

TOGETHER FOR THE GOSPEL



The (Unadjusted) Gospel

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The Unadjusted Gospel

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The Church Is the Gospel Made Visible

Mark Dever

How does your church make the gospel visible?

Imagine a church in which faith in Christ is affirmed but the lives of everyone in the church are otherwise, well, normal. Some people in the church are more “religious.” Some are less. But all of them are happy together. The cross is regularly, though vaguely, affirmed. In fact, all the talk about God and Christ is indistinct and muted. Sin is not really discussed. And prejudices are not confronted. Do you think this church would commend the gospel?

In fact, such a church reminds me of one English bishop’s response to a question about the mission of the church. Richard John Neuhaus wrote of this bishop, “He seemed a little taken aback by the question, but finally allowed that he supposed the mission, so to speak, was something like ‘keeping alive aspects of the Christian heritage for those who are interested in that sort of thing.’”¹

In a similar vein, I remember the strong words of Frank Thielman’s father, Cal Thielman, who was a wonderful Presbyterian pastor and preacher for many years in Montreat, North Carolina. While driving him to his hotel during a stay in New England, I pointed out an historic church building. He asked me about the theology taught at that church. I said, “It’s quite liberal. They don’t really believe the Bible is true.” Mr. Thielman frowned, shook his head, and snorted, “I wish God would just burn it down!”

I wonder how many churches would actually help spread the gospel *by closing down*. And how many more churches simply don’t matter much.

Has your life been full of spiritually unhelpful churches? Has church been a place of testing more than resting, of trial more than triumph, of employment more than enjoyment? Would you and other members in your church say that spiritual growth has come from publishers and college fellowships, from musicians and authors, from friends and family, from websites and Internet preachers—but not really from your church itself?

In fact, a local church exists to make the unadjusted gospel visible. And the purpose of this chapter is to consider how the local church then displays the great truths of the unadjusted gospel about God, humanity, Christ, and the necessary response. These four words give you a summary of the gospel.

- *God* is holy and loving.
- *Humans* have been created good and in his image. Yet we have sinned against him and now deserve his judgment.
- *Jesus Christ*, God's one and only Son, has mercifully come to rescue us from the guilt and punishment of sin. He lived a life of perfect trust in his Heavenly Father, died in the place of sinners, and rose from the dead in victory over sin and death.
- He calls us now to *respond* by repenting of sin and putting our trust in him, and so being reconciled to God now and forever.

This is the gospel. Nothing I say means to diminish the verbal nature of the gospel and the sufficiency of God's Word. A healthy church reinforces and encourages evangelism; it doesn't replace it.

But we must also realize that an unhealthy church undermines our careful proclamation. The two are related. Even as the church is created by the gospel, so the church also reflects and helps define what we mean by the words we preach.

God

First, let's consider God and how his nature and character are to be displayed in the church.

Holiness. Distinct lives point to a distinct God. The lives of our congregation members should be marked by the fruit of God's Spirit—"love,

joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23).² Sometimes these qualities will be welcomed and admired. Other times they will be rejected. As Paul said of his own ministry, “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life” (2 Cor. 2:15–16). Our distinct lives help to clarify what God himself is like.

Think of the command, “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Lev. 19:2). Peter quotes this very verse to some young Christians in Turkey in the middle of the first century. “Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:15–16; cf. 1 Cor. 6:9–11, 19–20). Brother pastor, is your church marked by such holiness? Or is your church so much like the world that those around you have no questions to ask you?

Is the awesomeness of God reflected in our public gatherings? Is God presented in our individual lives and church gatherings as one who is unique, holy, set apart, and distinct? In our day, we treat casualness as the height of intimacy with God. But it was not so in the Bible. Consider the responses that people in the Bible have to God. Job repents in dust and ashes (Job 42). Isaiah confesses his sinfulness (Isa. 6:5). Ezekiel falls face down (Ezek. 1:28). As Jeremiah put it, “No one is like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is mighty in power” (Jer. 10:6). Our God is majestic and holy and awesome. And we show something of God’s holiness in the reverence of our public assemblies and in our personal obedience.

Satan wants us to think of holiness as bondage, when it’s really freedom. Your church and mine, by reflecting God’s character, become lights that shine in a very dark world. One holy person can draw people’s attention. But a holy community creates a picture of humanity that people have only dreamed of.

Love. Our churches should be distinct from the world in part through our love for God and others. Local churches should be marked by concern for others. They should be communities in which, as Paul says, “nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others” (1 Cor. 10:24). Would you notice a community like that? Is that what our non-Christian friends

and neighbors see when they watch the life of our churches? Without such love, we are just like any other club.

Authority. Another important distinction from the world around us is in our understanding and use of authority. I stumbled across this idea when preaching through 2 Samuel, and I came to David's last words:

The God of Israel spoke, the Rock of Israel said to me: "When one rules over men in righteousness, when he rules in the fear of God, he is like the light of morning at sunrise on a cloudless morning, like the brightness after rain that brings the grass from the earth." (23:3–4)

The Holy Spirit used these verses—and pastoring a congregation full of people who probably work in government!—to cause me to reflect on how our use of authority is meant to reflect God's. When Satan tempted our first parents, he was teaching them that authority and love cannot go together. He was telling them that "love" will always let people do whatever they want and that true love won't deny us something so desirable.

Of course, we know that that's false. When we regard God as Jesus did—as perfectly trustworthy—we live as God intends people to live. And his authority simply works. The right use of authority is fruitful; it blesses those underneath that authority. And it is glorious—like the light of morning at sunrise. Authority well used reflects the character of God in a special way.

So when we live in communities where we experience firm, gentle, patiently correcting, attentively guiding care for one another, then something deep inside of us is stirred. We begin to hope for a more humane life than we had previously thought possible. There is a God who both loves us and corrects us. And we want to know this God. A community functioning like this provokes people to become aware of their native thirst and hunger for such good authority.

On the other hand, without local churches like that, authority might be abused as it often is in the world, which destroys. Or it can be absent altogether, which enervates. Authority abused in the home, office, government, or church tells an especially destructive and evil lie about God. And our churches should show the world something different, something

better. Our churches should be places in which trust might not be fully earned, but by God's grace it is extended. Such trust should be given to fellow Christians and especially to those called to lead our congregation. And this trust should be honored. A local church like that, where holy, loving, and healthy authority is exercised, helps to illustrate and explain something of God and his character to others in our world.

Human Beings

A healthy local church also helps to clarify the truth about human beings—what we are and what we were made to be.

Image of God. The local church should be a congregation in which all people are valued because they are made in God's image, not because of their job, status, wealth, education, or similarity to us. Therefore, churches should be characterized by friendships and relationships that cross natural boundaries.

When they do, and when they don't reflect a solitary slice of the community or one kind of person, they reflect the fullness and variety of God's creation. As Paul said, "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth" (Acts 17:26a). A church community that lives out what it preaches about the value of each member points back to what is preached—that we were all created in God's image. A local church is not only for people of one social class or ethnicity, because God himself is the Father of all people. Our conscience, our moral sense, and our ability to relate to others show that he has made each one in his image. Our churches help to display that reality.

Depraved. But our churches should also teach and model an understanding of human depravity. I'm sad to say that we certainly model depravity when we sin. But our congregations should be places where we both teach about and confess our sin to one another. And we help one another fight it.

The church should *not* be an assembly of the self-righteous but an assembly of people who admit that they are not righteous apart from God's grace.

Is your church a community in which no one is encouraged in moral

self-satisfaction but in which humility is honored? Humility should be honored because, as Christians, we know that humility is appropriate for sinners such as us. The Bible teaches that we “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Our churches should clearly teach this important truth, even if it is culturally unpopular.

Brother pastor, in your presentations of the gospel, use God’s law to awaken the conscience of the sinner. And preach about sin to the saints, as well. For instance, the fact that redeemed folks continue to struggle with sin points to one argument for church membership. Church membership offers accountability to Christians. By identifying with a particular church, members tell the pastors and other members of that church that they intend to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer, and service. They *increase others’ expectations of them* in these areas, and they make it known that *they are the responsibility of this local church*.

Church membership is more related to the gospel than many pastors think. A careful practice of church membership makes our witness to non-Christians clearer. It makes it more difficult for weaker sheep to stray from the fold. It gives shape and focus to the discipleship of more mature Christians. And it aids church leaders in knowing exactly who they are responsible for. In all of this, God will be glorified.

When we step into this community of the local church, it makes us *morally visible* to ourselves. It is the context in which sinners may first see themselves *as sinners*. We do not cultivate Christian lives to hide, cover over, or deny our sinfulness. A Christian church, in that sense, may be the most honest, least flattering, frank congregation of people someone has ever come into and yet, at the same time, be marked by love, encouragement, and sensitivity, because we are a congregation of people who believe that not only is the visitor a sinner but that *we* are *all* sinners.

Years ago, when I was preparing to leave England and move back to the United States, I met a relative whom I had never met before. After some chitchat, she asked me what I was going to do. I answer a question about my occupation in one of two ways—tactful or direct. I decided to go for direct: “I’m going to be a Baptist preacher.”

“Oh!” she said, dropping her eyes down to her coffee and stirring it,

obviously uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had just taken. “I don’t have much use for church.”

I waited a moment and then said, “Do you mind if I ask you why?”

She replied, “They’re just pits of vipers—all the gossip and backbiting!”

I then asked, “And do you think the world outside is really any better?”

She said, “Well, I guess not, but at least they know they’re vipers!”

Again, I waited a moment and then observed, “You might be surprised how much I agree with you. You’re right about the world—it is a pit of vipers. And I think you’re right about the church, too! I know that the church is a pit of vipers. But I think where I would disagree is that I don’t think that the world realizes that they are a pit of vipers. But Christians do. Now there are churches that don’t realize that they are a pit of vipers, and I wouldn’t touch those churches with a ten-foot pole! But any church I go to will know that it is a pit of vipers. That’s why we are there. And you know what? There is always room for one more to slither on in!”

When our churches confess that humans are made in the image of God *and* that humans are fallen and depraved, we offer a compelling and accurate description of human nature. It captures the good and the bad. The simple ability to understand ourselves and our world in such realistic terms will both bring sanity and commend the gospel. It will discourage our churches from being glibly triumphalistic or morbidly pessimistic. And we pastors must lead the way in trying to cultivate the appropriate humility within ourselves, as we confess our sins to God and to our brothers and sisters.

Without a community built to teach, understand, and live in the light of these twin truths, our real problem will be left undiagnosed. It is our understanding of human sin, combined with an understanding of God’s goodness and righteousness, that sets up the human problem—how can we sinners be accepted by such a holy, loving, and good God?

Christ

That brings us to a third aspect of the gospel that the church makes visible—the Savior Jesus Christ.

Person. In one sense, it is difficult to speak of making the unique Son of God visible. He *was* visible, but now he is interceding for us before the throne of God, and he will visibly return in power and great glory to judge the world. In a very profound sense, he is not here.

Precisely what marks out this current stage of redemptive history is that Jesus is present with us through his Spirit, his Word, and his people. He is invisible to us at this juncture, between his ascension and his return. But the local church should be a community in which the unique person of Jesus Christ—fully God and fully man—is to be *metaphorically* visible in the sense that we bear his name, his teaching, his gospel purposes, his glory, and his fame. The church worships Christ.

We can certainly take up the New Testament language of the church as the body of Christ. And we know that we who are filled with his Spirit and purchased by his blood are his temple (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 3:16).

So how do we make Christ visible in our local churches? We do so by teaching that he is fully God and fully man, who become incarnate for us and for our salvation. And we do so by imitating him in our lives. We show who Jesus is by worshiping him and being devoted to him on Sunday and every day.

Without a community that teaches this message, the truth about Jesus Christ would be unknown. Without a church in whom God's Spirit works, people would never go to tell and live out this message, and the message would never be told. Without local churches like this, Christ would be left without a witness in this world.

Work. At the very heart of our local congregation, however, is the commitment to understand and present not only *who* Jesus Christ is but also *what* Jesus Christ did. In the same way, our lives together should be provocative. We should form communities in which loving forgiveness is regularly granted. We should be collections of people marked not by self-righteousness but by a knowledge of our own sin, by humility, and by an understanding of our need for grace and therefore by a gracious and merciful attitude.

Your church and mine should be marked by outgoing love. Our churches should demonstrate the love of God. "But surely we know and

love God,” someone might say, “because our hearts are moved, and tears roll down our cheeks when we sing this hymn or that chorus.” No, says John. “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. . . . This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers” (1 John 3:14, 16).

God is love, and he will be *known* as such. And if we are his children, we will love, too, not just on the basis of being created in the image of God, as we were thinking about a few moments ago, but also on the basis of being bought by the blood of the Lamb. What about those in your congregation who are different from you—of a different nationality, a different ethnicity, or a different political view?

Brother pastor, we must teach our people to prize and cherish those differences. Help them to recognize that those differences are God-given opportunities for a church to express and display love in ways that are inexplicable to the world. Remember what John heard the creatures and elders singing before the Lamb in heaven: “With your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

In our world today, generation seems to be one of the biggest divides, but our churches should offer a different kind of picture. I remember how excited an older lady in our congregation became when she recounted the story of how a young man in our church brought his small group of young men to spend their Friday night with her in the rest home after she had a stroke. She said the other folks in the rest home asked her who she was—was she some kind of celebrity? She said no; it was simply what her church was like.

We have seen non-Christian friends converted simply by watching the relationships in our congregation as the gospel begins to come alive to them.

I have sometimes said to young theology lovers in our congregation, “If you love to read Wayne Grudem and John Piper but won’t inconvenience yourself to go pick up an older person and give him a ride to church, I don’t know if you’re a Christian.” It is the nature of loving real

people that such love can become difficult and inconvenient. It's what happens when we covenant together with a flock of imperfect sheep. On the other hand, the lack of commitment fostered by a lack of formal membership tempts our flesh and presents an opportunity for self-deception. The inconveniences of love are minimized, and therefore the worth of our love offers less compelling evidence of its divine nature. Membership functions to instruct us in the very nature of Christian love and to encourage its expression.

How can we point to Christ's sacrifice of himself for us if we are not members of Christ's body who sacrifice ourselves for one another?

It is as we sacrifice ourselves for one another that racism ends in the church: "Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13).

It is as we sacrifice ourselves for one another that favoring the wealthy ends in the church: "My brothers, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, do not show favoritism" (James 2:1). He who was rich beyond all splendor all for our sakes became poor.

Christ's example of sacrifice also leads us to forgive: "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13).

Our evangelism must be more than advertising. Instead, our churches must be characterized by an unusual degree of mutual care, even going to the level of regularly inconveniencing ourselves to love others: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Our love for one another becomes a description of Christ's love for us.

Christ's sacrifice also warns us against a wrong form of denominationalism. Think of Jesus's prayer "for those who will believe in me . . . that all of them may be one" (John 17:20–21). You know, don't you, that there can be a right and a wrong denominationalism? Given our disagreements over some points of the Bible, denominations are good, not bad, because they allow each church to follow Jesus according to conscience, and they keep strife between Christians of different convictions at bay. But if those denominations become the ultimate focus of our loyalty, then they are terrible idols. Keep clear fences but keep them low, and shake hands over them often.

One thing a faithful pastor must also do is lead his flock to unity even against those members who believe the right thing but value their belief in an unbalanced way and would divide the flock over it.

Christians should divide from other Christians reluctantly and only over those matters in which agreement is necessary to function as a congregation. So in my own church's statement of faith, you will find statements only on those matters that we think are essential for salvation *and* that are essential for living peacefully and productively together in one congregation, united and happy.

In fact, all this is captured by two facts about our church's outdoor sign, which reads: "Capitol Hill Baptist Church." (1) The word "Baptist" is there, because a decision about baptism is necessary for functioning together as a church. (2) Yet the word "Baptist" is the smallest word, because we want to signify that non-Baptist churches can still be true Christian churches.

Our congregation's love and holiness should point back to the supreme expression of God's own love and holiness on the cross of Christ. It is the death of God's Son that allows the Father to forgive with both justice and mercy, thus perfectly fulfilling both his holiness and his love. That is why Paul can say that God presented Christ as a *sacrifice of atonement*, as a *propitiation* (Rom. 3:25). In Christ's death on the cross, God offered the solution to the problem of the fall. He solved the ancient riddle of how he as a holy and good God could show mercy. Do you remember how it was stated in Exodus 34, at the end of the Golden Calf debacle?

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with [Moses] and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished." (Ex. 34:5-7)

This really is the riddle of the Old Testament, indeed of the ages. How could God both "forgive wickedness, rebellion and sin" and yet "not leave the guilty unpunished"?

With the coming of Christ, we learn the way. God *has* saved us, and in a way that *is* consistent with his character. At the cross of Christ he demonstrated his justice—he *is* good and therefore will take vengeance. No sin will go unpunished. And yet, at the same time, at the cross he showed himself to be full of mercy. Therefore Paul could say that God is the “just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

How is God’s character here reflected in our churches? Without the local church actually *being* a community like this, the cross, even if it is taught, seems unrelated to life. Unless our churches live as we have described them—cross-centered and cross-relishing, working for Christ’s sacrifice for us to be the center of our relationship with God and with each other—our relationship with God will be taken for granted, and our relationships with each other will become casual and selfish. Without this Christlike love, our lives raise no questions, excite no expectations, and hold out no hope.

Response

That brings me to the last aspect of the gospel that our churches illustrate: the right response to Christ.

Repentance. Our congregations should teach and model repentance. A community in which people humbly admit their faults and then work to change is a remarkable community. How appropriate that baptism—a confession of our uncleanness, of our needing to be washed—stands as the sign of admission to this community. This is why we can say that our church is only for sinners, and among them only for repenting sinners.

For example, Christians must repent of selfishness by helping other people follow Jesus. Helping others follow is a basic part of following Jesus ourselves. The letters of James and 1 John clearly teach that the Christian life may be personal, but it is not private. Just think of what John says about those who claim to love God but not their brothers. Repentance necessarily involves us in the lives of others, which means that the local church is where our repentance should become visible.

We should not try to run the race of the spiritual life alone. I remember asking a godly friend once why he came to church only in time for

the sermon. He responded that he didn't get anything out of the rest of the service. I asked him if he had ever thought of joining the church. He looked at me like I had three heads and then said, "I know what I'm here to do—evangelize and disciple! If I linked arms with all those people, they'd just slow me down."

I thought for a minute and then asked him, "Do you think that if you joined arms with all those people, they might slow you down, but you might help to speed them up, and God might be more concerned about the corporate whole than simply about you?"

The fact that we are sinners called to repent sometimes means we need other people to help us repent. Sometimes it even takes the corrective discipline of the whole congregation to help us repent. In our congregations, we love each other by holding each other accountable. All of us will have times when our flesh wants to go a different way from what God has revealed in Scripture. And submitting to the loving discipline and accountability of a local church is part of how we love God, who is holy and calls us to be holy. He does not want us to bear his name in vain.

What a tremendous privilege and great responsibility it is to make gospel repentance visible! It means that repentance must typify our churches. Admitting our sins and repenting of them continually depicts the gospel and makes it credible.

And, brother pastor, it is especially important for you to build relationships and set up structures in which you can receive godly encouragement and correction. How are you and I modeling repentance in our lives?

Faith. A local church is a community in which invisible realities control our behavior. It is where belief in God's promises are the foundation of the hopes that we live for. It is where God's Word is central to our lives. Your church and mine are communities that should treasure the preaching of God's Word, because it is our GPS system. God's Word directs us like a GPS directs our cars on the road. (Though, unlike the GPS, he never makes any errors!) We trust God's promises. We live in hope. And just as certainly as God has always created his people by his Word, so we can be certain of the centrality of God's Word in our lives and churches.

People say that we are in a visual age today, but we have always been in a visual age. We were made that way. There is an immediacy to our sense of sight. We long to see. But consider how God reveals himself to us. When our first parents sinned, they were cast out of the garden. They lost sight of God. Then, in God's amazing grace, God spoke a Word of promise to them. When they were out of the sight of the eye, God came to them by the Word addressed to their ears. We are not in the age of the *eye* but of the *ear*.

Ever since the fall, we have been in the age of the ear, and the centrality of the Word in our churches points to this salvation reality. God's Holy Spirit creates his people by his Word: "Faith comes from hearing the message" (Rom. 10:17).

We can, in a sense, create a people by other means. And this is the great temptation of pastors. We can create a people around a certain ethnicity. We can create a people around a fully graded choir program. We can find people who will get excited about a building project or a denominational identity. We can create a people around a series of house groups, where each feels loved and cared for. We can create a people around a community service project. We can create a people around dress codes, around opportunities for socializing for young mothers, or around singles doing Christian cruising. We can create a people around men's groups. We can even create a people around the personality of a preacher. And God can surely use all these things. But we can only see the true church of God if it has been created by the Word of God—by those who crave it and feed off of it for their souls.

Of course, a day will come when faith gives way to sight, and sermons will be no more. And let me tell you, there is nobody who looks forward to that more than I do—when we don't need faith anymore because we can see the Lord. That is the climax of the Bible: "They will see his face" (Rev. 22:4). At that point this old cane of faith can be cast aside, as we can run and see him with our eyes. But we are not there right now. We are still laboring under the results of the sins of our first parents and our own sins. Yet because of God's grace this is not a time of total despair. He gives us his Word, and he gives us faith. We are in a day of faith. So,

like our first parents before us and like Noah and Abraham, the Israelites, and the ancient apostles, we rely on God's Word.

Most fundamentally, our local church is a community of people shaped by our belief in Jesus Christ and his promise to save all who will trust in him. Sermons are, therefore, central to our churches because it is in God's Word that we have these promises held out.

This sacrifice and our anticipation of salvation now and ultimately are signified by the Lord's Supper. It offers us a dress rehearsal of the marriage supper of the Lamb, when we will be forever and finally reconciled to God and brought into his unmediated presence.

Our community makes sense only in light of these truths, and these truths are illustrated and displayed by our church's life. We live differently because of believing in God's truths. Paul even argues that we give differently because of God's promises (2 Corinthians 9). Consider, for instance, the example of the early Christians: "You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions" (Heb. 10:34). Our giving—our sacrifices—for each other makes sense only in light of these coming realities.

A local church, then, is a congregation of people who trust God. And it is not just our understanding of all his purposes that we trust, because those are sometimes hidden from us. We trust his character. We are a community of people shaped by our common understanding of and expectations for the future. Our fears about the future, of course, are rooted in those places where *our* will differs from God's will. But as a whole, a local congregation consists of people whose future is beginning to take shape even now. And we move together trusting God.

We are to be a community of people like Jay Smith in London. Jay preaches in Hyde Park at Speakers' Corner to passing Muslims. After the subway bombings a few years ago, he asked the assembled crowd what they thought of the bombing. Many said that those who had committed those crimes were heroes. Jay replied to one crowd in which I was standing, "My wife understands that I will probably *be killed* for what I am doing."

So why would Jay risk his life that way? Jay risks it because he knows that it is good to announce the gospel, and he lives in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the body, and, therefore, nothing he will need for eternity is within the power of mere mortals to take away.

Churches are whole communities of people who live by this same hope for the future.

Without such a community, a call to trust in Christ alone for salvation begins to seem abstract and empty. Again and again, people simply won't know what we mean when we call them to trust in Christ or to believe in him. Our local churches illustrate and make believable repentance for sins and trust in Christ.

Conclusion

Brother pastor, do you see something more of how the church is Jesus's evangelism plan?

Many Protestants have begun to think that because the church is not essential to the gospel, it is not important to the gospel. This is an unbiblical, false, and dangerous conclusion. Our churches are the proof of the gospel. In the gatherings of the church, the Christian Scriptures are read. In the ordinances of the church, the work of Christ is depicted. In the life of the church, the character of God himself should be evident. A church seriously compromised in character seems to make the gospel itself irrelevant.

The church is important because it is tied to the good news itself. The church is to be the appearance of the gospel. It is what the gospel looks like when played out in the lives of people. Take away the local church, and you take away the visible manifestation of the gospel in the world. Christians in churches, then, are called to practice "display evangelism," so that the world will witness the reign of God begun in a community of people made in his image and reborn by his Spirit. Christians—not just as individuals but as God's people bound together in churches—are the clearest picture the world sees of who God is and what his will is for them.

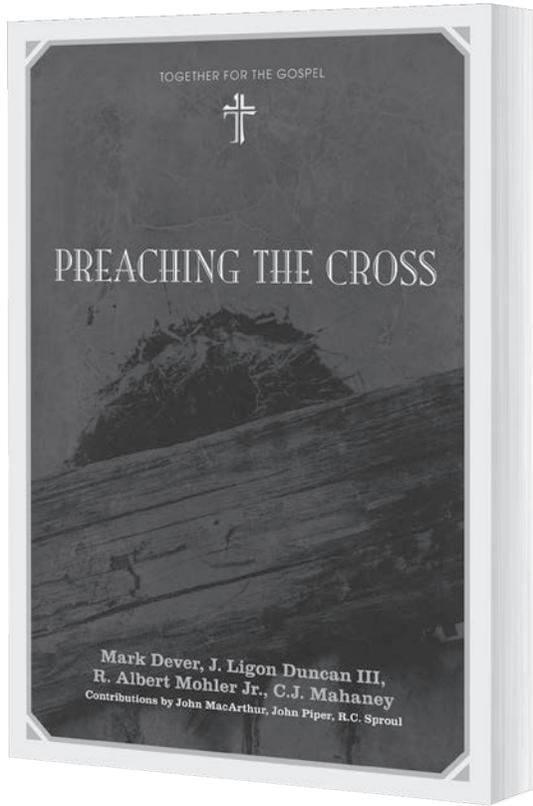
Brother pastor, you may be very careful in explaining the gospel, and rightly so. But you should also be careful for the church that Christ gave

this gospel to. Recapturing seminaries and even whole denominations for the gospel is good work, but its fruit will not last long if we don't get on with the work of cleaning up thousands upon thousands of local congregations that are bearing a poor witness to Christ. Don't undermine in the pew what you preach in the pulpit. Don't think that you help the cause of Christ by denouncing abortion from your pulpit when you let the doctors who perform them remain as members in good standing in your church. Sermons about love ring hollow in the church that will not confront stinginess, self-centeredness, or gossip. Pray that God will use our imperfect but really changing congregations for his glory. May John Newton's prayer for himself be our prayer to God for our churches: "I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I wish to be. I am not what I hope to be. Yet I can truly say, I am not what I once was. *By the grace of God* I am what I am."

In the church the content of the gospel should be taught and the character of the gospel should be displayed. Paul writes, "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:10–11). The church is the pattern for, the foreshadowing of, God's work. And it is also the means he uses to bring about his glory in our families and neighborhoods and also in the world and even beyond—throughout the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

Have you realized that all *that* has been going on in your local church? What gospel is your church making visible?

A Call to Pursue Gospel-Saturated, Preaching-Centered Ministry

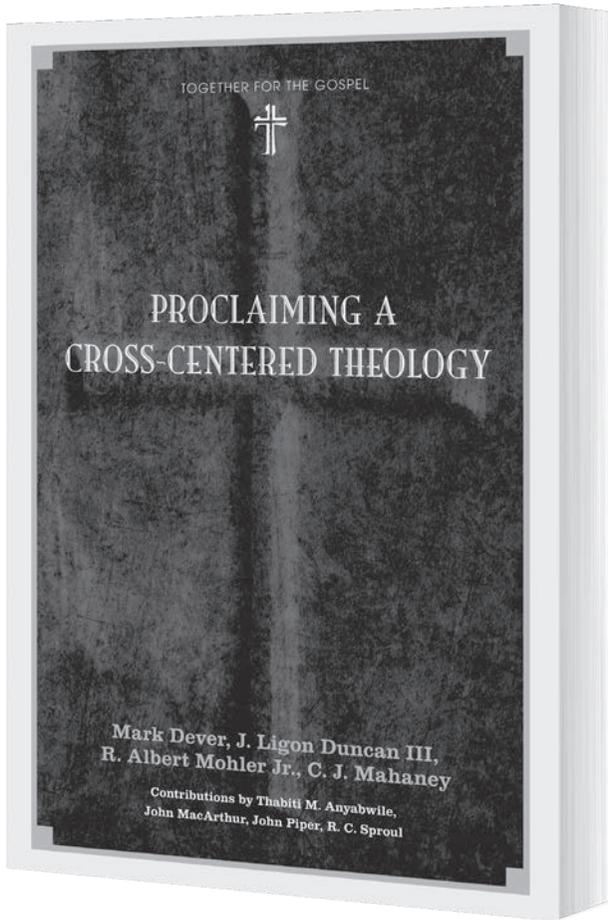


Proclaiming the gospel is without a doubt the most important task of pastoral ministry. And yet other seemingly more urgent activities often obscure it. From time to time all pastors and preachers need to be reminded of the primacy of the gospel.

Preaching the Cross is a call to expository gospel-centered preaching. Every contributor enthusiastically celebrates the centrality of the cross of Christ—keeping the main thing the main thing.

Includes contributions from Mark Dever, J. Ligon Duncan III, R. Albert Mohler Jr., C. J. Mahaney, John MacArthur, John Piper, and R. C. Sproul.

Exploring the Church's Need for Faithful Proclamation



Developing and preaching a cross-centered theology is critical, for by Christ's atonement the church lives or dies. As leading voices in evangelical Christianity elaborate on the church's need for a fully biblical theology, they call every pastor and congregation to scripturally saturated thinking.

Includes contributions from Mark Dever, J. Ligon Duncan III, R. Albert Mohler Jr., C. J. Mahaney, Thabiti M. Anyabwile, John MacArthur, John Piper, and R. C. Sproul.

“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 . . .*”

1 Corinthians 15:1–2

Responding to the perennial temptation to “tame” the message about Jesus, eight prominent church leaders, including John Piper, John MacArthur, Al Mohler, and R. C. Sproul, challenge Christians to hold fast to the faith by emphasizing the importance of maintaining a pure and unadulterated view of the gospel.

Looking back at the New Testament and the church fathers and forward to the church’s continued mission of faithful biblical preaching and effective cultural engagement, the contributors draw on their extensive ministry experience to offer us a thoughtful plea for safeguarding the message of the gospel in the midst of our pluralistic world.

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CHURCH & MINISTRY / PREACHING