

# RELIGION

## Judgmental Tone Turns Off Faithful

Pastor reflects on reasons why

BY JAKE THOMAS  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

It's no secret that churches are hemorrhaging young people at a rapid pace. But Adam Hamilton, a pastor from Kansas and author of many books, thinks he knows the reason why.

In his new book, "When Christians get it Wrong," Hamilton explains that a judgmental, narrow-minded, and very vocal tone in Christianity is turning off people from the faith. But Hamilton, who was in Portland recently for a conference, has a couple thoughts on how to change that.

**When do Christians get it wrong?**

I think Christians get it wrong any time they stop living like Jesus did and make people feel small or they become like the Pharisees that Jesus really was in conflict with. That's a natural tendency for us as Christians to begin to judge other people, forget where we come from, and think it's really about telling other people how to live their lives as opposed to us trying to live the life that Christ called us to live—a life of compassion, justice, and mercy.

**What are some examples of that?**

People regularly send me notes

describing all the people that they think are living sinfully, while failing to see that the very act of sending that letter is a sign that something is not quite right in their heart. One of the examples I give in the book was I was doing a funeral for a young man who committed suicide and I was trying to comfort the family. I had a couple come up to me after the service and said, pastor, you really blew it with this funeral. You should have told people that he was in hell. I looked to them and said, do you know that? I think there is a host of other places where they get it wrong. When they try to make the Bible into a 21st century scientific textbook instead of trying to recognize its poetry its, its inspiration, and how it's not so much telling us how things came to be but why. I think we get it wrong when we think we know the mind of God when it comes to other faiths.

**As a pastor it seems like you need to take some sort of moral stand at times. How do you balance that?**

I look at how Jesus would go about doing this. When Jesus associated with prostitutes he showed them love and grace. So it's this balancing act of showing his followers the highest standard: love. Everything else is measured in the light of love. Jesus also demonstrated with his interactions with



Adam Hamilton

people who were non-religious or nominally religious this extraordinary grace. That's the thing we ought to be about.

**What are some issues that Christians ought to pay more attention to?**

When we talk about Christian ethics first of all we are talking about how we as Christians live our lives, not how others live their lives. It's one thing for me to say that this is what Jesus thought in this area of that area, but when it comes to me telling broader society that you're wrong to live this way, I think that starts to get it wrong. I think that we should be asking questions like, what does justice look like? What does it mean to love our neighbor? What is the loving thing to do with each person I come in contact with? It's appropriate for Christians to ask questions about policies that our country is pursuing that bring harm to other people.

**Why are younger people turning away from the church?**

I think that part of the challenge is what they've seen of the Christian faith isn't a reflection of what Jesus taught or the way to live. I've heard

over and over again from young adults that Christians are asking them to stop thinking or become this narrow-minded person who makes other people feel small. When you talk to young people about Jesus, they're like, yeah, Jesus taught some really great things; I just don't see Jesus in many of his followers.

**Why has this narrow mean-spirited tone in Christianity become so prevalent?**

I think the same tendency is present in every religion. I think we also live in a very polarized society with a lot of people afraid of changes. I think it leads us to demonize the people we are afraid of. I think there is a large group of people who want things to be black and white. Some people want to know that they and everyone like them are going to heaven and everyone else is going to hell, and they don't have to think about it.

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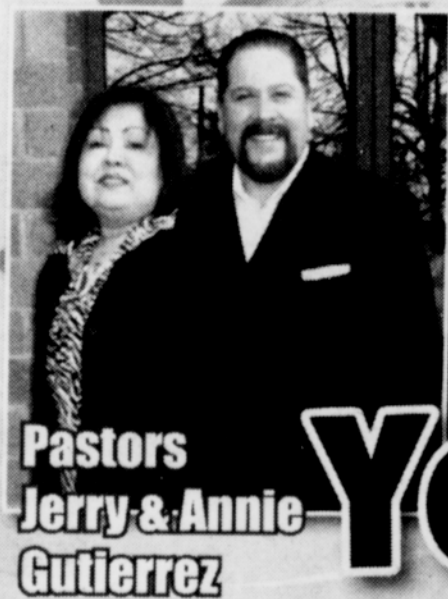
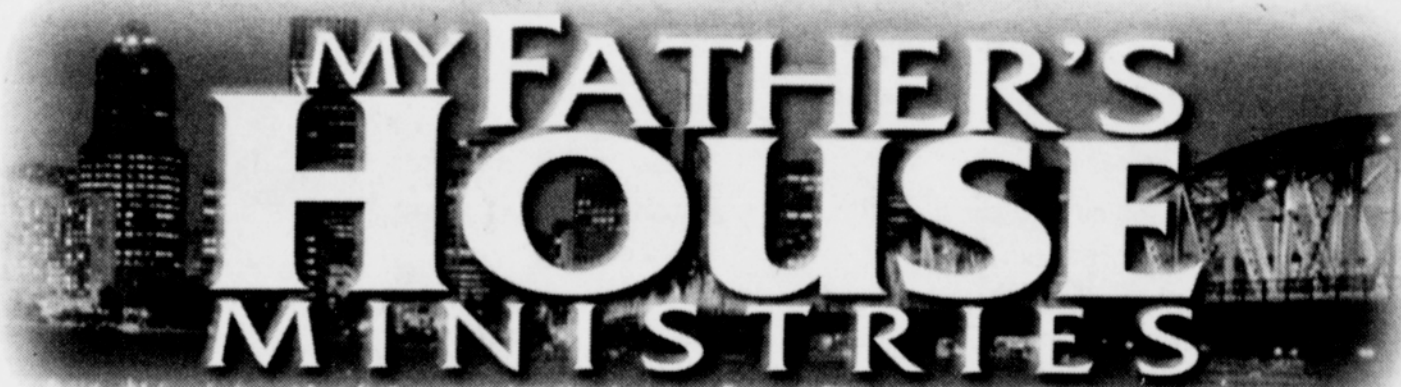
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