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A light in the darkness

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

-Matthew 5:14-16

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“We live in a big post-Christian nation. I don’t think we live in what would be deemed a Christian nation. I would say the esteemed assigned the clergy is long since gone.”

-David Skinner

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Recent studies by the Pew Research Center show a decline in Christianity within the United States, while the population labeling themselves as practicing other faiths, or unaffiliated continue to expand. While the article states the United States still remains the largest Christian nation, there was a 7.8% decline in the Christian population from 2007 to 2014. Furthermore, growing up in a Christian household no longer holds the same value it once did. The 6.7% increase in the population choosing to unaffiliated themselves from any religious entity points to the larger number of adults walking away from the religious they were originally introduced to by their families. The value once installed in most Christians has transformed into a mundane label holding little to no meaning for increasing parts of the United States population.

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David Skinner grew up in a great Christian home. At the young age of eight, he had an encounter with the Lord, and made a commitment to his Church. Although he was one of the youngest persons, he began to thrive in this environment, and the people in his community began to take notice. Despite of his lack of experience in the world, he felt a sense of belonging in this community.

At the age of sixteen, however, his relationship with God began to weight down on him. What was once a great relationship began to feel uncool and inconvenient. For the following four years he found himself entangled in an extensive battle with the Lord.

His sophomore year at Texas Tech University he began to notice the solid foundation he was accustomed to having in his life had shifted, leaving an sense of misery behind. He was overcome with the knowledge that he was not in the right place with the Lord, and thus, not heading the right direction. Years of fighting with the Lord lead him to the moment he finally gave in. Unexpectedly, David Skinner surrendered to the call of ministry.

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“I could say two words to you right now and you would think something that you wouldn’t have thought of years ago. I would say the word ‘Catholic preach’ and now the word ‘pervert’ comes to the brain, though in fact there’s a very small percentage of people who do that. The way information works now its like all these guys are these horrible idiots humans, but no,

they're not... The big money machines have damaged the gospel, so the esteem of the pastor is less than what it used to be."

-David Skinner

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Within six weeks after David Skinner decided to accept God's plan, he was being interviewed for a job. Despite making no initial efforts to pursue a job in the ministry, he was being interviewed as a youth minister at First Methodist in Littlefield, Texas. His good friend who was a youth minister had called him earlier and said "Skin, I'm moving to another church, so they're going to be looking for somebody in Littlefield. I gave them one name. Its yours."

They hired him the very next day. He thought the incredibly quick process had to be clear affirmation that this was the path intended for him. Nevertheless, he was still struggling to get the words out of his mouth, so he sought out a pastor he had known in an attempt to sit down and discuss the whirlwind of events he had just experienced.

The pastor's response was: "Well its about time."

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"I do find in the South, though, that [going to church] is still pretty significant. You can go up North and there are churches where they just don't meet in the summer. That obviously doesn't happen in the South. I mean, we're still going to meet. So, I think it's still relatively high in the South, but I'd say its definitely waning."

-David Skinner

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It was around his time at Texas Tech that David Skinner met his wife Gena. As he continued to pursue a journey through the ministry, his family began to grow. When his first daughter, Maegan, was born, David Skinner was working with a youth group at St. John's Methodist in Stamford, Texas. As his multi-ethnic group was passing his baby daughter around a guy went up to him and said: "She's probably the most famous person in Stamford right now."

Three years later, the family of three moved to San Antonio, Texas. It was then that they were blessed with their second daughter, Alyssa. Although big city churches are slightly less nurturing than the small town atmosphere the family had previously experienced, his children were equally as loved and spoiled by the community. The majority of the people in the congregation loved the pastor and his wife, and thus both baby showers left the new parents wondering where they were going to put all the stuff. The last addition to the family, their son Reece, was in the womb when David Skinner and his family moved to Cedar Creek, Texas.

At this point, they were a bit nervous about the move since their oldest daughter Maegan was already 5 years old, and she had started to make friends. During their introductory meeting at this new little church, however, he was informed that the church had made a decision at one point to build an awesome playground. This was the first thing Maegan saw when she arrived at their new home; all previous worries forgotten. One thing was always constant: his children were always loved not only by him and his wife, but by their entire community.

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"Part of that is clergy messing up, and part of it is in the culture where 50-60 years ago said pastor got messed up, well if he messed up then it would've been taken care of and it wouldn't have been national news. We have national news that I believe rapidly moved to being

oppositional towards Christianity. They love it when a preacher screws up. Love it. It's like good news to them. In a post-Christian nation you have this weird mentality now in relation to the Church”

-David Skinner

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Religious scholars Liliana Trofin and Madeline Tomescu “explore the media’s role in representing Christian conservatives in America’s political culture: traditional Christian messages have been *reshaped, refined, repeated, and redirected* to new audiences. ‘Christians of all theological leanings [...] have long used and even depended on mainstream news media (a) to communicate their messages to larger, secular audiences and (b) to portray Christian values and norms positively and in what activists perceive as appropriate contexts.’”

One thing David Skinner began to notice during his time as a part of the ministry, is that a pastor can shut down a conversation by mere presence just as easily as a police car can slow down traffic. After all, sometimes being a pastor felt a bit like being a high-school football coach in Texas. Most people know you, and either love or hate you. Regardless, there is an unavoidable sense of expectation from the members of the community. The Skinner family responded to these expectations by living their lives as open books. Even if one set a goal to look closely, David Skinner knew in his church, the pastor would never be accused of cheating on his wife, or any other stereotypical things the media has begun to associate with preachers. When thinking about his life after joining the Church, David Skinner talked about the charmed and unsuspecting life his family got to experience. Aside from wondering now and again small questions such as: “Is your kid going to say something he shouldn’t say?” or “Are they going to expect Gena to play the piano or sing in the choir?” David Skinner lived his life without ever experiencing a sense of “Why are y’all not a certain way?”

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About thirty years into his work, David Skinner began to experience health issues. He got caught up in the great work he was doing, and lost his health in the middle of it. That's the reason why he had to step out of pastoral ministry as a full time situation.

“That was sort of an inability to take care of myself. Not stopping long enough. It wasn't the churches fault,” he said. “They had plenty of demands on me, but they didn’t want to kill me. Well, maybe a couple of them, but most of them didn’t.”

Even then, instead of taking that as his out, he persevered through it and continues to work in the hospice industry. Although he knows the people he works with are not getting better, getting the opportunity to share a sense of hope with those who need it most is far more enjoyable for him than filing paper work.

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“People have these signs that say ‘Tax The Churches,’ and I thought if they were to back up some logical conclusions to discover what they have today that they would not have today if it wasn’t for the church. You know there wouldn’t be a Southwestern, there wouldn’t be a Trinity. There wouldn’t be a St. Eds. There wouldn’t be great hospitals. There wouldn’t be the arts. A lot of that was built in the church. All these stuff that we see as good and beautiful were built in faith. Quite frankly science was built in faith. It was not a pursuit to disprove that God created things. It was a pursuit to see that the enormity of God’s creation. Its presumptuous now to

assume that religion has done more destruction in the world than anything else. I would say people have, but I don't think faith has."

-David Skinner

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Scholar Christopher Duerringer raised the question of whether the increasingly popular "War on Christianity" function as counter-publicity or hegemonic containment. Through his studies, he found that the way the culture in the United States approaches anti-Christianity discourse, is not necessarily representative of counter-publicity. He believes "they attempt to reframe policies aimed at restorative justice and pluralism as unjust, unprovoked offenses against a natural order. And if successful, such arguments threaten to reverse the marginal progress made in a country where, despite constitutional declarations and legal guarantees aside, women, people of color, and non-Christians are still significantly disadvantaged in terms of economic, political, and cultural access."

Ultimately, a battle against Christianity is the least beneficial outcome. All of the resources, time, and investments in a battle against one group, could be better implemented by fighting for new ideals, such as equality. Rather than dismissing Christianity, why not fight for freedom of religion?

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In a society that pushes itself further away from God, David Skinner and his family choose everyday to be the light of the world they were called to be. His noble, and loving family gives light to the countless communities and friends they have touched. They let their light shine before others, not out of their own merit, but so that others may see their good deeds and glorify their Father in heaven. In the end, David Skinner's core belief is that we are all Imperfect people pursuing a perfect God.

#### Author's Note

This piece was the biggest challenge and honor I have been given as a writer. As a inexperienced non-fiction writer, it was a long road to get comfortable sharing either my own stories, or someone else's in a way that stayed true, interesting, yet the perfect balance between personal and relatable without being too revealing. When I began writing this piece, I started the process without being entirely sure where I wanted this story to go. Even now, I feel as though the narrative guided itself to where it is now, rather than me truly controlling where I wanted it to go.

Interviewing someone who I previously knew, but learning about a new or different aspect of their life was an interesting process. It completely transformed a person I saw in a specific way into someone with a different story.

#### Sources

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