

IX

9Marks BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

THE GOSPEL

HOW THE
CHURCH
PORTRAYS THE
BEAUTY OF
CHRIST



RAY ORTLUND

Foreword by J. I. Packer

“When Ray Ortlund speaks, I listen. My generation has grown in knowledge but needs sages. Pastor Ray is that to us. Pick up this resource and hear from a man who espouses theological depth matched by gospel grace.”

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Bryan Chapell, President Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary; Senior Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

“Ray Ortlund weaves together profound biblical reflection on how gospel doctrine must lead to gospel culture with choice quotations from great saints in church history. A must read for any church that wants to help rather than hinder the lost in being attracted to Christ.”

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“Compelling. Convicting. Encouraging. Probing. And most of all, entrancing. What a beautiful vision of what the church can be through the power of the gospel. How evident it is that the gospel has penetrated Ortlund’s own heart. Read it. Pray through it. Ask God to use its message mightily in your church and in many other churches as well.”

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“Pastor-scholar Ray Ortlund, in his newest book, brings out the goodness in the good news. And a church that doesn’t show this goodness in their life together, says he, undermines the very gospel they preach. It’s a good argument, and worthwhile.”

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“In this incisive book, Ray Ortlund does the necessary and compelling work of connecting the life-giving gospel to the lived experience and witness of the church. His vision for gospel cultures that bloom in the rich soil of gospel doctrine will capture those who desire to see the world captivated by Christ.”

Stephen T. Um, Senior Minister, Citylife Presbyterian Church, Boston, Massachusetts; co-author, *Why Cities Matter*

The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ

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CONTENTS

Series Preface	11
Foreword by J. I. Packer	13
Introduction	15
1 The Gospel for You	21
2 The Gospel for the Church	39
3 The Gospel for Everything	51
4 Something New	65
5 It Isn't Easy, But It Is Possible	79
6 What We Can Expect	93
7 Our Path Forward	103
Special Thanks	119
Notes	121
General Index	127
Scripture Index	133

SERIES PREFACE

Do you believe it's your responsibility to help build a healthy church? If you are a Christian, we believe that it is.

Jesus commands you to make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Jude says to build yourselves up in the faith (Jude 20–21). Peter calls you to use your gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul tells you to speak the truth in love so that your church will become mature (Eph. 4:13, 15). Do you see where we are getting this?

Whether you are a church member or leader, the Building Healthy Churches series of books aims to help you fulfill such biblical commands and so play your part in building a healthy church. Another way to say it might be, we hope these books will help you grow in loving your church like Jesus loves your church.

9Marks plans to produce a short, readable book on each of what Mark has called nine marks of a healthy church, plus one more on sound doctrine. Watch for books on expositional preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, and church leadership.

Local churches exist to display God's glory to the nations. We do that by fixing our eyes on the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting him for salvation, and then loving one another with

Series Preface

God's own holiness, unity, and love. We pray the book you are holding will help.

With hope,
Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman
Series editors

FOREWORD

Satan, in his wicked way, is a shrewd strategist. C. S. Lewis reminded us of this in *The Screwtape Letters*, and the apostle Paul clearly never forgot it (e.g. 2 Cor. 2:11; 11:14). Sherlock Holmes spoke of Professor Moriarty as the “Napoleon of crime,” and we do well to think of Satan as the “Napoleon of sin.” Satan stays active, keeping pace with God, cunningly aiming to spoil God’s work and to thwart his plans to do good for his people and bring praise to his name. So the church must ever be at war with Satan, since Satan is always at war with it—with us who believe.

Today, God is renewing within the church a concern for a deeper knowledge of his truth in Scripture and of his love in Christ. Yet already it is observable that Satan seeks to derail this concern by causing trouble in the congregations that possess it. We can be certain, moreover, that he will keep on doing this as long as the renewal of orthodoxy continues. And so books that call for authentic, Christ-centered faith to show itself in Christlike beauty of life—books like this one—become very significant for the Christian cause at this time.

It seems beyond question that we believers do not think often enough, or hard enough, about the culture of our congregations. *Culture*, a word borrowed from sociology, means the public lifestyle that expresses a shared mindset and con-

Foreword

victions held in common. A church's culture should be orthodoxy expressing orthodoxy. It should look like self-giving love for others that in turn reflects the sacrificial love for us of Jesus Christ our Savior and our Lord.

By hammering home the reality of this, our cultural calling, and reminding us that Christian belief minus Christian culture is real hypocrisy, Dr. Ortlund renders us good and needed service. May his words be heard and taken to heart.

J. I. Packer
Board of Governors' Professor of Theology
Regent College

INTRODUCTION

Evangelion (what we call “the gospel”) is a Greek word, signifying good, merry, glad and joyful news, that makes a man’s heart glad and makes him sing, dance and leap for joy.¹

William Tyndale

William Tyndale, the pioneer translator of the Bible into English, wrote those delightful words in 1525. And he sealed them with a martyr’s death. What a world we live in, that something so happy would be so hated! But so it is.

As Tyndale pointed out, the very form of the Greek word translated “gospel” means good news.² The gospel is not law, demanding that we pay our own way. The gospel is a welcome announcement, declaring that Jesus paid it all. It’s like a long-awaited telephone call. When the phone finally rings, we grab the phone and eagerly take that call. This gospel is a message to be proclaimed and believed (Mark 1:14–15). It is the point of the whole Bible (Gal. 3:8). It comes from God above (Gal. 1:11–12). It is worthy of our utmost (Phil. 1:27–30).

This good news is more than good vibes. This message has specific content. It can and must be defined, and from the Bible alone. Every generation must pick up their Bibles and rediscover the gospel afresh for themselves and rearticulate the ancient message in their own words for their own times.

Introduction

We are in just such a time of active gospel rediscovery, and it is exciting to be involved.

Here is the essential message Bible-believing people rally around:

God, through the perfect life, atoning death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, rescues all his people from the wrath of God into peace with God, with a promise of the full restoration of his created order forever—all to the praise of the glory of his grace.

Salvation from the judgment of God into fellowship with God is all of God. It is not of us. That is good news indeed! And this gospel is widely known and sincerely preached in our churches today.

SOMETHING TROUBLING

But here is something troubling. If a message so good lies at the defining center of our churches, why do we see such bad things in those same churches—ranging from active strife to sheer exhaustion? Where is the saving power of the gospel? Why don't we see more of Tyndale's singing, dancing, and leaping for joy in our churches, if the good news is setting the tone?

In his prophetic book *Witness*, Whittaker Chambers tells of a young German woman whose father had been fervently pro-Communist. Then he became strongly anti-Communist. Why? She said: "You will laugh at me, but you must not laugh at my father. One night, in Moscow, he heard screams. That's all. Simply one night he heard screams."³

Introduction

This happens in our churches too. People come to hear good news. But then they hear screams. They hear cries of anguish and distress in churches that preach the gospel in concept but inflict pain in reality. That is shocking, but it is not new. The prophet Isaiah writes:

The vineyard of the LORD Almighty
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are the garden of his delight.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.
(Isa. 5:7, NIV)

How many people in our cities are ex-Christians, and even strongly anti-Christian, because they went to church to hear “good news of great joy” (Luke 2:10) but it was drowned out by strife and trouble?

Let’s not assume that our churches are faithful to the gospel. Let’s examine whether they are. After all, “Every institution tends to produce its opposite.”⁴ A church with the truth of the gospel in its theology can produce the opposite of the gospel in its practice. The risen Lord said to one of his churches, “You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked” (Rev. 3:17). The problem was not what they believed doctrinally but what they had become personally, and they didn’t even realize it. Yet it was obvious to the Lord: “I know your works” (Rev. 3:15). Therefore, they needed to go to Christ with a new humility, openness, and honesty.

THE TEST OF A GOSPEL-CENTERED CHURCH

Not long after his life-altering crisis of faith, brought on by the personal ugliness he saw in his denomination, Francis Schaeffer wrote an article entitled “How Heresy Should Be Met.” Here is his main point:

The final problem is not to prove men wrong but to win them back to Christ. Therefore, the only ultimately successful apologetic is, first, a clear, intellectual statement of what is wrong with the false doctrine, *plus* a clear, intellectual return to the proper scriptural emphasis, in all its vitality and in its relation to the total Christian Faith, *plus* a demonstration in the life that this correct and vital scriptural emphasis meets the genuine needs and aspirations of men in a way that Satan's counterfeit does not.⁵

So the test of a gospel-centered church is its doctrine on paper *plus* its culture in practice—“a demonstration in the life that this correct and vital scriptural emphasis meets the genuine needs and aspirations of men.” If a church's gospel culture has been lost, or was never built, the only remedy is found at the feet of Christ. That church needs a fresh rediscovery of his gospel in all its beauty. It needs to prayerfully reconsider everything it believes and practices. Nothing is gained by merely repackaging the church in forms more attractive to outsiders.

First and foremost, the gospel of Christ must be fully believed and embraced by our churches. That is more profound than a momentary upsurge of enthusiasm. *The need of our times is nothing less than the re-Christianization of our churches, according to the gospel alone, in both doctrine and culture, by*

Christ himself. Nothing less than the beauty of Christ will suffice today, though what a renewed church will look like might, at present, lie beyond our imaginations.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The purpose of this book, then, is simple. I want to show how Christ puts his beauty into our churches by his gospel. That explains the title of this book: *The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ*. Beauty is powerful. Our churches long for it. You and I long for it. And we can help our churches see it. We possess, in the gospel alone, God's wonder-working resources for the display of Christ among us. And as you read, I hope you find yourself thrilled with the beauty of Christ. That's my ultimate goal.

So this is a book about the gospel, yes. But more specifically, it's about how the gospel can shape the life and culture of our churches so that they portray Christ as he really is, according to his gospel.

I believe that A. W. Tozer's ironic quip from a generation ago still holds: "A widespread revival of the kind of Christianity we know today in America might prove to be a moral tragedy from which we would not recover in a hundred years."⁶ What is there in our churches that *deserves* to survive? What is there in our churches that *can* survive? Any church of any denomination today that falls short of the gospel of Christ in either doctrine or culture will inevitably collapse under the extreme pressures of our times.

My own dear dad said in a sermon years ago, "Only an awakened church . . . only people in a revived condition are

Introduction

going to make a dent on this society.”⁷ The gospel alone works with the power of God (Rom. 1:16). Everything else, everything less, will be swept away, and rightly so.

Let’s set all lesser things aside and prayerfully, before the Lord, rediscover his powerful gospel, while we still can.

1

THE GOSPEL FOR YOU

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16

Gospel doctrine creates a gospel culture. The doctrine of grace creates a culture of grace.

When the doctrine is clear and the culture is beautiful, that church will be powerful. But there are no shortcuts to getting there. Without the doctrine, the culture will be weak. Without the culture, the doctrine will seem pointless.

Gospel doctrine with gospel culture is prophetic. Francis Schaeffer wrote:

One cannot explain the explosive dynamite, the *dunamis*, of the early church apart from the fact that they practiced two things simultaneously: orthodoxy of doctrine and orthodoxy of community in the midst of the visible church, a community which the world could see. By the grace of God, therefore, the church must be known simultaneously for its purity of doctrine and the reality of its community. Our churches have so often been only preaching points with very little emphasis on community, but exhibition of the love of God in practice is beautiful and must be there.¹

THE GOSPEL

Schaeffer's words "by the grace of God" are crucial. We need strength from beyond ourselves, because it's hard to hold on to gospel doctrine. It's even harder to create a gospel culture, one so humane and so attractive that people *want* to be part of it. Schaeffer also wrote: "If the church is what it should be, young people will be there. But they will not just 'be there'—they will be there with the blowing of horns and the clashing of high-sounding cymbals, and they will come dancing with flowers in their hair."²

We accept that the truth of biblical doctrine is essential to authentic Christianity, but do we accept that the beauty of human relationships is *equally* essential? If by God's grace we hold the two together—gospel doctrine and gospel culture—people of all ages will more likely come to our churches with great joy. It is more likely that they will think, "Here is the answer I've been looking for all my life."

DOCTRINE OR CULTURE?

Every one of us is wired to lean one way or the other—toward emphasizing doctrine or culture. Some of us naturally resonate with truth and standards and definitions. Others of us resonate with feel and vibe and relationships. Whole churches, too, can emphasize one or the other.

Left to ourselves, we will get it partly wrong, but we won't feel wrong, because we'll be partly right. But only partly. Truth without grace is harsh and ugly. Grace without truth is sentimental and cowardly. The living Christ is full of grace and truth (John 1:14). We cannot represent him, therefore, within the limits of our own personalities and backgrounds. Yet as we

depend on him moment by moment, both personally and corporately, he will give us wisdom. He will stretch us and make our churches more like himself, so that we can glorify him more clearly than we ever have before.

These equations help me define the matter more simply:

Gospel doctrine – gospel culture = hypocrisy

Gospel culture – gospel doctrine = fragility

Gospel doctrine + gospel culture = power

Only the powerful presence of the risen Lord can make a church this gospel-centered.

Several years ago, author Anne Rice said, “Christians have lost credibility in America as people who know how to love.”³ There might be many reasons for that negative assessment, not all of them convincing. But I cannot dismiss her comment. Neither does the problem that she highlights register as a low priority in the Bible, one we might get around to someday. In fact, few things are more urgent for us than to regain credibility as people who know how to love, for Jesus’s sake, so that his glorious gospel is unmistakably clear in our churches.

People will see *him* in *us* as we build our churches into gospel cultures with the resources of gospel doctrine, taking no shortcuts.

John 3:16, perhaps the most famous verse in all the Bible, spreads before us the doctrine of the gospel. This verse is the gospel for you and me personally. The renewal of our churches starts deep within each of us, as we are renewed in the gospel

THE GOSPEL

ourselves. So let's think through this wonderful verse, phrase by phrase.

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

The gospel is good news, and these momentous words have to be the best news: “For God so loved the world . . .” (John 3:16a). Yet for this verse to make the impact on us it deserves, we must understand two things: who this God is and how he loves this world.

First, who is this God? The word *God* is so familiar to us that we might gloss over it. But we need to think about it. Not one of us has ever had a single thought about God that was fully fair to the magnitude of who he really is. Who is the God of the Christian gospel?

A contrast can help. In his book *What Is the Gospel?*, Greg Gilbert uses satire to help us see how we naturally diminish our concept of “God”:

Let me introduce you to god. (Note the lowercase *g*.)

You might want to lower your voice a little before we go in. He might be sleeping now. He's old, you know, and doesn't much understand or like this “newfangled” modern world. His golden days—the ones he talks about when you really get him going—were a long time ago, before most of us were even born. That was back when people cared what he thought about things, and considered him pretty important to their lives.

Of course all that's changed now, though, and god—poor fellow—just never adjusted very well. Life's moved on and passed him by. Now, he spends most of his time just hanging in the garden out back. I go there sometimes to see him, and there we tarry, walking and talking softly and tenderly among the roses. . . .

The Gospel for You

Anyway, a lot of people still like him, it seems—or at least he manages to keep his poll numbers pretty high. And you'd be surprised how many people even drop by to visit and ask for things every once in a while. But of course that's alright with him. He's here to help.

Thank goodness, all the crankiness you read about sometimes in his old books—you know, having the earth swallow people up, raining fire down on cities, that sort of thing—all that seems to have faded in his old age. Now he's just a good-natured, low-maintenance friend who's really easy to talk to—especially since he almost never talks back, and when he does, it's usually to tell me through some slightly weird “sign” that what I want to do regardless is alright by him. That really is the best kind of friend, isn't it?

You know the best thing about him, though? He doesn't judge me. Ever, for anything. Oh sure, I know that deep down he wishes I'd be better—more loving, less selfish, and all that—but he's realistic. He knows I'm human and nobody's perfect. And I'm totally sure he's fine with that. Besides, forgiving people is his job. It's what he *does*. After all, he's love, right? And I like to think of love as “never judging, only forgiving.” That's the god I know. And I wouldn't have him any other way. . . .

Okay, we can go in now. And don't worry, we don't have to stay long. Really. He's grateful for any time he can get.⁴

Is there anything in Gilbert's picture that reflects how we think of God? Let's be honest with ourselves about this.

John Piper helps us all take our spiritual temperatures this way:

For many, Christianity has become the grinding out of general doctrinal laws from collections of biblical facts. But childlike wonder and awe have died. The scenery and poetry and music

THE GOSPEL

of the majesty of God have dried up like a forgotten peach at the back of the refrigerator.⁵

In other words, we might affirm the right doctrines, but every one of us still needs to say: “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!” (Ps. 139:23).

Let’s forget everything else for a moment. Let’s think about God, because “what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”⁶ God does not gain by our clarity about him. We do.

Go all the way back to the beginning. Where did you get your idea of God? And how do you know you didn’t make it up?

The gospel displays God gloriously, far beyond what we naturally think, even opposite to what we naturally think. For instance, early in the Bible, God says, “I am God Almighty” (Gen. 17:1). Almost no one believes that God is truly almighty, which is why God said it. But when that amazing thought about God drops into our mental pool, the ripples move out in all directions. Here is what God Almighty reveals to us about himself:

I am the Almighty God, able to fulfill your highest hopes and accomplish for you the brightest ideal that ever my words set before you. There is no need of paring down the promise until it squares with human probabilities, no need of relinquishing one hope it has begotten, no need of adopting some interpretation of it which may make it seem easier to fulfill, and no need of striving to fulfill it in any second-rate way. All possibility lies in this: I am the Almighty God.⁷

Without this real and glorious God, the task of our lives would be to keep adjusting our expectations of life downward.

Author Reynolds Price understands how dark reality becomes without an almighty God: “There is no Creator and there never was. The universe is pure unilluminated matter where senseless atoms and vicious creatures stage the awful pageants of their wills.”⁸ But with John 3:16 showing us the love of God Almighty, we never have to swallow such hopelessness.

The Christian gospel does not ask us to settle for something. It begins with the almighty God, who, amazingly, doesn’t despise the world but loves the world. That’s who God really is. It’s what the Bible says. Let’s believe it.

Now to the second question—how does God love this world? John says, “For God so loved the world.” The little word *so* is worth noticing. It communicates the intensity of God’s love. How did God love the world? Not moderately, but massively. God *so* loved the world, not because we are lovable but because he *is* love (1 John 4:16).

The intense nature of God’s love becomes all the more evident when we think about this world of ours that is *so* loved by God. As we grow in seeing God more clearly, we also grow in seeing ourselves more clearly. John observes: “This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light” (John 3:19–20). It’s hard to admit that we love the darkness, but we know it’s true. We have all done evil things and then covered them up, fearing exposure. We’ve tried to forget the memory and to ignore conscience and to medicate the pain. It is hard for us to face ourselves honestly.

W. H. Auden, in his poem “September 1, 1939,” points

THE GOSPEL

to something of this darkness in our individual lives. He describes what he saw one evening in a nightclub:

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day;
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play . . .
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.⁹

We all see ourselves in this poem, don't we?

John's words about loving the darkness also help us to see ourselves at another level—as a culture. One of the marks of our times is that we redefine evil things as good. We change the labels, as if that could change the realities. We tell ourselves we're better than we really are. This too is “[loving] the darkness rather than the light.”

Recently I did a search at Amazon.com for “self-esteem,” and I got 93,059 results. Time after time, we have been told that self-regard is how we become well-adjusted and successful people. But is it true?

In her *New York Times* article “The Trouble with Self-Esteem,” Lauren Slater quotes a researcher who studied criminals and concluded: “The fact is, we've put antisocial men through every self-esteem test we have, and there's no evidence for the old psychodynamic concept that they secretly feel bad about themselves. These men are racist or violent because they don't feel bad enough about themselves.”¹⁰

The Bible challenges the self-flattery that we cling to in our world today. How? First, the law of God exposes the fraudulence of our virtue by showing us the true holiness of God. We don't deserve as much as we think we do. Second, the Bible simply changes the subject to how much God loves the undeserving. In other words, the gospel helps us to stop barricading ourselves against God, because it's evil people in denial whom God loves so massively.

But we must trust him and open up. After all, we know how dishonesty paralyzes our human relationships. For instance, a friend wrongs you and then pretends it never happened. As a result, the friendship cools, the distance between you grows, and soon there is guardedness where before there was spontaneity. At some point, you realize that what makes the relationship impossible isn't the original wrong but the denial of the wrong.

Our willful denial of God is *the* mega-offense above all our other offenses that God challenges by his massive love in Christ. Our world thinks it is too good for God. It's too touchy and defensive to accept his love. But that does not stop God.

What if it did? What if God said: "So, that's the way you want it? Then have it your way. You hate the light. You love the darkness. Your whole approach to life is to sin and then fake happiness. You refuse to be honest. Okay. But you cannot cling to your self-created falsehood and have my massive love too. This relationship is over forever"? He has the right to say this. Who could blame him if he did!

But what did God do instead?

THE GOSPEL

THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON

God so loved the world “that he gave his only Son.” This Son is Jesus, the promised Messiah of the Old Testament and the One who fulfills the deepest hopes of the human heart. The word *only* means that Jesus is unique. There is no other like him. He is therefore irreplaceable. There is no other Savior. The world has no other hope. No one else will appear out of heaven to come rescue us. It’s either God’s only Son or despair now and damnation forever.

Have you considered the audacious things Jesus says about himself? Here are a few, for starters:

- “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).
- “Believe in God; believe also in me” (John 14:1).
- “Unless you believe I am he you will die in your sins” (John 8:24).

C. S. Lewis helps us get right to the point:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic . . . or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.¹¹

The only Son, given from the massively loving heart of the Father, came into this world “not by constraint but willingly, not with a burning sense of wrong but with a grateful sense of high privilege and . . . a blessed consciousness of fellowship with His Father who sent Him.”¹² We did not make him up as a new religion. He came down from God as the archetypal new man, our better self, our only future. He lived the worthy life we have never lived and he died the guilty death we don’t want to die. By his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus fulfilled every demand of God in our place. He atoned for our guilt. He satisfied the wrath of God against us. He conquered death on our behalf. He did all that as our substitute, because in our helplessness we could never dig our own way out. God gave us his Son fully, without holding back at all. God even gave him *up* at the cross. He abandoned him to the desolation of the hell we utterly deserve, so that forever and ever he would give us heavenly things we cannot deserve (Rom. 8:32).

This is the massive love of God—the Son leaving nothing of the Father’s glory unexpressed, leaving nothing of our need unfilled, opening up the mighty heart of God to the unworthy. But this massive love is laser-focused. The only Son is our only entry point back to God, the only One given by God, the only One acceptable to God. *There is no other*. I dare you to name one other hope in all this world of which this can be said:

The obedience and death of the Lord Jesus laid the foundation and opened the way for the exercise of this great and sovereign act of grace. The cross of Jesus displays the most awesome

THE GOSPEL

exhibition of God's hatred of sin, and at the same time the most august manifestation of his readiness to pardon it. Pardon, full and free, is written out in every drop of blood that is seen, is proclaimed in every groan that is heard . . . Oh blessed door of return, open and never shut, to the wanderer from God! How glorious, how free, how accessible! Here the sinful, the vile, the guilty, the unworthy, the poor, the penniless, may come. Here too the weary spirit may bring its burden, the broken spirit its sorrow, the guilty spirit its sin, the backsliding spirit its wandering. All are welcome here. The death of Jesus was the opening and the emptying of the full heart of God. It was the outgushing of that ocean of infinite mercy that heaved and panted and longed for an outlet. It was God showing *how* he could love a poor, guilty sinner. What more could he have done than this?¹³

Every other hope is based, explicitly or implicitly, on how deserving we are. Only the Christian gospel is based—clearly, boldly, and insistently—on how loving God is to the undeserving. If you thought you could earn, demand, and fight your way through life on the basis of your own entitlements and cleverness, but now you find within yourself not light but darkness and denial, not freedom but impasse; if you have shocked yourself with the evil you're capable of and have given up on yourself in despair, the God of love waits for you with open arms today.

When we finally abandon our pretenses and open up to the love of God, we always find it right where God himself put it—in his only Son. In Christ alone, we, the guilty, will find all the love that we will ever need. That is what the gospel says.

But how do we get there?

THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES WON'T PERISH BUT HAVE LIFE

John concludes verse 16 with the answer: “that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” The word *whoever* is broad. Anyone, however discredited, can enter in. At the same time, the words *not perish but have eternal life* are narrow. Perishing and eternal life are the only alternatives standing before us. Every one of us will go one way or the other. It all depends on whether we will “believe in him,” the only Son of God.

What then does it mean to believe in him? Here is what it does *not* mean. In English, we might say, “I believe in the free-enterprise system,” that is to say, “I agree with it, I like it.” But try that out on John 3:16: “For God so loved this evil world, that he gave the sacrificial gift of his only Son, so that we could say, ‘Sure, that’s what I believe in—along with Motherhood and Apple Pie.’” The massive love of God calls for more and creates more than mild agreement.

The Greek text of John 3:16 literally says, “whoever believes *into* him should not perish.” Real belief takes us *into* Jesus Christ. Real belief destroys aloofness. It moves us from self-completeness into Christ-completeness. We stop treating him as a religious garnish to be placed on the side of life. Rather, we find in him our all. He becomes our new sacred center. We gladly lose ourselves in who he is for desperate sinners. Theologians call this radical reorientation “union with Christ.” It’s that profound.

When I believe into Christ, I stop hiding and resisting. I surrender my autonomy. In response to the good news of all

THE GOSPEL

that Jesus has done, I hurl myself at him as my only hope. I want to be *really* forgiven of my *real* sins by a *real* Savior.

When you look at Jesus in this new way, the Bible says you are brought safely *into* him forever. How wonderful! You can never be forsaken there, because all forsakenness landed on the cross, far away from us. His grace, received by faith and not works, relocates you deeply into his heart.

Gerhard Forde helps us accept the simplicity of believing as opposed to earning:

We are justified freely, for Christ's sake, by faith, without the exertion of our own strength, gaining of merit, or doing of works. To the age-old question, "What shall I do to be saved?" the confessional answer is shocking: "Nothing! Just be still; shut up and listen for once in your life to what God the Almighty, creator and redeemer, is saying to his world and to you in the death and resurrection of his Son! Listen and believe!"¹⁴

What matters most to God is not which sins we've committed or not committed, or how we stack up in comparison with other sinners. What matters most to God is whether we've bonded by faith with his only Son. In other words, God's final category for you is not your goodness *versus* your badness, but your union with Christ *versus* your distance from Christ. To put it yet another way, what matters most about you in God's sight is not the bad or good things you've done but your trust and openness to Christ *versus* your self-trust and defensiveness toward Christ.

God has simplified everything for everyone. We don't have to be good enough. We don't have to know all the answers. God

has the answers. He has lovingly provided everything in Christ. There is no reason for us to hold back. Why remain cool and guarded when God offers his massive love in the most obviously wonderful person who ever walked the face of the earth? Why not trust him? If you do, he will draw you in, and he will do so forever. This is the promise of the gospel.

If you don't believe your way into Jesus Christ, you will perish.

Do you see that word *perish* in John 3:16? Stare at it for a while. It's captured dimly in a play called *Breath*, written in 1969 by Samuel Beckett, who contributed to that era's "theater of the absurd" movement. The whole play lasts about thirty-five seconds. The curtains part to reveal a pile of garbage on stage. There are no actors. The only sound is a human cry as the lights come up, which is followed by silence, which is followed by a whimper as the lights go out. End of play, end of life, end of story. That is a picture of perishing—a lifetime that leaves behind a trail of cast-off clothes, old computers, carbon emissions, and lost opportunities, then a funeral, and then the death of everyone who wept at your funeral. You don't matter ever again, except when you stand before the white-hot judgment of God in eternity, where you will give an account for rejecting him. Hell is for people who could have enjoyed the love of God but held back. The Bible says, "They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thess. 1:9). That is perishing.

But eternal life is available right now to hell-deserving sinners massively loved by the all-glorious God who gave his only Son. The only thing he asks is that we respond to that

THE GOSPEL

good news by turning from ourselves and receiving Christ with the empty hands of faith. Have you trusted in him? Have you forsaken yourself and turned to him as your complete Savior? Will you do so right now? He offers and promises eternal life, in himself, to all who simply believe.

Jonathan Edwards helps us to become decisive for Christ:

What is there that you could desire in a Savior that is not in Christ? . . . What is there that is great or good, what is there that is venerable or winning, what is there that is adorable or endearing, or what can you think of that would be encouraging which is not to be found in the person of Christ? Would you have your Savior to be great and honorable, because you are unwilling to be beholden to a low person? And is not Christ honorable enough to be worthy that you should be dependent on him? Is he not a person high enough to be appointed to so honorable a work as your salvation? Would you not only have a Savior of high degree but would you have him . . . to be made also of low degree, that he might experience afflictions and trials, that he might learn by the things that he has suffered, to pity those who suffer and are tempted? And has not Christ been made low enough for you, and has he not suffered enough? . . . What is there lacking, or what would you add if you could, to make Christ more fit to be your Savior?¹⁵

FROM DOCTRINE TO CULTURE

The love of God in Christ is the breathtaking doctrine of John 3:16. Now here is the beautiful church culture called for by that doctrine: “Beloved, if God *so* loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

Peter puts it this way: “Love one another earnestly”

The Gospel for You

(1 Pet. 1:22). We are not to love moderately but earnestly, the way God loves.

There is a lot of love in this world, most of it moderate. But under the blessing of God, gospel doctrine cracks our hearts open to receive something from beyond this world. We see how massive God's love really is, and so we give up our aloofness and come together to care for one another in real ways, even as God wonderfully cares for us. That is when a church starts looking like a community where the God of John 3:16 dwells in power. That is when the world can see his love in reality, and many will join us in Christ and live forever.

Gospel doctrine creates a gospel culture, and it matters.

IX 9Marks

Building Healthy Churches

9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches.

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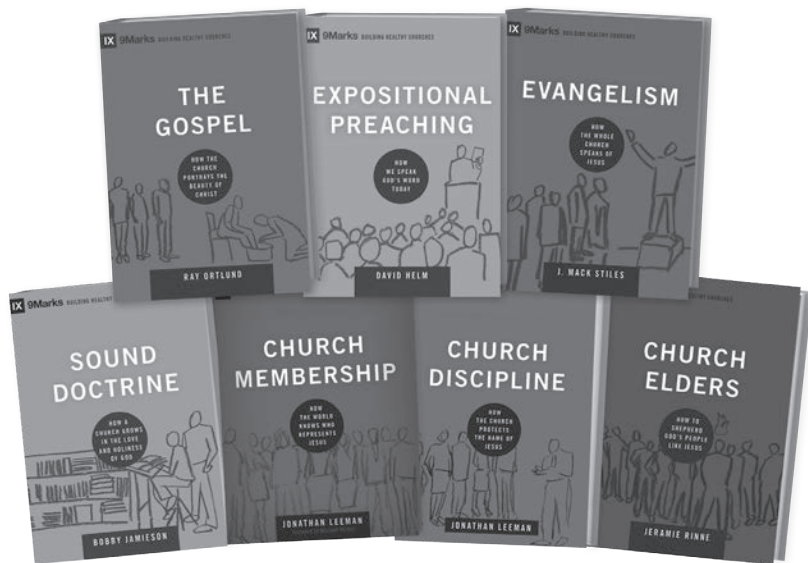
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- 5 A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism**
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HOW DOES THE CHURCH PORTRAY THE BEAUTY OF CHRIST?

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CRAIG L. BLOMBERG, Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary

“In this incisive book, Ortlund does the necessary and compelling work of connecting the life-giving gospel to the lived experience and witness of the church.”

STEPHEN T. UM, Senior Minister, Citylife Presbyterian Church, Boston, Massachusetts

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**This volume is part of the 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches series.*

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