know? I do believe in the Big Bang and it taking millions, no billions of years to get here, right?

DAN: I think I have that bumper sticker right here—

MORGAN: “God Spoke and Bang It Happened.”

DAN: So maybe? Second question: Where do you think you'll go when you die?

MORGAN: Well, that's the million-dollar question, isn't it? I believe in life after death. What it is I do not know, and I'll probably be wondering that until I find out.

DAN: There's only one way to find it out.

MORGAN: Right? And I hope I don't find it out for a very long time. That will be a question that follows me throughout life.

DAN: Name something Jesus Christ is known for.

MORGAN: Love, right? [laughs] My family is Catholic, but I wasn't raised Catholic. I wasn't raised in the church, but I did have a huge spiritual upbringing. What I was taught, from my mother and my father, was that Jesus Christ and Christianity is based on love. And no one can deny that's a great idea.

DAN: Amen. Number four: Name something that the Christian people are known for.

MORGAN: Politics. I would say, especially in this country, politics.

DAN: Give me an example of some of the things you've seen flying around in the media or in conversations.

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MORGAN: Our country is kind of a conundrum because it's built on freedom of religion, freedom of speech; it's the land of the free—and yet we were founded by a puritan society. But I think the way things are being portrayed today it makes religion feel more political than anything else.

DAN: It feels like, today, complicated issues are being boiled down to their simplest form so it's easier for me to shout what I think at you. It feels like we've lost the ability to have a conversation.

MORGAN: I would agree, I would definitely agree with that and I think it's very sad. I think it's a sick turn this country has taken and, frankly, I'm worried about it. I feel if we don't start getting it together and start listening to each other then I don't like the road we're taking, and I would hate for my children to have to grow up in a country where all we have is walls built up, and rights and wrongs, and no middle ground. You have lots of abortions and Roe versus Wade, which is a big deal right now. You have evolution on your suit and "Inherit the Wind" is going up down the street. . . . We've come so far, but we've taken baby steps to do it and right now we're stagnating. But I think there'll be a push. I have faith in my generation. Yes!

DAN: Is there a bumper sticker that jumps out to you?

MORGAN: Oh, yeah, this one cracked me up, "The Agnostic Dyslexic Insomniac Who Lies Awake at Night Wondering If There Really Is a Dog." That's funny.

To me, the division of America, this separateness, isn't getting any of us anywhere. And both sides are making the same mistake: they think the culture war is a winnable war. Some think, eventually, one side will win out over the other. I don't see it that way. I'm concerned that calling it a culture war presumes a few things, like, if it's a war there is an enemy. This kind of adversarial posture serves to further entrench us in our own positions. The sad fact is, our country is polarized because we like it that way. It is so much simpler to pretend the world is black and white. An "us ver-

sus them” attitude is just simpler than critical self-reflection and allows us each to blame the other.

It’s funny because I see bumper stickers as a symptom of the disease. A bumper sticker is, quite possibly, the weakest, most strident form of communication possible—because of its one-way nature. In this information age, communication styles are more influential than ever. I’ve identified four primary ways that have (seemingly) become the accepted ways we communicate our ideas, both through the media and in person.

**Myopia**—our communication conveys our point of view exclusively. While our facts may be accurate, we lack context and, ultimately, understanding by ignoring any information that doesn’t put forward our agenda.

**Hyperbole**—our communication again conveys our point of view, but we exaggerate the facts and distort the available information to create an intellectually dishonest and, possibly, more persuasive case for our agenda.

**Hysteria**—our communication conveys our point of view in an emotional and aggressive manner based primarily on our feelings, what we want to be true, and our blind desire to be right and see our agenda come to fruition.

**Truth**—our communication conveys as balanced a review of the facts as possible, including the weaknesses of our position and the strengths of the other’s. The goal of this communication is the illumination of reality and, in this case, our agenda considers the well-being of all people, not just those who agree with us. It’s tough to fit this on a bumper sticker.

A balding man in his forties, with a gray trench coat and an attaché bag slung over his shoulder, spent a full five minutes reading the bumper-sticker suit while I talked with a group of twentysomethings from Europe. I noticed him hovering out of the corner of my eye and couldn’t decide if he was going to be trouble or not. He had a round, friendly face, bright eyes (which squinted as he pondered various bumper stickers), and a big warm smile. I could tell there was some conflict here, and I hadn’t even spoken to him yet. It was already about one in the morning (gotta love NYC), and for a second, I thought about bailing out to avoid this guy (but engagement is what I’m all about, baby!) His name was Jonathan.

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JONATHAN: What are you doing?

DAN: A documentary film on the collision of faith and culture, and I have five questions for you.

JONATHAN: Faith and culture . . . but everyone has faith in something, faith in their senses, their intellect—

DAN: I guess I'm referring to faith in God or, specifically, the collision between the Christian faith and a secular culture.

JONATHAN: I know very few Christians who have faith in God. Most of the Christians I've met have faith in the Bible, and most of them have faith in their own mind's interpretation of the Bible.

DAN: So what is true faith then?

JONATHAN: Jesus explained: to love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might and like unto that love your neighbor as yourself. That's how He described it. And then in Matthew twenty-five He said, "What you do to the least amongst you, you do unto Me." Now I have yet to see very many people who profess the Christian faith go reach out to the least amongst us. They seem to be aspiring, for the most part, for worldly power.

DAN: Who are you thinking of when you say that?

JONATHAN: I'm thinking of the people who the world calls fundamentalists; I call them exclusivists. The fundamentals of Christianity are really full of love and compassion. And, similarly, the fundamentals of Islam are love and compassion. In this day and age you're even finding exclusivist Buddhists, which is really weird. But this phenomena of using religion to amplify pride rather than humility, to seek power rather than service, and to laud selfish love rather than selfless love . . . people are so preoccupied with their ego-self getting to heaven, I don't know, I read Jesus' doctrine as transcending that self. You see all these ministers, the kind of people our president listens to like Pat Robertson, and their whole preaching is about *you*. You can get saved, and you can be as selfish and self-centered as you want to be. I never saw that in the gospel, or at least not how I read the gospel.

## bumper-sticker CULTURE

DAN: I think you'd have a hard time finding that in the red letters of the Bible.

JONATHAN: To me, right now, we've got to start defining the values of justice, love, and compassion as universal values and challenge every religion to live up to those values. Because those qualities come from God—they don't come from man, so we have to say to Muslims, "Are you living up to the compassion that Mohammed called you to?" We have to say to Buddhists, "Are you living up to the compassion that Buddha called you to?" And we have to say to Christians, "Are you living up to the compassion that Jesus called you to?" And then we have to say to ourselves, "Are we living up to the compassion God has called us to?" It's time to get beyond the franchises.

Needless to say, I was pleased that I didn't bail out before talking with Jonathan, who, as it turned out, worked for an institute committed to world peace. What a thrill to converse in such an open, dynamic, and positive way. Even after we ran out of videotape, Jimmy and Jonathan and I stood out in Times Square talking about life, God, and America. Every few minutes a person or two would stop on the sidewalk and listen in on our spirited conversation or stop to read the bumper-sticker suit.

Who would've figured that dressing up like a human bumper sticker would've fostered so much good interaction, but, then again, that's what happens if you actually stop and really talk to people.