

## TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions podcast.

John Dickson:

Years ago, I was having coffee with a pastor friend in a cafe at my local beach. I was explaining to him what my church was doing to promote Christianity among the residents of the area, all pretty standard stuff, I thought. At one point, I noticed this woman a few tables away looking inquisitively at me. And I assumed she was a fellow Christian who'd overheard us talking and was interested in listening into the conversation, so I just kept on blabbing on. A few minutes later, the woman got up from her table, paid her bill, walked straight across to me. And at what seemed like the top of her voice in this packed cafe, she said, "You want to convert the world, do you? How dare you?" And off she stormed. Of course, then I realized she probably wasn't a Christian. And I thought of the perfect comeback about an hour later. At the time, I was honestly dumbfounded. For a moment, I began to wonder maybe Christian mission is presumptuous, perhaps promoting the news about Christ is the stuff of fanaticism rather than a reasoned modern faith. I was that guy.

John Dickson:

This woman in the cafe was picking up on one of the most reviled activities of modern times, proselytizing. Proselytizing. It even sounds bad. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary to proselytize is to induce or recruit someone to join one's party, institution or cause. The Urban Dictionary has reworked the word proselytize to read proselytise, to attempt to convert someone from one view, belief or opinion to another, without stopping until tongue tasing them to the ground, brutal. And that's our topic for today. Why are Christians such God botherers? Is it possible to share your belief system with someone who doesn't accept it without being a jerk? Is there any context in which proselytizing could be considered a good thing? I'm John Dickson and this is Undeceptions.

John Dickson:

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan Academic's Master Lectures. Each episode, we'll be exploring some aspect of life, faith, history, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we'll be trying to undeceive ourselves and let the truth out.

Dr. Sam Chan:

Christians end up with two universes of friends. They end up with a universe of church, Christian friends that they hang out with. And then they have a separate universe of non-Christian friends and the two universes never meet each other. So when you're Christian friends say, "Hey, let's have a barbecue," you

go off with them. Or when you're non-Christian friends say, "Hey, let's go listen to some music," you go off with them, but you don't ever merge your two universes together.

John Dickson:

That's Dr. Dr. Sam Chan. Yes. He's two doctors in one, talking about why Christians just don't get it when it comes to sharing their beliefs. Why in fact many have helped proselytizing to become the dirty word that it is today. He not only has a medical degree from Sydney University, but he holds a PhD in Rhetoric Speech Act Theory, to be precise from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the United States. In a sentence or two, what is Speech Act Theory?

Dr. Sam Chan:

It says when we talk or communicate or speak, we're not just conveying information. We're not conveying abstract ideas and propositions and bullet points. We're actually performing an action. An action like a promise, a warning, a blessing, a command, a curse, maybe a thank you. So at a very basic level, if I say to my future wife, "I will marry you," that is more than just abstract ideas. That is me committing my life into a relationship, a covenant relationship with another person. So there's an action being performed.

John Dickson:

So pass me that glass of water in front of you there is a speech act, right?

Dr. Sam Chan:

That's right. And if I only understand it as information, I actually have misunderstood you or been under informed, I need to have heard the request, the action behind the statement.

John Dickson:

Sam is the consummate professional God botherer. He's the professional proselytizer you might say. But it's his concern that his fellow believers weren't really communicating with their friends who don't believe that led him to write a book titled How to Talk About Jesus Without Being That Guy. It's his contention that Christians and anyone else with strong beliefs, can't hope to communicate with others so long as they continue to inhabit one universe while trying to speak from a distance into another. Tell me, what role does the community someone belongs to play in the beliefs that they form?

Dr. Sam Chan:

Yeah. Our community is probably the number one determining fact for what we believe, what we think and how we behave. We love to say, "Hey, we're rational, detached, neutral creatures. I base all my beliefs on facts, evidence, and data alone," but community, whether we like it or not is the most powerful determining factor for what we believe to be true. So as an example, I'd love to say to a room

of a hundred people "Who here believes men have the right to vote." And of course, "Who here believes women have the right to vote?" And everyone goes, "Oh, of course, yeah. Women of course have the right to vote." While I say just a hundred years ago in this room, most people would not have believed women had the right to vote regardless of what your religion or beliefs were. So community's very powerful in determining belief.

Dr. Sam Chan:

I say to people, "Who here believes motorcycles should wear a helmet?" And everyone goes, "Yeah." But then if you go to the USA, most people say, "No, no, it's their head. They can do what they want with their head." So community's very powerful in determining belief. And one final example, when my wife and I were expecting our second child who took us a long time to try to work out what to name our second child, because every parent plays that game. You don't want to name so common that it's boring, everyone else has that name, but you don't want a name so weird like Matthew with three Ts and a silent Q. So you try to look for that Goldilocks just right name in the middle. And we came up with Cooper, how cool would Cooper be? And the people would say, "Hey, how cool, funky and hip are the parents?" But then that year when we named our child Cooper, Cooper was a top 10 name in our state. Meaning we were just doing what our community was doing, whether we knew it or not.

John Dickson:

Merriam grew up living in a totally different community from that of Sam Chan different from most of us, really. She grew up in a country where Islam was the dominant and omnipresent viewpoint. The culture itself was shaped by the Quran and it was so pervasive, it was hard to even realize she was living in this environment.

Merriam:

You don't know anything else, so it's kind of like asking a fish how it feels when it's in the water. How does the water feel in different... I mean, now in hindsight, it's very different to being in the West, of course. But I would say that as a native of the fish land, when I go back, it takes about a week for me to get back into the way of things. But I have to say that it was just normal. It was a very, very fun existence. We did everything that I guess a child should be doing with sports, with education. We had very good schooling, excellent family life, excellent friends. So nothing too different, I guess in that sense.

John Dickson:

Your parents encouraged you to flourish from the beginning. You were no oppressed Islamic woman who couldn't do anything. Tell us about that, the sort of freedom and flourishing that you experienced.

Merriam:

I was blessed enough to be in a family unit that was very open minded. My mom is a doctor. My dad was a retired army official and he was into polo horses. So I grew up with horses, dogs. That was the first thing that I was trained in. My dad wanted his daughter to be very sporty, very outgoing. He thought that built character. And I think because the patriarch of the family was so caring of the women, I think that was the best thing that could happen. And it protected me from the bad patriarchy.

John Dickson:

And even swimming was a huge part of your life in those early years, yeah?

Merriam:

Yep. Yep. It came later because I hated the water. I used to go to kindergarten and they had swimming classes there and I just didn't like getting wet. So I would dip my swimming costume in the water and put it in the bag because if it wasn't wet, my parents would ask me why wasn't it wet. So I was a bit sneaking that. So I wasn't really fond of the water, but I started when my brother was trying out for the swim team. And so my dad said "Everything my son will do, my daughter will do." And so I started swimming and then I started winning. So I think that kept me going. I liked winning.

John Dickson:

Are you being coy and not telling us how far you took this? You actually represented your country, yes?

Merriam:

I did. Yes. So I won the first ever race that I started. And then that gave my parents a little bit more of a motivation to keep going. They thought that they stumbled onto something I was good at and it was their responsibility to keep that going. So I trained and I trained and I trained a lot. And then I gradually got into the national team and then I represented (beep) in a few international events.

John Dickson:

Hey, just to be clear, we're playing it safe in this episode, by not naming Miriam's country or even her real name. I hope you understand.

Merriam:

The highlight was winning a gold medal at the Islamic games that happened in Iran. And I was surprised at how good Iranian women were in swimming. So that was a new world to see Islamic women perform so well. And that was good. Yeah.

John Dickson:

Merriam's parents were very determined to offer their daughter the best opportunities possible. And part of it from their perspective was to raise her a devout Muslim. But in her early days, she did come into contact with Christians.

Merriam:

So I was actually in a Christian Catholic school. Christians are still a very respected... At least in the circle that I grew up in, they were very respected, especially in the education sector. They are responsible for a lot of the education institutes. And so the nuns were widely regarded as very good in training young girls, how to be young girls. So my parents wanted me to go there. So I went to Catholic school and that was my first experience of Christianity or Catholicism. I later found out that there is a massive difference between Protestants and Catholicism. Well, that's when I came to Australia. But I saw Christmas plays, I was very familiar with the Christmas story. I had a strange fascination with the Bible stories. It was kind of like they were my own, but I couldn't yet trust them. So it was a good relationship there.

John Dickson:

So why weren't your parents worried that you would get converted at this Catholic Christian school? Were they just so confident that Islam is immovable or were they pluralistic? I mean, what was it? Why would a Muslim family that really believed, not fear that their child would be evangelized, proselytized and converted?

Merriam:

That question honestly never came up with my parents. They just really knew that the people of the Book had values and they embodied the values that were consistent with other people of the Book. And they trusted that much more than some of the, for lack of a better word, feminist ideology that was coming up in the new girls schools where the teachers were perhaps a little bit less conservative than they would've liked. So they just went for the values and they never thought... I think also later in hindsight, I think Christians aren't allowed to proselytize. So because in that school, you have Islamiat, which is the Islamic studies and the Christian girls get taken to another room where they get taught Christian studies separately or catechism. So it was no overlap. They weren't worried.

John Dickson:

Religion is a topic that's right out in the open in Merriam's country. She and her family had no trouble discussing their faith or challenging what others believed. One of the differences I've found when I've travelled to Islamic countries is unlike the West, when you're in a Muslim country, no one is creeped out when you raise the topic of religion.

Merriam:

That is one of the main differences that I feel. It's like talking about food. It's so a part of everyday routine that you wake up, you pray of course, that's what you do. And then you go about do your work and then you pray again.

John Dickson:

Why do you think people in the West are creeped out when conversation turns to religion, whereas in other parts of the world, that's not the case?

Dr. Sam Chan:

Yeah. I think all the way back to the enlightenment where we had a very strict secular sacred divide, public private divide. So you can believe in values, but in the privacy of your own home. And the reason is because the whole verification problem. So if I said to you, "The sky is blue," that's safe conversation because both you and I can look out the window and say, "Yep, the sky is blue. We can verify that." If I say, "One plus one equals two," we can say that, it's not going to cause an argument. If I ask you what you did on the weekend, no argument there. We can verify each other's statements. But if I suddenly said, "I believe in a God," that's weird, because we can't verify that statement. And now it's guaranteed to cause disagreement. So we can believe anything we want about values and spirituality, but keep it to yourself in the privacy of your own home.

John Dickson:

So that makes sense then, do you think? I mean, are you happy with that?

Dr. Sam Chan:

Well, like we said, it's a very profoundly Western problem because when I catch an Uber ride and if the driver is a Muslim, they have no trouble telling me about their faith and asking me about my faith. We go to the Chinese grocery store, they have a little shrine set up to their God in public. So they see no difference between public and private. The whole realm is spiritual and sacred. So I think it's a Western hang-up we have, but it's an understandable hang-up because we just want to get on with each other. If we only talk about the weekend the weather and the sports, we can all get on. But if we start talking about God and prayer and spiritual stuff, now we can't get on. It's just going to polarize us.

John Dickson:

Merriam wasn't worried about polarization. She was a confident Islamic woman who was zealous for her faith. And when she came to Australia to study science, she wasn't afraid of sharing that zeal with others.

Merriam:

Well, I was a bit of a strange child in the sense that at the age of 16, I started really owning my faith. I wanted to know why I believed in the things that I do. I was raised in Shia family, and so part of that came with its own set of little rituals that I gradually actually left by the age of 17. So I was already in the process of shedding my family identity into what do I want to believe in? So I had those seeds. And as part of just coming after school, my after school TV watching involved a lot of debates between Muslims and Christians that were coming on public TV in (beep). And at that time, I thought the Muslim preachers were doing great. And so I just was so trained in the comparison between Islam and Christianity and how Islam was so much better in terms of a worldview than Christianity, based on those debates that I was seeing day in and day out that I just took all of that knowledge and started using it whenever I was challenged here in Australia.

Merriam:

And so when I first came, I met the resident assistant who later I found out to my disappointment at that time that he was a Christian. And I was like, "Oh, but you sounded so smart. How could you be a Christian?" So I actually said that to him. So it was just part and parcel of the friendships that I made. And then he had this church group on campus that I started attending Bible studies with. And I just thought it was the most absurd thing, but I loved the fact that they cared for one another and they were part of the best working communities in which people were caring for one another, I still saw happening with them. So I was drawn to that. And then I thought that I could proselytize and I was smart enough to convert a few of them. It's fine.

John Dickson:

Islam, of course, isn't the only religion in the world that's looking for converts. Christianity has an undeniable goal. I mean, there's no avoiding it, to convert people, to put it in that language, to proselytize. Yuck. Why shouldn't people be just completely turned off by that obvious agenda?

Dr. Sam Chan:

Well, I can tell you why they would be turned off by that agenda. Because suddenly you feel used as a friend, it's like a friend who turned up to a party and then found out, "Oh, no, it's a Tupperware party," or it's a school fundraiser. "I thought I was your friend, but you are using me as a means towards an end." And I think people might feel that when they make friends with a Christian or Christian makes friends with them and they suddenly find like, "Oh, you are just trying to invite me to church." So I think there's this moment where you feel you got used or something. And also the idea when we think of proselytization rightly or wrongly, we think coercion. It's at the point of a gun. And so now my agency has been violated. I'm not treated as a human being.

Dr. Sam Chan:

And also in the Western narrative we have right now, they're basically two truths we believe. I'm okay, is truth number one. In fact, I'm amazing. And the only problem is authority figures who impose their constructs upon me. So parents, teachers, and religion. So at that moment when you try to tell someone about Jesus, now you've become the bad person in that narrative. So truth number one, I'm okay. And truth number two, you need to accept me for just who I am. And so then when we try to tell people about our religion or proselytize or evangelize, you're violating those two truths because you're trying to say to someone "You are not okay. You can actually be better than who you are." And two, "My God doesn't accept you right now, just the way you are."

John Dickson:

Yeah. So you've made a beautiful case for why we should never ever get near proselytizing. But I want to ask why shouldn't people be turned off? I mean, is there a way of marrying this? Christianity obviously has an agenda and that seems unnatural. So should people just avoid those proselytizing Christians?

Dr. Sam Chan:

The way I explain it then is when a Christian tries to tell their friend about Jesus, they're actually trying to show them there is a better story out there right now than the one you have. It's like, "I love your story. I can understand why you want to own your story, but what if I was to tell you there is a better story than what you have? One that can lead to human flourishing. One that is more beautiful, more wise, more liveable than you can dare imagine."

John Dickson:

You say that it's not just about explaining a message, but sharing life, sharing meals, events, and so on. Why, isn't the message good enough? Can it not carry on its own?

Dr. Sam Chan:

This is the beautiful thing that it's understanding anthropology. What is a human being? I'm not just a brain in a bucket that absorbs ideas. I'm a whole person who lives with emotions, with heart, with imagination, with creativity. And so if it was only about a message, if it was only about information, I could sky write John 3:16 in the air and say, "That's it, boom, I've now told my friends about Jesus." Or I could, I don't know, just give you a PowerPoint slide with three bullet points, and I have now told you about Jesus. But we as human beings belong in relationships where there needs to be trust and social capital. And that's how we communicate. And so, one obvious example is hospitality. When we eat together, after a while, it's actually not about the food. After a while, the food almost gets in the way because we want to talk. And then after a while you realize none of us are eating because we are talking. So somehow we talk never in a vacuum, but we talk around homes, around food, around meals in the context of relationships.

John Dickson:

And relationships were exactly what first began to unsettle Merriam's Islamic convictions. She was offended by certain Christian doctrines like the Trinity and the way the Bible openly talked about sexuality. But the Christian friends she'd made not only provided intellectual answers to her many questions, they were prepared to walk alongside her at the pace she set.

Merriam:

It's a spider web and it's so entangled that it's really hard to say. And it always happens over time, especially when you're converting out from one worldview to another. And a lot of things have to happen together. So the intellectual arguments need to be made and they were made by this friend that I made. Let's just say, this is Will, my friend who I made, who kept making these... Every argument that I had, he had a really good answer to it. And so I couldn't wiggle my way out of these arguments that he was making, but I just couldn't accept them. There was an emotional reluctance to it.

Merriam:

And so it took years for me to be emotionally at a place where things would just click into place, and then nothing would happen for a year. And then something would happen and I would click and I would remember something Will had said. And I was like, "That actually makes more sense now than..." Islamic worldview slowly started to be very limited in its answering capacities to all of the complexities of life I was facing. So it was intellectual, but it was life experience. And then it was a personal experience with God that I've yet to explain.

John Dickson:

Yeah. So what were the first things that started to draw you, attract you to Christianity?

Merriam:

That is a very good question because I had been drawn to Christianity because of my love for the people, for my teachers, and my principal in school. And so the love for the people I felt like, because I love them, I want to know what they believe. So I think there was always a drawing togetherness because of that. And then what drew me much later was the character of Christ, but that came much later.

John Dickson:

Well, tell me about that though. What was it in Christ that you found yourself being drawn to?

Merriam:

Just when you think He's going to do one thing, He does another... He's so unpredictable. And you think that He's going to always be this meek, submissive, loving... I'd roll over my back and I'll cross oceans for you person. And then He's calling people serpents and vile and throwing stands out in the house of God,

He's cleaning out God's house and the passion that He has and the humility that He has is just so contradictory to any person that I'd ever known, that I was really gravitated to that.

John Dickson:

So you were drawn to those tensions or contradictions. When did you first feel like, "Uh-oh, I'm liking this Christianity a bit too much"?

Merriam:

I think when the idea of original sin kind of clicked. I always thought it was a very evil idea to say that a baby was born with original sin and nothing that we do... it's absolutely completely out of our control. So that did not sit well with a good God.

Dr. Sam Chan:

Yeah. So no one likes the ugly word sin, because again, it implies I'm not okay and I need to be rescued, but we live as if there's such a thing as sin because we call out other people for their sin. And I think maybe one of the ways is the Bible gives us a rich variety of ways of understanding sin. So many of us in traditional religious circles, we're used to the "Oh, there are 10 commandments. You've broken a commandment, that is sin." And that sounds very, again, patronizing, it's a religious construct you're imposing upon me. But there are other ways of understanding sin. One is simply that we fall short of who we want to be, of who my society, my tribe wants me to be. And we fall short of who God wants me to be. And at that moment, many people think "You know what? It'll be so liberating to finally admit I'm not okay."

Dr. Sam Chan:

Also, when I speak in high school chapel services, I'm the grumpy old man who's coming in now to give the Easter Jesus talk. And if I say to them, "There's a God who loves you, who made you, but we're not worshipping him," that's another way of understanding sin that we're not honouring the God who loves us and made us. And at that moment, almost every eye looks at me and thinks, "You are right. I am not honouring this God." So there are many ways of understanding sin and it's actually liberating to know I'm not okay.

Dr. Sam Chan:

And here's the big other side of the coin, with the Christian message, there's forgiveness. There's a God who forgives us. So what people have pointed out with our secular narrative right now, we've gone back to a shame culture. We call out people. We cancel people, but there's no forgiveness. And that's why people are too scared to even say, "Sorry," because they're not going to find forgiveness or redemption. They'll forever be the bad guy, cast out, cancelled. Whereas in the Christian story, it's okay not to be okay. And Jesus accepts you for who you are. And there's forgiveness in this God.

John Dickson:

Merriam was starting to become aware of this weird Christian way of seeing the world. But as a member of the university Quran Study Club, she had her own worldview. What happened next surprised her friends as much as it surprised her, a spiritual encounter that strains belief. That's after the break.

John Dickson:

Today's Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan Academic's Master Lectures. Honestly, this is a terrific resource and the scholars in front of the camera are first rate. So there's the New Testament in Antiquity with Gary Burge and Gene Green, who guide us through how the Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures formed the essential environment in which the New Testament authors wrote their stuff. Professor Lissa M. Wray Beal offers 24 lessons through the controversial Old Testament book of Joshua. That's the one with all those holy wars that seem so at odds with the Spirit of Christ. Lissa helps us unpack this text in its ancient context and then offers guidance about what an earth it might mean today.

John Dickson:

There's a lecture series on artificial intelligence with John Lennox, one on Christian Eschatology and Hope with Tom Wright. And you can even do Bill Mounce's 36 lectures on Biblical Greek for the Absolute Beginner. Actually, I'm trying to convince a good mate to do this one at the moment. You know who you are. And there's tons more. And I just noticed, literally just noticed, they also have The Christ Files series. That's the series I did a few years ago where I traipsed around the world, looking at all the evidence for Jesus Christ. It's perfect for the thoughtful doubter. Anyway, check out more by going to [masterlectures.zondervanacademic.com](http://masterlectures.zondervanacademic.com).

John Dickson:

Whether you want to train full time for Christian ministry, get better equipped to just volunteer at church or even just learn more about the Christian faith, Ridley College can help. From certificate to master's degrees, we bring the classroom straight to your laptop or mobile device, wherever you are. I teach a couple of courses for Ridley and I'm proud to be involved. Find out more at [ridley.edu.au/undeceptions](http://ridley.edu.au/undeceptions).

John Dickson:

In his book, Sam Chan says, "The most powerful argument for change isn't an intellectual one, it's a relational one. It's people not points that make the difference."

Dr. Sam Chan:

Whether we like it or not, we believe what we believe based on trust. What a trusted person tells me. So whenever we believe someone, we're actually performing a decision, do I trust this person? And so I often say to a lot of people, in a room full of a hundred people, "Who here believes water boils at 100 Celsius all things being equal at sea level?" And a hundred hands will go up. Then I say, "Who here has

actually done the experiment, actually boiled water and measured the temperature?" And usually, only 30 out of 100 hands go up now. And then to the 30 who did do the experiment, I asked them, "Did the water boil at a 100?" And they all say "No, because something went wrong with the experiment." And at that point, we all still choose to believe water boils at a 100. Why? Because we believe what a trusted scientist tells us.

Dr. Sam Chan:

Most of us believe in global warming, right? But I say to anyone, "Well, most of us believe the earth is round, but none of us have been in a spaceship." We just trust what the books tell us. Most of us believe in global warming because that's what the trusted people would tell us. I also say to people, "Who here believes their mom and dad biologically, really are their moms and dads?" And I know he gets a little bit tricky in some context. And then, almost everyone says, "Yes." And then I say, "Well, how do you know this?" You weren't there... Well, you were there, but you didn't see it. You don't remember it. You just believe what your parents tell you. And if you do the DNA test, it's usually because trust broke down somewhere. So we believe people we trust.

John Dickson:

In your book, you say the golden rule of evangelism is to evangelize the way you want to be evangelized. So I want to put it to you, if a Muslim wanted to convince you of the importance of Islam, how would you like to be proselytized toward Islam? How would you like that experience?

Dr. Sam Chan:

Yeah. And this totally happened to me in an Uber ride with a Muslim driver. And I simply asked him, "So tell me about your faith." And he very happily, excitedly told me about his faith. Then he asked me what my faith was. And I told him I was a Christian. And 9 times out of 10, when I meet a Muslim Uber driver, the conversation goes well. This was that other 1 in 10 moment where he was horrified to hear I was a Christian and he just monologued at me for the next 20 minutes to tell me why everything I believe was wrong. And I just sat there on the receiving end of a monologue. And I felt like I wasn't a human being. I didn't feel heard. He suddenly didn't even want to hear or understand my point of view. He just preached at me in a monologue and I thought, "Well, that's exactly how I don't want to be evangelized."

John Dickson:

Merriam's new friends didn't subject her to monologues about the Christian faith. They engaged with her about the ideas she was struggling with, but nor were they intellectual pushovers, they avoided diatribes, but they were into dialogue. Can you try and describe the significance of your friendship with Will and your Christian journey?

Merriam:

Yep. So it wasn't just Will because if it's just one person, then you can make them the anomaly to the rule. And so it was the church group that he was hanging around with that honestly had really good... they really cared for one another and they believed in Christianity. So that was a testament to it working in a social setting. Still wasn't for me, but that stayed with me. And then I saw Will's parents and his family, and I saw an intergenerational working out of what families following Christ looks like, where there is a lot of respect for elders. There's a lot of respect for marriage and the institution there of.

Merriam:

And people from the East come over and think that there's absolutely no familial ties that are respected in the West. And that's a point of derision for many Easterners when they look at the West and say, "Divorce is so high. You guys kick your kids out when they're 18 and you have to make appointments." And so all of those frankly, racist things that people say towards those in the West. When I saw how Christians weren't that, I saw that there's a stark difference between Christians and the West. And that's not really made clear in the East. So that was the second point.

Merriam:

And so then I had other friends who were very solidly Christian, another named John, who actually pointed me to your books. So he was the one who handed me your books when I wanted historical answers. And so it was a couple of different people who actually believed in Christ and they weren't being nice. They were not nice Christians. They didn't care about offending me, which I loved. It worked with me. It may not work with every person, but I think everybody smells an agenda. Humans smell and they know an agenda from a mile. So if you are the kind of Christian, who's just meaning so well. And they just want to bring people to the Lord and just come out and bring you over to dinner and... That so good, but there's a difference when you're actually friends with somebody because you like them and you want to contend with them and that feels different. And those were the kind of relationships that led me over the years to battle hard and fail and admit defeat.

John Dickson:

Let's press pause. I've got a five minute Jesus for you. For the first few years of my Christian faith at about 16 years of age, I was a passionate promoter of the Christian faith. I talked to everyone about it, my mom, friends, complete strangers. I had no idea in those first couple of years that a Christian could be embarrassed about being a Christian. That's something I only learned later after I mixed with Christians a little bit. But because of my enthusiasm for sharing the faith, my church decided I should be trained in evangelism. Honestly, I'd never heard of evangelism. I just wanted to let people know what I'd come to know. I didn't know there was a word for it, let alone a course, but I found myself attending these classes over, I don't know, maybe 12 weeks, learning an outline of the gospel, illustrations to make the whole thing come alive. Bible verses I memorized, answers to tricky questions and so on.

John Dickson:

And once they thought I was trained, I was turned loose on the unsuspecting public in my local area. I would literally do door knocking, walk up to people in shopping malls and ask them for conversation. I was one of those guys. But you know what, suddenly my joy and natural ability to talk about these things evaporated. The whole thing became a burden on my emotions, my memory, probably most of all, my evangelistic targets. This joyful promoter of the Christian faith was now a nervous, unnerving Bible basher. I had become self-conscious about reaching out to others, whereas I used to speak about Christ as freely as I talked about Bryan Robson, the captain of Manchester United at the time. Now, I was completely self-conscious about the whole thing. I became so fixated on finding opportunities on steering conversation in a very unconversational manner, on getting the gospel correct, that I forgot the joy of just sharing with others the brilliant things I'd come to learn.

John Dickson:

If it's natural to want to talk about the brilliance of Manchester United or nowadays my wonderful Green Bay Packers, then it is surely natural for a Christian just to be open about the wisdom, the power and kindness of Jesus Christ. What we dismiss as proselytizing is really nothing more, at least it should be nothing more, than letting our natural enthusiasm for an idea or a person bubble to the surface. It doesn't have to come across as a kind of Tupperware sales presentation. And by the way, Christians didn't invent it either. On Twitter just the other day, as we were preparing this episode, I was drawn into a really weird conversation about proselytizing. Some sceptical woman named Morgan tweeted this, "Essentially, the Catholic church" it's important to remember "was created with the government of the Roman empire for the purposes of political power. Many of the letters of Paul that included a heavy focus on evangelism and spreading the Word of Christ were really put into the Bible, which didn't exist until this meeting among proto Catholic leaders and Constantine in his politicians to further the Roman Empire's colonial motivations."

John Dickson:

I naturally probed, "May I ask what you do with the wide, wide evidence of Christians evangelizing and getting into trouble for it from Rome in the second and third centuries, long before Constantine was a twinkle in his mother Helena's eye?" But the sceptics weren't going to have a bar of it. It was a political thing, pure and simple. And obviously it doesn't go back to the lovely Jesus. He would never have told people to go on Bible bash others. But here's the thing, it does go back, not just to Jesus, but to Jesus' Jewish heritage. It's often said that Judaism wasn't interested in converts, that they tended to stick to themselves and keep away from the Gentiles.

John Dickson:

And so it was only Christians who invented the notion of evangelizing, perhaps as a counterpoint to its Jewish background. In fact, there's a very famous Jewish scholar from Oxford, Martin Goodman, who's

called a Christian mission a shocking novelty in the ancient world. With all due respect to Professor Goodman, there is plenty of evidence that some Jews, some of the time, did in fact seek Greek and Roman converts. It was the natural overflow of believing there was one God who loved the whole world, which was a pretty widespread Jewish belief. Virtually all Jews in the period before Jesus believed in what scholars call the eschatological pilgrimage motif. This is the belief that at the climax of history, the pagan nations are going to travel to Jerusalem to learn about the one, true God and worship him. The response of many Jews to this idea was just to let the pagans go their own way because ultimately God, in the future, somehow will miraculously bring about this pilgrimage and salvation for Gentiles.

John Dickson:

But some other Jews saw it totally differently, they reasoned that if the one true God really wanted to bring Gentiles to himself at the climax of history, it made sense that he would love to see at least a little bit of that within history. And so the wonderful Jewish intellectual, Philo, in the decades before Jesus, praised the Jew who could offer Pagan's "Wise words and doctrines of philosophy, as well as setting before them a life of temperance and every virtue. Converting even those who seemed to be quite incurable." Philo also speaks of a huge festival on the Island of Pharaoh's off the north coast of Egypt, where Jews celebrated the translation of the scriptures into Greek and invited their pagan friends to the festival in the hope that these Gentiles "Might throw overboard their ancestral customs, and turn to honouring our teachings alone."

John Dickson:

Then there's the first century Jewish writer, Josephus, who talks about his fellow Jews in Antioch in the first century, who were "Constantly drawing multitudes of Greeks to their religious ceremonies" synagogue services, "and were," he says, "incorporating these Greeks with themselves." He's talking about conversion. He records actually the most amazing story of Jewish mission from the year 30. This is the closing days of Jesus's own work, but this is going on in a different part of the Mediterranean world or the Middle Eastern world. Josephus tells us about a Jewish merchant named Ananias who travelled to Adiabene in Northern Mesopotamia and taught the Royal Household of Izates how to worship the Jewish God. First we're told the Royal women embraced Judaism. They turned from paganism to the God of Israel. And then with their help, Ananias was able to teach King Izates himself. And Izates became a passionate believer in the Jewish God. And so did his mom, Helena. This whole Royal pagan dynasty became Jewish and they were eventually all buried in Jerusalem. I've visited their tombs just around the corner from the hotel I stay in when I'm there.

John Dickson:

Anyway, here's my point. Certainly, Christianity did not invent the idea of mission. It's just a logical thing. The overflow of coming to believe in such wonderful stuff. Even Jesus himself referred to the Pharisees, doing mission before him, except he wasn't pleased with what they were teaching. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees you hypocrites," he says in Matthew 23. "You travel over land and see

to win a single convert. And when you have succeeded, you make him twice as much a child of hell as you are." It's strong stuff. Jesus disagreed with what the Pharisees were teaching because in his view, they were laying legalistic burdens on the Gentiles that crushed the spirit instead of lifted the spirit to a sense of God's love and mercy. But certainly, Jesus wanted his own students, disciples, to spread the faith in every gospel.

John Dickson:

In different ways, we find Jesus saying things like at the end of Matthew's gospel, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always to the very end of the age." As the climactic statement of Jesus, Christians took this seriously. They didn't become weird, bullying proselytizers. At least, not in those early centuries. They just did what was perfectly logical, beautiful and natural. They couldn't keep to themselves the beautiful things they'd found out about Jesus. So they shared their faith with anyone who'd listen. You can press play now.

John Dickson:

When Merriam eventually became a Christian, it did involve one of those forthright conversations she'd come to really enjoy, this time with her friend, Will. But it also involved a deeply spiritual event. You also had, help my memory here, not quite a vision but maybe a dream or something about-

Merriam:

No, it was even weirder than that. So I'm a science person, and I like to triplicate everything. I would prefer that, but I've been humbled over the years in that request. I got into an argument with Will again, and it was a very heated argument in which I was angry about some of the bad things that had happened in my life. And I couldn't explain the bad people getting away with good things. And so I had this huge existential angst and he was trying to explain how Christ is the deliverance. And I'm like, "Can we just not talk about that?" I don't want to cut off this friendship because that is not an answer that I'm willing to go to. But that was the first time that he kept pushing that this is the answer.

Merriam:

And so, I just cut that conversation short, but it actually made me... That was the first time I got on my knees and I prayed, it was kind of like a mock prayer, but it was in earnestness as well. I truly wanted to know. So I got on my knees and I said, "God, Jesus, if you're God, answer me, because I do want to know." And before I could finish that sentence, I just heard three words. It was audible, but it was... The three words were let me in. And so even though I heard them, they were coming from inside of me. And it was so weird that I opened my eyes and I looked around and there's nothing there, but it wasn't a scary feeling. It was somebody authoritative who was very gentle at the same time, somebody huge and gentle

asking for my permission in a very authoritative way. I've never ever experienced that before or afterwards. I brought it up with my Quran study group the next day and they all kind of laughed at me. So it was definitely something that I paid attention to.

John Dickson:

Let me in. And so what do you make of that invitation or those words?

Merriam:

It took another year or so for me to actually make sense of what happened, but things like that, don't just go away. Later when I was going through some biblical verses, and I think it's in Revelations where it says that "I stand at the door and knock and whoever lets me in..." So it just, when I started to get to know the heart of the Christian God or the Old Testament God even, it's a desire for him to have deep relationship with you, but it matters what you say. He's not going to make you an automaton. And I think that is so precious. And that's what I felt with those words. So it rung true when I started reading scripture.

John Dickson:

Merriam has been a Christian for almost 10 years now. And you might also be interested to know that she ended up marrying that friend Will, a lovely story for another time. But the sincerity of a conversion like hers from Islam to Christianity, doesn't sit well with the Western world that feels like it's heard that old Christian story many times before. Christianity has had 2000 years to make its case in the West, at least. And on every measure just about, the West is going, "Nah, we're not up for this," so are you just peddling a losing message?

Dr. Sam Chan:

I think again, in the West, we keep living as if there really, really is a God. So as Mark Sayers says in This Cultural Moment, "We live in a kingdom, but we forget about the king who gives us this kingdom." I think it's like that story where Jesus heals 10 lepers and they enjoy healing and restoration and cleansing, but only one comes back to know Jesus. So right now, we're like those lepers. We're enjoying the blessings, but we're missing out on the relationship with Jesus. So as my missionary friend, Phil Nicholson in Taiwan says, "The problem isn't that we want too much from God, we want too little. We just want the blessings, the fruit, the benefits, but we miss out on knowing God." It's almost like the barista in our favourite coffee shop. They know our coffee order, but they're not going to come to our wedding and they're not going to invite us to their wedding. So it's only a business acquaintance. So right now, it's like we're only acquainted with God, but we miss out on the wedding, the relationship.

John Dickson:

Have you been able to share your faith with many people, I guess in particular with Muslims?

Merriam:

Yes. Yes. I'm very careful when I go back to (beep) because that's a whole different ball game, but over here, I have been blessed to... I prayed for another sister in Christ and I got one from (beep). I'll not share her details because that is her story to share. But I was absolutely amazed to see God bringing another Muslim girl into the fold. And so I have been able to... She asked me why I became a Christian. And so I told my story and then her walk was quite different to mine, but she came to Christ. So I've been able to share there. I share regularly with my mom. We have arguments, we have debates and all kinds of things. But if somebody asks, I share, but I don't go out of my way to just scream from the rooftops. Sometimes I would love to.

John Dickson:

The idea of trying to convert someone is pretty disgusting to many people today. Many of the people who listen to this podcast will feel "That proselytizing, yuck, yuck, yuck. How dare you?" But I mean, you've already hinted at this a bit, I guess, but what's your feeling about that, about proselytizing? Should Christians not do it? Should they really do it? How should they do it?

Merriam:

I think they should, but I think Christians should be seen and heard much less. I think there's a point at which they need to be heard, but after they've been seen. When somebody asks, "Why are you filled with joy? Why are you bearing these burdens so well? You are so different, what is the reason behind that?" And then when you start talking, your words carry a whole different weight. Yeah. They need to be seen much more than they are now.

John Dickson:

There no question that proselytizing has terrible connotations for many of the people listening to us. And yet you are a world class professional proselytizer. Why isn't it a disgusting thing for you? Why is it a natural, beautiful thing?

Dr. Sam Chan:

I think I begin with this place where the person I'm talking to is special. They're in the image of God. They're loved by God, created by God. So important that Jesus Christ, the Son of God became one of us. That's how important this person is in front of me. And they're a good gift from a good God and I explain... Because friendship right now is a good gift from a good God, 60 to 80% of Australians say they actually have no close friends. Someone joked with me that the miracle of Jesus Christ wasn't that he was raised from the dead, but he was a man in his thirties with 12 friends.

Dr. Sam Chan:

And so if I even have one friend, that's a miracle. That's a good gift from a good God. And I need to see that person as who they are, a precious person in the image of God. So they don't exist only for me to tell them about Jesus, because now I'm using them as a means to an end. But at the same time, God might give me these opportunities to give them something special that would help them to be rescued by God.

John Dickson:

Got questions about this or other episodes? I'd love to hear them and I'll have a crack at answering them in our upcoming Q&A episode. You can tweet us @undeceptions. Send us an email at questions@undeceptions.com or record your question over at undeceptions.com. You just scroll down and hit the record button. I'd love to hear your voice. While you're there, check out the growing Undeceptions Library and check out the other shows in the Eternity Podcast Network like SALT with Jenny Salt, she does a bunch of human stories, just like the one you've heard today.

John Dickson:

Next episode, It's the End Of the World As We Know It and I Feel Fine because we've got the culture critic from Fox, Alissa Wilkinson and the one and only Richard Bauckham, truly one of the world's most revered biblical scholars. It's the world's end, so mark it in the calendar. See you.

John Dickson:

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, produced by Kaley Payne and directed by the lovely Mark Hadley. Editing by Nathaniel Shumac. Special thanks to our series sponsor Zondervan, for making this Undeception possible. Undeceptions is part of the Eternity Podcast Network, an audio collection showcasing the seriously good news of faith today. Before I go, I want to give a shout out to Open Doors, an organization that works tirelessly to provide material support for Christians in countries where sharing your faith leads to social exclusion, imprisonment, torture, and worse. Check them out at [opendoors.org.au](http://opendoors.org.au).

Speaker 4:

You only said something nice because of my fan mail, didn't you?

Speaker 5:

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