

## **Some Background**

My name is Sarah Cunningham. I am an evangelical author who identifies as “moderate” on the theological spectrum. I am friends with many influencers in many camps from right to left across the Christian landscape, and it is my heart for bringing these important voices together that led me to help invite a wide range of Christians to an event called Christianity21, which is hosted by JoPa.

I do not co-produce all JoPa events. For example, I do not co-produce Progressive Youth Ministry, as I do not identify as progressive or emergent. Nor am I a co-producer of Why Christian, as has been reported.

I have known Tony Jones for approximately 7 to 8 years—the first time we met, as I can recall, I believe was at a National Pastor’s Convention in 2006 or 2007. I was invited to this event by my publisher, who served as a sponsor of the event, and had acquired books by both myself and Tony, among an incredibly diverse range of other authors from both conservative and progressive camps. At times, I have interacted with Tony weekly, if not daily, as we—along with many others—have sometimes participated in or contributed to the same gatherings, projects, and resources over the course of years. In addition to the times I have interacted with Tony at other Christian events, I go to Minneapolis 4 to 6 times a year, have been to Tony’s house multiple times, have had meals with his three children more than once, and know and love his wife, Courtney.

## **Some Distinctions**

Tony and I are dear friends who do not share the same place on the theological spectrum. I tend to lean more conservative than Tony on several of the issues on which he is most vocal. I maintain close ties to more conservative and moderate evangelical communities, publish books with evangelical publishers, and have only attended evangelical churches (often non-denominational) in my adulthood.

I stress this history and these distinctions, not because it matters much to me, but because some of the most invested critics have suggested that I defend Tony because it is financially profitable to do so. In actuality, however, many if not most of the organizations which have partnered with me and thus provided me any opportunities for financial compensation, are conservative enough that they would likely prefer I was NOT connected with Tony Jones as he has a more liberal theological track record and a more provocative online voice than would make them comfortable.

The online commentary on Tony’s personal life has also suggested that people in Tony’s camp are circling the wagons to protect their own tribe. In response to this, I would also like to clarify that this is not the case for me. Although I have many

friends who have identified with the emergent movement, here are the facts: Out of hundreds of events I have participated in or attended, I have only attended two to three events that I am aware of which claimed to be emergent gatherings over the last 18 years of my adult ministry and career. In my first book, which I wrote when I was 23 and was published when I was 26, I specifically stated that I was not emergent and even included reference to a book which critiqued the emergent movement. I have also, at times, declined kind invitations to participate in other emergent or particularly progressive networks, simply because I do not identify closely enough with those labels even though I sometimes share some of the same aims as those communities.

In addition, because Tony and I hail from different traditions and experiences, he and I have disagreed—even heatedly at times—about several topics, theological points, and blog and social media posts over the time I have known him. We have had long conversations, exchanged lengthy emails, and traded many texts that while rooted in friendship, included much debate. Once we even co-wrote about such a disagreement on his blog.

The suggestion that all those speaking on Tony's behalf must all be doing so out of a desire to protect their profits, or out of a desire to protect their own tribe, are simply wrong. When I speak on his behalf, I perhaps *lose* applause from some in my home tribes, but I do it because I believe that true conscience and honor requires us to extend ourselves for personal justice—even when that justice is not for our own but for our theological or political other and even when it may cost us something.

### **On Defending Victims**

I would also like to say I deeply believe and have passionately written both online and in books, about the importance of organizing for the marginalized, powerless, and victimized. I have drawn critique, many times, for speaking up for justice, from a wide range of actions such as writing books about disillusionment with the church or joining clergy marchers fighting racism in New York City, despite personally having a family member who is a white police officer in one of America's largest cities. I absolutely believe in standing against injustice, even at cost to myself, when a careful review of the circumstances lead me to believe there is a reputable claim of injustice.

In addition, I also have met or know almost everyone who is accused of being involved in a cover up related to allegations against Tony, including almost all of those who offered Julie an apology. It is my understanding that almost all of those who offered apology, offered apology to Julie for their own self-chosen words which unfortunately publicly labeled Julie as crazy. However, if you read their testimonies carefully, you will observe that almost all of them also said they arrived at that opinion either through their own experience or through word of mouth, of their own volition, with no coaching. In fact, two of them outrightly stated their

comments were their own mistakes, and not a part of an organized smear campaign or cover up of any kind.

Finally, I myself place a high value on marriage. My husband and I have been married 12 years, we have been together 14. Our marriage is not perfect, but it is prized, and I would fight for it to the death. And I take all threats to our marriage—both the ones that have come from my own sinfulness and the ones that come from outside pressures—seriously. It is my belief that despite Tony’s different theological positions around marriage, that he takes such threats seriously too, and that while I cannot know the past through personal experience, there is ample reason to believe that Tony did NOT in fact begin his relationship with Courtney until his relationship with Julie had ended.

### **The Evidence vs. The Allegations**

I have taken the accusations against Tony very seriously. Just as I advocated on my Huffington Post blog for reviewing the evidence on both sides of the Michael Brown shooting, I have insisted on reviewing evidence, often independently of either Tony or Julie. I have seen public legal documents, private emails, and heard the testimony of at least a dozen people involved in the events which point to serious credibility problems in these allegations. While no one can understand or assess all of the dynamics present in someone else’s private home life or divorce proceedings, I have had the chance to witness many important things firsthand. This includes the deep love and affection from Tony’s children toward him—that along with many legal documents and the testimony of numerous adults—lead me to believe there are many, many discrepancies between the accounts offered online and facts that are easily verifiable for anyone who takes the time to visit the Minneapolis area courts or police stations.

Despite all the places where Tony and I do not agree, I believe—in my best judgment after thorough research—the core of the allegations against him are burdened by far too many false claims to be considered credible.

### **A Hope For Peace and Healing**

I believe that many of those offering critique are well-meaning people, some of whom have noble track records of standing with the oppressed and against injustice. I believe many who have given these allegations attention have done so out of a sincere heart for abuse victims.

Over the course of the past few months, however, I have also seen some of the online critics publicly tweet at Tony’s friends or affiliates by asking questions like “Why do you remain affiliated with this person when he is accused of abusing his wife?”

It has troubled me that a few of them did not give more consideration to all the possible answers to this question. That perhaps the most likely scenario is NOT that dozens of authors in Tony's networks, dozens of police and justice officials, leaders of certain religious movements, sponsors of events, publishers of Tony's books, and all of Tony's employers represent a conspiracy of hundreds and thousands of people to cover up abuse.

Perhaps the reason that notable people who are well known for confronting abuse do not publicly speak out against Tony is because the hundreds of people closest to this situation, who have been following these events for years, simply know that while humans act imperfectly—especially in painful life stages, the allegations are just categorically false and easily disproven.

Perhaps a cartoonist who critiques religion, a Facebook page that critiques Christian culture, and a Tumblr admin who lives in Australia do not have the years of interactions, or practical opportunity to closely examine a wealth of evidence, to which many in the industry who are closer to the situation have enjoyed access.

Perhaps the reason that many retained affiliation was not because they have suddenly—and only in this one instance—turned especially heartless or dismissive of victims. Perhaps it was because these matters were investigated and cleared years ago, and that actions were taken to support Tony in focusing his efforts on his marriage and family at the time. Perhaps it's because many of those named were not just discovering these threads of discussion in 2014, but now—7 years later—these leaders were trying to protect the true victims of this series of incidents, Tony and Julie's children, who did not deserve to be used as debate-points in this argument or to have their family's darkest hours broadcast and preserved online for all to see.

Tony and my experience of God and the Bible and theology and church is not exactly the same, but I do believe the same God I worship is stirring in him. I believe the same Bible I read impacts his current trajectory. I believe the same Holy Spirit stirring in me is prompting growth in him and that his pursuit of God is sincere and valid—though different—than mine.

I encourage all those who have participated in this online discussion to offer as much grace to each other, especially those who we consider our "others" or "opponents," as our hearts and emotional bandwidth allow. It is truly one of the only ways we might begin to recover good from the mountains of harm that has unfolded.

Lastly, I will not let even the most invested online critics or the possibility of being targeted by those who mock people of faith make me afraid to speak. If I was not willing to lose applause or opportunities from others to speak toward justice in the middle of controversy, then my commitment to the truth would be too weak to be admired anyway. I encourage others who have offered private testimony that helps provide context for these allegations to be brave in sharing their own experiences.

I believe we live into people's understanding of us, and in taking the long view, I believe much truth about this matter and all involved will emerge in time. But more than truth about any one of us or any group of us, hopefully, I pray, truth about our God and the kind of community he desires to bless us with will be further revealed as well.

Many blessings and thanks, as well as wisdom, to those of you who search your hearts on this issue. May we trek after Jesus and seek to be like him in better and better ways, both individually, and together. Anyone who wishes to contact me may do so at sarahraymondcunningham (at) gmail (dot) com.