

“If you read only one book this year, make it this one. It’s that important.” **Rick Warren**

the
**Explicit
Gospel**

Matt
Chandler
with Jared Wilson

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Rick Warren, #1 New York Times best-selling author, *The Purpose Driven Life*; pastor, Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, California

“This book, like the gospel itself, is clarifying, convicting, comforting, and compelling all at the same time. I wholeheartedly invite you to read it, to be overwhelmed by the mercy and majesty of God in the gospel, and then to spend your life making the gospel explicit in every facet of your life and to every corner of the earth!”

David Platt, best-selling author, *Radical*; Senior Pastor, The Church at Brook Hills, Birmingham, Alabama

“Matt Chandler is one of the best Bible preachers on the earth and one of the godliest men I know. I am thrilled to see this book released. Read it. And buy some extra copies to give away.”

Mark Driscoll, pastor, Mars Hill Church, Seattle; President, the Resurgence and the Acts 29 Church Planting Network

“Too often the gospel fails to take root when it is assumed. The explicit gospel transforms individuals, churches, and nations as the mission of God is carried forward. Matt Chandler has gifted the church with a powerful tool to combat the assumed gospel. *The Explicit Gospel* is a serious threat to the moralistic, therapeutic deism that cripples the lives of so many. I highly recommend this book to both believers and unbelievers alike.”

Ed Stetzer, President, LifeWay Research; contributing editor, *Christianity Today*

“That the gospel is not clearly taught in classic liberalism is disheartening but not surprising. That frequently the gospel is not taught in evangelical congregations is both disquieting and surprising. Evangelicals will not deny the gospel, but they may assume it while talking about everything else—and that is tragic. Matt Chandler issues a robust call to make the gospel an *explicit* and central part of our preaching and takes pains to show what that looks like. Amen and Amen.”

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Matt Chandler presents the gospel in a way that is balanced, hope-filled, and very, very serious, all the while presented with Matt’s trademark humor. Even more faithful than funny, Matt insults all of us (including himself) in a strangely edifying way, and in a way that I pray will make you treasure Christ even more.”

Mark Dever, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,
Washington DC; President, 9Marks

“*The Explicit Gospel* is a roadmap and wake-up call to our generation to grasp the full, expansive, and true gospel story. Matt is a leading voice, a great expositor of the Scriptures, passionate about Jesus, and serious about the gospel and making God known. When he speaks, I listen, and when he writes, I read. This book reflects the clear and core message of Matt’s life, leadership, and passion for a generation hungry for truth.”

Brad Lomenick, Executive Director, Catalyst

“People who come face-to-face with death make the best evangelists. I have to believe that’s why my friend Matt Chandler is so passionate about a clear, biblical presentation of the gospel. Life is short. Eternity is long. May this book drive you to greater clarity in preaching the life-saving gospel of Jesus Christ.”

James MacDonald, Senior Pastor, Harvest Bible Chapel,
Chicagoland; radio teacher, *Walk in the Word*

The Explicit Gospel

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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	11
Part 1: The Gospel on the Ground	
1 God	21
2 Man	39
3 Christ	53
4 Response	63
Part 2: The Gospel in the Air	
5 Creation	89
6 Fall	111
7 Reconciliation	135
8 Consummation	155
Part 3: Implications and Applications	
9 Dangers in a Gospel on the Ground Too Long	175
10 Dangers in a Gospel in the Air Too Long	189
11 Moralism and the Cross	203
<i>Appendix</i>	223
<i>Notes</i>	225
<i>General Index</i>	231
<i>Scripture Index</i>	234

Introduction

*The Gospel is the heart of the Bible. Everything in Scripture is either preparation for the Gospel, presentation of the Gospel, or participation in the Gospel.*¹

DAVE HARVEY

My concerns started on a Saturday night at a “Celebration Weekend” several years ago. Our church—The Village—was baptizing a great number of men and women who were publically professing their belief in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. As I walked into our small auditorium, I was greeted by a hefty man in his early twenties. He gave me a hug and then proceeded to tell me about a girl he had brought to hear the testimonies. With a bit of nervous glee in his voice he informed me that the girl was a witch, and he hadn’t told her ahead of time where he was bringing her. A smile on his face, he told me she was really angry and he wanted me to know this “just in case something happened.”

I sat down in the front row and with some anxiety prayed that God would give me wisdom if this thing turned into a scene from *Harry Potter: The Unrated Version*. I am a good interpreter of Scripture and a passionate man when it comes to the gospel, but when it comes to spells and curses and the manifestation of demons, I have enough experience to know I don’t know enough and that I need more prayer, study, and discipleship (but that’s another story for a different book).

About this time the screen that obstructs the baptistry was raised, and standing in the water were two women in their early thirties. Karen began to share her testimony.² She told us that for the last fifteen years of her life she had been heavily involved in the occult and witchcraft, and she began to list all the reasons Christ

Introduction

was better, more powerful, and more loving than anything or anyone else, especially compared with what she had witnessed and been a part of in the occult. I breathed a sigh of relief and knew God was at work among us. A young man in his early twenties was next. He talked of atheism, alcohol, Buddhism, drugs, and doubt, and then he talked about how through the patience and persistence of a friend, the Holy Spirit had opened his eyes to the truth of life in Christ and forgiveness through his cross.

But the next four baptisms bothered me. One after another, each person stirred the waters and told some variation of the same story: “I grew up in church; we went every Sunday morning and night; we even went to Wednesday prayer, vacation Bible school, and youth camp. If the doors were open, we were there. I was baptized when I was six, seven, or eight, but didn’t understand what the gospel was, and after a while I lost interest in church and Jesus and I started walking in open sin. Someone recently sat me down and explained or invited me to The Village and I heard the gospel for the first time. I was blown away. How did I miss that?” Or they would say, “No one ever taught me that.”

I had heard all this before, but that night was the eve of the birth of our son, Reid. My daughter was three, and it hit me that my kids were going to grow up in the church. That night for the first time I asked the question, “How can you grow up going to church every week and *not* hear the gospel?” I quickly decided that these people had heard the gospel but didn’t have the spiritual ears to *truly* hear it, to receive it.

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit wasn’t going to let it go that easily. The question began to haunt me. I decided to have a few conversations and interviews with what we have called the “dechurched” men and women attending The Village. A few of them confirmed that my hunch was correct. They could go back and read journals and sermon notes from when they were teenagers or college students and see that they had indeed heard the gospel. However, what alarmed me most was the number of men and women who

couldn't do that. Their old journals and student Bibles were filled with what Christian Smith in his excellent book *Soul Searching* called "Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."³

The idea behind moral, therapeutic deism is that we are able to earn favor with God and justify ourselves before God by virtue of our behavior. This mode of thinking is religious, even "Christian" in its content, but it's more about self-actualization and self-fulfillment, and it posits a God who does not so much intervene and redeem but basically hangs out behind the scenes, cheering on your you-ness and hoping you pick up the clues he's left to become the best you you can be.

The moralistic, therapeutic deism passing for Christianity in many of the churches these young adults grew up in includes talk about Jesus and about being good and avoiding bad—especially about feeling good about oneself—and God factored into all of that, but the gospel message simply wasn't there. What I found was that for a great many young twentysomethings and thirtysomethings, the gospel had been merely *assumed*, not taught or proclaimed as central. It hadn't been explicit.⁴

Nothing New

This assumption has historical precedent. We can read about it in the pages of Scripture and in chronicles of church history. Consider these words from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For *I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.*

Paul is reminding the Christians of the gospel. He's saying, "Don't forget it! You were saved by it, will be sustained by it, and are currently standing in it."

Introduction

For some reason—namely, our depravity—we have a tendency to think that the cross saves us from past sin, but after we are saved, we have to take over and clean ourselves up. This sort of thinking is devastating to the soul. We call this the “assumed gospel,” and it flourishes when well-meaning teachers, leaders, and preachers set out to see lives first and foremost conformed to a pattern of behavior (religion) and not transformed by the Holy Spirit’s power (gospel). The apostle Paul saw this bad teaching and practice happen often, and he went on the offensive against it:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the *grace of Christ* and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are *some who* trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:6–9)

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: *Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?* Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal. 2:20–3:5)

The idolatry that exists in man’s heart always wants to lead him away from his Savior and back to self-reliance no matter how pitiful that self-reliance is or how many times it has betrayed him. Religion is usually the tool the self-righteous man uses to exalt him-

self. Again, this isn't new; the apostle Paul lays out in Philippians 3:4–9 his religious pedigree and practice as an example of what a man can accomplish with discipline and hard work. In that passage Paul states that all his religious effort, exhaustive checklist of all his accomplishments included, amounts to nothing compared to the surpassing greatness of Christ. He goes a step further and even calls it “rubbish” or “dung.”

Think about that: all your church attendance, all your religious activities, your Sunday school attendance medals, your journals, having a “quiet time,” reading the Scriptures—it's all in vain if you don't have Christ. When you read Paul's texts together, you get a feel for his attack on the Christian, moralistic, therapeutic deism of his day. We are saved, sanctified, and sustained by what Jesus did for us on the cross and through the power of his resurrection. If you add to or subtract from the cross, even if it is to factor in biblically mandated religious practices like prayer and evangelism, you rob God of his glory and Christ of his sufficiency. Romans 8:1 tells us that there is no condemnation for us, not because of all the great stuff we've done but because Christ has set us free from the law of sin and death. My sin in the past: forgiven. My current struggles: covered. My future failures: paid in full all by the marvelous, infinite, matchless grace found in the atoning work of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Gospel?

I have been encouraged and emboldened by the number of cries for gospel-centered ministry occurring in evangelicalism. From books to blogs, conferences to DVDs, there is a call back to what is of “first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3). But I want to spend my time with you trying to make sure that when we use the word *gospel*, we are talking about the same thing. Unfortunately there are, as you have seen referenced in Paul's writings, false gospels. I want to make sure we are all on the same page here—which is to say, God's page—and talking about what *he* is talking about when the gospel is mentioned in the Scriptures.

Introduction

The Bible establishes two frames of reference for the same gospel. I call these vantage points the “ground” and the “air,” and in this book we’re going to see how together, they comprise the explicit gospel. In part 1, “The Gospel on the Ground,” we will trace the biblical narrative of God, Man, Christ, Response. Here we will see the power of grace for human transformation. Beginning with God’s needless self-sufficiency and culminating in a sinner’s Spirit-abled response to the good news, we’ll see how the glory of God reigns supreme over every plot point in God’s plan for man. When we consider the gospel from the ground, we see clearly the work of the cross in our lives and the lives of those around us, the capturing and resurrecting of dead hearts. We see the gospel extended in this way when Jesus and his prophets call individuals to repent and believe.

When we get to part 2, “The Gospel in the Air,” we’ll see how the apostle Paul connects human salvation to cosmic restoration in Romans 8:22–23. Here we’ll look at the oft-forgotten meta-narrative of the Bible’s story of redemption. Paul writes:

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

If the gospel on the ground is the gospel at the micro level, the gospel in the air is the story at the macro level. Here we find a tour de force story of creation, fall, reconciliation, consummation—a grand display of God’s glory in his overarching purposes of subjecting all things to the supremacy of Christ. As we examine the gospel in the air, we’ll see from the scriptural testimony of Jesus’s atoning work that the gospel is not just personal, but cosmic. When we consider the gospel from the air, the atoning work of Christ culminates and reveals to us the big picture of God’s plan of restoration from the beginning of time to the end of time and the

Introduction

redemption of his creation. We may see the gospel extended this way in Jesus's declaration in Revelation 21:5, that he is "making all things new."

We see these two vantage points positioned together in Romans 8:22–23. In this passage we see that the gospel is the fulfillment of the longing of all of fallen creation but also (and chiefly) the fulfillment of the longing of mankind, the only creature made in God's image.

One gospel, two vantage points. Both are necessary in order to begin to glimpse the size and the weight of the good news, the eternity-spanning wonderment of the finished work of Christ. Both are necessary so that we are not reductionistic in how we define what God is up to both in our hearts and in the universe around us. If the gospel is reduced because of our preferences or misunderstandings, we leave ourselves open to heresies and to attacking our brothers-in-arms.

Most of the time, each of us views the same glorious truth from a particular vantage point. It might help to think about how someone walking down a New York City block sees the city versus how someone flying 30,000 feet overhead sees it. Both would say, "This is New York," and both would be right. What a silly argument the two would have if they tried to deny the other the right to talk about and proclaim the greatness of the city.

We'll begin our coverage with the gospel on the ground, because without an understanding of the ground and the pull of spiritual gravity toward it, you just might spin off through the air and into outer space.

You know you know it... But then again, maybe you don't.

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