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Just Follow Jesus: Interview with Christian Singer Derek Webb

Derek Webb isn't your prototypical evangelical Christian -- but he hopes that someday, he might be.

A long-time darling of the contemporary Christian music scene, Webb has flirted with controversy a number of times since launching his solo career, most notably with his 2009 album *Stockholm Syndrome* and its lead single "What Matters More," which found him openly addressing homophobia in the Christian church.

Given his willingness to reach across dividing lines, I asked Webb about his religious identity and how it relates to his work and his positions on issues relating to LGBT people, Muslims and atheists.

Tracking the arc of your career, it seems to me that you've become increasingly vocal about your opinions on certain social issues. What's behind that?

My wife and I are both artists. Part of the luxury of being an artist is that you not only can but kind of have a responsibility to think long and hard about things on behalf of those who might listen to your music. You can give them a jumping off point for subject matter that might be too tangled for most people in the busyness of their daily lives. I think there are a lot of smart people out there who honestly just don't have the time to think through some of these issues, and it becomes easier to watch CNN, to watch Fox News, to read some random blog and just get your answers and talking points from those kinds of places.

Sometimes all people need is a little shove, and I feel like artists can play a really unique role

by taking advantage of the luxury of being able to think through these issues of culture and life and then distill those thoughts down into just a couple minutes, put a little melody with it -- something to help the medicine go down -- and give people something to react to, [so] that they might begin to form their own opinions.

What was the reaction to "What Matters More" and, more largely, *Stockholm Syndrome*? Were you concerned about the risk of taking a stand on such a heated issue?

It was honestly pretty predictable. The part of it that I didn't really expect was the response from those that are at the business end of the church's judgment, especially around the gay issue. But what was surprising in a good way -- what showed me that I picked the right kind of trouble to get into -- was the response from a lot of people who were really struggling spiritually because they had no language for being who they actually were and believing what they actually believed. For their whole lives they had people telling them they couldn't be a certain kind of person. I was really gratified to be able to provide some small bit of sanity to a handful of people. That was worth whatever judgment or misunderstanding that might've come from the record itself.

In terms of my being fearful or not [about the] reaction; I take my job really seriously, and I have tried to make a habit over the years of not listening to people who either criticize me or praise me. Spirituality is a really mysterious thing, and I feel as though I have received various coordinates from God over the years in terms of what I need to be spending my time and my work on, and that's really what I'm listening to. If following faithfully along those coordinates puts me in a season of praise with a certain group of people, that's fine -- but I don't do it to get in those graces, and neither am I upset if that also costs me some people along the road. I would much rather be faithful than successful, and I think that's a real professional difference [from] how some people do it.

How do you think the Christian community can build bridges to the LGBT community?

Initially, Christians can stop pretending that they're so different. I think there would be an immediate change in the conversation if we all realized how similar we are and the common language we share.

Another thing that would really change the conversation between the church and the broader gay community -- and it so desperately needs changing -- is the church's response. The church has spent so many years dealing publicly in the morality of the issue, in a way that misrepresents the response that I believe Jesus would have, that Christians have forgotten, or maybe never really [knew] in the first place, that whether your moral response to the gay issue is that it is perfectly permissible in the eyes of the Bible, or that it is totally reprehensible, your interpersonal response should be absolutely no different to gay people.

The response, by the way, is love. Period. It's love and open arms, regardless of your position on the morality.

Your latest LP, *Feedback*, is a worship album. Yet it's a different kind of worship album in many ways, including the fact that it's mostly instrumental. How do you respond to people who say you've "gone soft" or that you're "not Christian enough"? And, conversely, to people that say you're "too explicitly Christian" -- that you should just "keep your religion to yourself"?

I certainly get some of those [comments]. You can't please everybody, and I don't do this to please everybody. But the job of any artist is to look at the world and tell you what they see. Every artist, whether they acknowledge it or know it, has a grid through which they view the world

and make sense of what they see. Even if it's a grid of unbelief -- that you don't think there is anything orchestrating the world and that everything is completely random -- that is a grid through which you make sense of the world.

A lot of "Christian art" is about the lens they're looking through, rather than the world they see through it. I'm not going to criticize anybody for doing that, but I would rather look at the world through the grid of following Jesus and tell you what I see. But that doesn't presume that all the art I'm going to make will be about following Jesus.

The year I made *Stockholm Syndrome*, there were a lot of triggers that brought issues of race and sexuality to my mind. I have a lot of friends and family that have suffered because of the church's judgment; my best friend in the world is gay. I felt a lot of people around me drawing lines in the sand, and that year I decided: I don't want to draw lines and have to be on one side or the other, but if someone's going to push me to one or the other side of the line, I'm going to stand on the side of those being judged because that's where I feel Jesus meets people. Making *Stockholm Syndrome* was about that journey. That same lens, this year, brought *Feedback* to life. They are very different pieces of art, but the exact same ethic brought both of those records out.

What place do you see Christians having in such a religiously diverse culture? How should Christians respond to things like anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence?

Again, my first response is that Christians need to see ourselves as the same as those we're pointing our fingers at. The exact same thing goes for the conversation on religious diversity. We have got to see ourselves as the same as those we might perceive as our enemies. Not only is that a good idea; I think it's a direct commandment from Jesus.

That is counterintuitive to me, but Jesus says we are to be preemptive about how we love. I think Christianity has a very unique position in these arguments to demonstrate what we believe, to where we might not even have to tell people about [Jesus] and that his primary message was love, if we demonstrated it better.

I think this is an especially important moment and conversation. At a time when everybody in our culture is talking about tolerance, it seems that tolerance has the highest premium of any response -- "If we just tolerate one another..." But my feeling is: Who wants to be tolerated? People don't want to be tolerated; they want to be loved.

I don't want to be tolerant of people. I want to move toward and love people, to know them and know their stories, and to tell them my story. I think, if we did more of that, we'd all learn that our stories aren't that different, and that there might even be a bigger story -- a meta-narrative -- that we're all tied up in together.

As an atheist working to engage the religious and the nonreligious around positive dialogue and action, I wonder what you think can be done to bridge what is perhaps the biggest interfaith divide -- that existing between some atheists who want to see the end of all religion and seem to reserve a special malice for Christianity, and some Christians who believe that atheists are leading to the destruction of our values?

I believe that it's going to take going beyond tolerance, to love and care for those who are not like us and don't believe like us. That's a spiritual discipline, for Pete's sake. One of the hallmarks of following Jesus is to pursue and love people who are different than we are and have different beliefs than we do, and to live our lives loving, understanding and coming into common ground with those people.

This is going to be one of those untelevised revolutions; it's really going to take all of us, individually, getting to know one another better. What changes people's minds and changes people's language is relationships. I personally don't think that any Christian who doesn't have a friend -- not just a token friend, but someone they love and care about -- who is gay should speak out about the gay issue. I think that should almost be a requirement to publicly voice your opinion, because I can't tell you how it changes your posture and your language when you're not just talking about a "behavior" or a "faithless" group of people, but a family member or loved one -- someone who, when you're done saying what you're going to say, you'll have to deal with.

I'm not saying that we should change our positions on things we think are absolutely true, but it should bear some weight on what we say and how we say it. Everything would change if we actually knew each other. That's really what it's going to take.

What is your vision for the future of Christianity? What kind of Christian community do you want to see?

Honestly, I would just love to see Christians following Jesus. He was not an easy guy to follow, especially when he started talking about loving neighbors and loving enemies and going beyond tolerance to live your life with people who are nothing like you and disagree with you. I really want to hammer on some of these points, because I think they are the hallmarks of following Jesus.

I don't think that Christianity, Jesus or the Bible have failed; I think that Christians have failed to believe it and to do it. If Christians would just look at the life and the words, and pursue Jesus, I think they would suddenly find that it's incongruent with a lot of cultural Christianity and Christian practice. I would love to see Jesus lead all of us about out of this ghetto of Christian subculture.

Even if that happened, we'd still be diverse members of one body, so it doesn't mean we'd suddenly become homogenized. We'd all still have our particular personalities and gifts. Those differences are good. But the most primary and basic ethics that compel us as followers of Jesus should change, and it would change everything and reorient us back to what it actually means to be a Christian: to love.

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