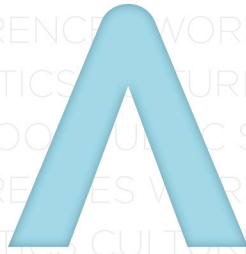


**ABOVE PROGRAMS, POLITICS, PREFERENCES,
AND ALL OTHER PRIORITIES**



ABOVE ALL

**THE GOSPEL IS THE SOURCE OF
THE CHURCH'S RENEWAL**

J. D. GREEAR

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J. D. GREEAR

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THE GOSPEL PRAYER

Because I am in Christ . . .

1. I have done nothing that could make you love me less,
and nothing I could do that would make you love me more.

2. You are all I need for everlasting joy.

3. As you have been to me, so I will be to others.

4. As I pray, I'll do so according to the compas-
sion you've shown at the cross and the power
you demonstrated through the resurrection.



CHAPTER 1

GOSPEL ABOVE ALL

Bible-based Christianity is dead.

At least that's what society wants you to believe.

Churches are closing their doors. Evangelicals are leaving the faith. The tide of those who identify as “no religion” is rising.

Is the handwriting on the wall? Is the Christian movement done? Must Christians rethink their convictions?

It seems change is the only option.

We can't hope to reach the next generation with our Bible-thumping, worn-out doctrines of sin, the exclusivity of Christ, and our “archaic” notions of marriage and sexuality.

Change or embrace irrelevance.

And looking around, it seems a lot of Christians have gotten the message. Many have given up trying to maintain their historical Christian convictions.

Does God really believe that about marriage?

Is the Bible really believable?

Is church really all that important?

For those that haven't given up on their beliefs, they've relegated their lives into the shadows. Hunkered down. Quarantined. Protected. Fighting to keep themselves and their children free from the infection of the culture that lurks about. They're no longer praying that Christ would use them to turn their worlds upside down like Peter did in those golden days of optimism. Not a chance. Peter didn't have to deal with the secular media. Or Hollywood. Or the LGBT agenda.

Instead they're praying that Christ would return within the hour and save them from the evil around them so that their troubles would be left behind. They might not get out much and engage with their neighbors in need of saving, but they will for sure mobilize to get to the voting booths. That's our last stand.

Go into these churches and ask the faithful attenders how a person can be saved, and you will likely get a biblically reliable answer. They know the Sunday school answer is Jesus. Ask them to explain the gospel, and they'll likely be two for two. This makes things interesting because I believe what the church—you and me—needs most in our present time is a recovery of *the gospel*.

**How will the
recovery of
something we
already know take
us to places we've
never been?**

But how will the recovery of something we already know take us to places we've never been? After all, isn't the proverbial definition of insanity doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results? For this reason we're tempted to think we need something new. We need something to change. We need a different method.

Isn't the real issue that we haven't mastered the new media of our hyper-technological age? Or that we need to update our politics to fit the twenty-first century?

Maybe it's a leadership crisis. After all, everything rises and falls on leadership! If seminaries would just train pastors to be better leaders, to staff to their weaknesses, to get more in touch with culture, and to understand and use their enneagram number, our churches would grow again. Right?

Sure—they might.

But with what type of growth?

All of these issues are important and deserve discussion, of course. But I contend that what we *really* need isn't anything new.

Jesus said his gospel—the events of God the Son coming to earth, living the life we were supposed to live, dying the death we were condemned to die, and rising from the dead to defeat sin and death and offer humanity a way to God through his sacrifice—contained such power that not even the gates of hell would be able to resist its advance.

Think about this: *The gospel is the one thing in the New Testament, other than Jesus himself, that is referred to directly as the power of God.*

Not *contains* the power of God.

Not *channels* the power of God.

The gospel *is* itself the raw, unstoppable, death-defeating power of God.

The apostle Paul explains in his letter to the Romans that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all who would believe (Rom. 1:16).

When dynamite was invented in the eighteenth century, its name was derived from the Greek word Paul uses in Romans 1 for power—*dunamis*.

Now, Paul, of course, didn't know anything about dynamite, but I think it's still a good image to use when thinking of the gospel. The gospel is God's power to create, to redeem, to heal, to bring back from the dead. It doesn't offer insights on a new or superior technique. It is raw, explosive power.

My dad told me that when he was a boy, one of the worst whoopins he got was when he broke into his dad's company's shed and "borrowed" some dynamite. He wanted to go fishing.

(I know that raises a lot of questions. Suffice it to say, we're fortunate to still have Dad around.)

As a boy, my dad may not have known about risk, but he knew something about power. Fishing sure is a lot easier when you do it with dynamite, Dad said. Toss the dynamite in the pond, wait for the BOOM, and then watch as lifeless fish float to the surface.

That's Western North Carolina fishing right there.

(He read over this chapter and asked me to make sure you knew he wasn't condoning this type of thing anymore.)

A stick of dynamite doesn't give you instructions on new ways to fish or tell you the best places to cast your line; it *is* the power that does all the work. In a similar way, the gospel doesn't give you instructions on how to change: it *is* itself the power to change.

This is the power the church needs.

And the most important question before us is this: How can we get the gospel back into the right place in the church?

The gospel is more important than our programs.

The gospel is more important than our preferences.

The gospel is more important than our priorities.

The gospel is more important than our politics.

The gospel is more important than _____.

It doesn't matter how you fill the blank; the gospel is always and will always be most important!

My guess is, if you picked up this book, you believe the gospel. You believe that God is holy and glorious and worthy and that you're sinful. You believe in what Jesus has done for you. But like many believers, when it comes to the pursuit of abundant *life*, you believe in other things as well. The gospel is one alternative among many.

Here's the reality: if the gospel is not above all, it loses its power to change us, our families, our neighborhoods, our

places of work, and our world. In fact, if the gospel is not above all else, *it's not even the gospel anymore.*

We need the power of the gospel—the raw power of God—to bring transformation to every area of our lives. And then to our communities and our churches.

Let me speak a quick word of encouragement to the pastors and church staff members reading this. When the gospel is above all else in our churches,

our churches thrive. God's power in the gospel is such that it will make up for many of our shortcomings—our low budgets, our leadership deficiencies, our ministry misalignments, our political mistakes, and our strategic missteps. But when the gospel is *not* above all—when our focus is divided and we give priority elsewhere—expertise in all those things won't make much difference.

What the church needs now is what the church has always needed—a return to the gospel. This isn't nostalgia for a bygone age. I'm not, in the words of one pundit, “sacrificing the future in search of the past,” and I'm not trying to make anything great again. What I am trying to do is show us that the only way to save the future is by going back to the very beginning.

This book is intended to be a wrenching look at how secondary things—quite often good things, sometimes even necessary things—have displaced the gospel as *the main focus* in the life of the church.

Martin Luther famously said that to progress in the Christian life is always to begin again. If we truly want to progress in our mission, we need to begin again with the gospel. We need to go back to the start. Back to where we first saw the glory of God's grace and mercy and love. Back to where Jesus humbled us, saved us, and gave us new life.

No matter what you've heard before, success is not found by being on the right side of history. True success—success that

**If the gospel is
not above all, it
loses its power.**

will never fail or fade—is found in being on the right side of gospel. Power is not found in the brilliance of a new strategy but in the emptiness of an ancient tomb.

WHAT IS *THE GOSPEL*?

The word has been used so commonly for so long that it's become all but stripped of its meaning.

There's gospel-centered preaching, gospel-centered kids Sunday school, gospel-centered worship, gospel-centered tree and shrub removal. Okay, one of those I made up. (Maybe.) But “the gospel” has become shorthand for whatever is important to us in Christianity at the moment. It's also become a label we slap on things to assure newcomers that our church is hip, up-to-date, and theologically certified. But is that all the gospel has become?

A label?

What does it mean for the gospel to function as the power of God in our churches? If the gospel is truly God's raw power, we had better have it in the right place.

After Paul declares to the Romans that the gospel message is the power of God, he spends ten chapters explaining how the gospel works. We might summarize Paul's chapters by saying the gospel is the good news that:

We were dead in our trespasses and sin.
Religion couldn't help us.
New resolutions to change couldn't help us.
Jesus, the baby born of a virgin in Bethlehem,
was the Son of God.
He did what we couldn't do. He lived a righteous life that pleased God.
Still he got crucified on a cross under the curse of sin.
He did that for us.
He died in our place.

But Jesus was raised from the grave to offer
new life in his Spirit.

Jesus gives this new life to all who call upon
him in faith.

The beauty of the gospel is that those who trust in Jesus need never again fear alienation from God. In Christ you are secure. In Christ you are loved. In Christ you are whole. In Christ you are chosen. In Christ you are pure. “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

And now Christ has redeemed us to a life of a love and service where we can reflect to others what he has done in us.

Simply believing this, Paul says, releases into us the power of God to make it so. Renewing our minds in this message, he tells the Romans, transforms ordinary, sinful people into the kinds of people who accomplish the very will of God (Rom. 12:1-2).

In his letters to the Corinthians, Paul says the gospel’s inherent power means there’s nothing more important to talk about to the church than it. It is, literally, “in the first place.” It is primary (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

Paul even goes as far to say there is nothing else he really cares about the people in his churches knowing. Christ and Christ crucified is enough (1 Cor. 2:2). He tells Titus, his young protégé, that the gospel of God’s grace not only bestows forgiveness but all the power they need to live godly lives in this world (Titus 2:11-12). Believing the gospel is not only how you get released from the *penalty* of sin, it’s how you get released from the *power* of sin, also.

Because of the unparalleled power of the gospel, it is not something the biblical writers expect us to learn on the Roman Road and then leave behind. It contains everything necessary for success in the Christian life.

It’s not just the 101 class of a four-year Christianity major.

Not just the diving board off of which we jump into the pool of Christianity.

Not just the milk that nourishes us until we are mature enough for meat.

The gospel *is* the meat.

And the dessert too, for that matter.

More than just the 101 introductory class to Christianity, it's the entire campus at which classes are held.

More than just the diving board, it's the whole pool.

The way you grow in Christ is the way you began in Christ: faith in the finished work and the empty tomb. To progress is always to begin again.

Peter says the gospel is so profound the angels, who stand around the throne of God every day, long to just catch a glimpse of it (2 Pet. 1:11-12). How hard must it be to impress an angel? They understand more theology than we ever will during our lifetimes. They had front row seats to God's mind-bending creative power that spun billions of stars into space. They saw God split the Red Sea and fill Balaam's donkey's mouth with words and sentences. They are themselves so powerful that a mere look at them turns the strongest human into a quivering puddle of fear. Yet these angels are still blown away by the simple gospel message. They want nothing more than to delve more deeply into it.

The beauty of the gospel is endless because the beauty of God is endless.

**The beauty of the
gospel is endless
because the beauty
of God is endless.**

This means that wherever you are in your journey with Christ—whether you're in doubt that Jesus really is who he says he is or you've been convinced of the gospel's power for seventy years—you're just getting started. And the great news for each of us is that, as Peter says, embedded in

the gospel are all the resources you need to become everything God wants you to be (2 Pet. 1:3).

Tragically, a lot of Christians have moved on from it.

I was once at a conference where the speaker before me explained that the church had heard enough about the death of Jesus. He said (and I wrote it down word for word because I couldn't believe it), "We need to stop talking so much about Jesus' death. Everyone already freakin' knows about that. We need to talk now about his life."

The apostle Paul would never have said such a thing. And not just because he would avoid dirty words like *freakin'*. No, Paul knew that the only way to understand Jesus' life and experience his power as our own is to lean more fully and deeply into his death.

A brief note here: What are you supposed to do when you are an invited guest and the speaker before you says something like that? Typically, I prefer to honor the role of "guest" and let the conference host answer to God for what has been said.

Typically.

But when dealing with an issue of first importance—the issue of first importance—I had to throw my hat in the ring. I said, "Respectfully, I would encourage you never to do what the previous speaker has told you to do."

Yep. I did that.

And it was as awkward as you're imagining it.

Worth it.

More Than Just "God Loves You"

I haven't been in school for years, but I still have nightmares about being unprepared for a final exam—showing up only to find out that *today* is the day 80 percent of my grade is determined and that I had forgotten all about it.

Imagine with me: your professor announces that your final exam is to write an essay identifying the three different kinds of atomic isotopes and discussing the varying electromagnetic qualities distinguishing them. The thing is, you don't have the foggiest idea what he is talking about—you vaguely remember some song about being home on the range where the deer and

the isotope play, but you're pretty sure he's talking about something else.

Fast-forward ninety painful minutes, and you take the long, lonely walk up to the professor's desk at the front of the auditorium. You reach out to turn in your failing essay.

But then something happens.

Just as the pages of your scribbled nonsense are about to hit the professor's inbox, a classmate that you have never met reaches out, grabs your exam, marks out your name, and prints his own name. Then he writes *your* name on *his* exam. Then he turns both in.

The grades come back.

You pass.

He fails.

You get credit for his and he takes the blame for yours.

Now, I realize you're not allowed to actually do this in college, but it's a good picture of what Jesus did for us in the thirty-three years he spent on earth. He lived the life you were supposed to live and then erased his name and wrote yours on it. He died the death you were condemned to die, wiping out your name and writing his. His obedience covers what you couldn't and didn't do. His reward comes to you. Your punishment goes to him. This is what Christian theologians call the Great Exchange.

The gospel is not just the message that God loves you. He absolutely does, of course, and if he didn't, there would be no gospel. But he shows you the length, breadth, and height of his love through the beauty of *substitution*.

Don't miss that word. This word is vital to the gospel, for without substitution there would be no gospel.

At The Summit Church in North Carolina, where I have been privileged to pastor for almost twenty years, we summarize the gospel in these four words:

Jesus in my place.

You might think of it this way: Jesus did not just die *for* you; he died *instead of* you. He suffered your curse so you could inherit his righteousness (Gal. 3:13). He was clothed with shame so you could sit at the seat of honor (Heb. 12:2). He was struck down so you could be lifted up (Isa. 53:3–4). The Father turned his face away from Jesus so that he could turn his face toward you (Matt. 27:46). He lived the life you were supposed to live and died the death you were condemned to die so that you could have the reward he deserved—eternal life in the presence of God (Col. 3:4).

The prophet Isaiah predicted this holy substitution more than seven hundred years before it happened.

He himself bore our sicknesses, and he carried our pains; but we in turn regarded him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds. We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished him for the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:4–6)

Jesus' act of substitution is what separates Jesus' gospel from every other religion of the world. I've heard it said that it's possible to spell every other religion in the world "D-O." *Do this. Don't do that. Go here. Say this. Rub this. Touch that. Pray this. Chant that.* If you do these things often enough and well enough, so other religions say, God will accept you.

At least you hope.

The gospel, on the other hand, is spelled "D-O-N-E." Jesus did everything necessary to save us. In his final moments on the cross, Jesus cried out, "It is finished!" Not, "I got it started, now you take over." All the *doing* necessary to save has already been *done*.

In every other religion, God sends prophets as teachers who reveal a plan to earn God's favor; in Christianity the greatest Prophet is not merely a teacher but a Savior who has earned God's favor for you and gives it to you as a gift.

Let that sink in. In Christ you don't have to work to please God or to appease his anger or disappointment. The doing we do is done as a grateful response to what has been done on our behalf and in our place.

Our good works flow from salvation, not in pursuit of it.

Tim Keller says it like this: "Every other religion teaches, 'I obey; therefore I am accepted.' The gospel declares, 'I am accepted; therefore I obey.'"¹

This is the good news—the power of God in the gospel—that saves us. This good news is more important than anything else, and not just because it obtains for us eternal life. The gospel does so much more than just that. The gospel is the source of our life—here, now, and to come. It is itself the power of God.

Because of this, it should be above all.

Most churchgoing folk, if asked about the gospel, know this. They can tell you about substitution, sometimes even about "do" versus "done." In fact, they may be able to articulate it better than me. But that doesn't mean the gospel occupies the right place in their hearts, lives, or worldviews.

Christians often see the gospel only as baby food. The starting point. The entry rite into Christianity. The prayer we pray to begin our relationship with Jesus.

But the gospel *is* the Christian life! It is not just the ABCs of Christianity; it is the A-Z. All of the Christian life flows from the good news of what Jesus has done on the cross. The gospel is the place we stay and never get tired of. The place we never stop learning, growing, and living.

That's why growth in Christ is never about going *beyond* the gospel but going deeper *into* the gospel. The gospel is like a well. The purest waters are found when you go deeper, not wider.

Of the 538 different variations of Batman my generation has had to endure, I think Christopher Nolan's 2005 megahit,

Batman Begins, is the best one. In it, young Bruce Wayne falls down an old well that apparently had been covered up for years. The surrounding brush had grown over so much that the opening to the well was completely invisible. It wasn't until years later that Bruce returned to the well. What he found was it was actually the entry to a vast, underground cave with unspeakable treasures and the secrets to becoming "the Batman."

There was so much more to Wayne Manor than what could be found above ground. To experience the full riches of the Wayne family estate, one needed to go deeper.

This is how we must treat the gospel.

We may think we see and understand all that's on the surface of the gospel message, but there's more to be discovered in the depths.

The more we look, the more we're transformed. The more we discover, the more we see. The apostle Paul says we grow spiritually as we gaze into God's glory (2 Cor. 3:18). As we behold the glory of Christ in the gospel, we become more like him. We grow from glory to glory.

Think about your own journey with Christ. How did you first become a Christian? You beheld the glory of God in the good news of what Jesus had *done* for you.

And now, how do you, as a Christian, become more and more like Jesus? By continuing to gaze at the glory of the God who did these things for you. By believing it remains finished.

Just as we are *saved* by believing the gospel and beholding Jesus with eyes of wonder, so we are *sanctified* in the same way. The gospel gets us in, and the gospel gets us all the way home.

Which is why we *all* still need it.

And why we need it more than anything else.

Of First Importance?

Evangelical Christians have always been gospel people, of course. After all, it's in our very name. The word *evangelical* is a transliteration of the Greek word *gospel*. So in that sense

the gospel has always been our “brand.” It’s been the heart of Christianity from the beginning. It’s what gives our faith life.

But now it seems like we are tempted to turn elsewhere for renewal and for life.

You foolish [Evangelicals]! Who has cast a spell on you? . . . Are you so foolish? After beginning by the Spirit, are you now finishing by the flesh? (Gal. 3:1-3)

Our failure to see renewal isn’t a result of holding the gospel so tightly that we’re rusty on modern techniques. Rather, it’s a result of holding techniques too tightly and getting rusty with the gospel. We’ve removed the gospel from its place of first importance. It no longer is supreme. It no longer is our first priority.

We must turn *back* to the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus if we want to go forward in mission.

None of our goals for personal growth will take off without the gospel. None of our calls for renewal will endure if they are not grounded in the gospel. The fire “to do” in the Christian life comes only from being soaked in the fuel of what has been *done*.

A quick note to my fellow pastors: this has to start in the pulpit. Every sermon should be grounded in the good news of what Jesus Christ has done. Charles Spurgeon once said that in every one of his sermons, he would “plow a trough” back to Jesus. I used to think that meant he thought we should give a gospel invitation at the end of every talk. But Spurgeon meant more than that. Spurgeon meant that the water of life necessary to do whatever the Scriptures commanded us to do flowed only from the finished work of Christ. Apart from faith in that, we preach a powerless religion, and our calls for renewal—however creative, innovative, and winsome—are as dead as the stone tablets in Moses’s hands. Every story, every command, every principle in Scripture should point to the finished work of Christ. If we don’t do this, we remove the *life* from the Book of Life.

Since Jesus claimed all of the Scriptures point to him (Luke 24:27), this shouldn't be too difficult for us. Just as the point of the Bible is to exalt his name, the point of every sermon should be the same.

To paraphrase D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the goal of a lecture is that people leave with *information*; the goal of a motivational speech is that they leave with *action steps*; the goal of a sermon is that people leave *worshipping*. Gospel preaching will always have Christ-exalting worship as its aim.

When people in our communities think about and talk about us, they should think and talk about the gospel. It should be both the ultimate point and the basis of every ministry and endeavor of our churches.

Think about your own church for a moment: what's the one thing your church is about?

Is the gospel what you leave your church talking about?

Or do you talk about your pastor's insights, your great worship band, your guest services, your massive pipe organ, your care for the poor, or your courageous proclamations against sin? Do others see your church as that place that gives really practical, helpful advice about life? Or as a classroom with theologically robust, original-languages-savvy preaching?

There is nothing wrong with most of these things, but none of them *are* the power of new life. They can be means of responding to or living out the power of God, but none of them *are* the raw power of God. Only the gospel, according to Scripture, *is* power.

Apart from the gospel, our ingenious life-change strategies will lack staying—and saving—power. Apart from the gospel our kindness to the poor will only make people comfortable for a while before they perish eternally. Apart from the gospel, the world we reshape through our politics will be every bit as bad as the one we are trying to reform. Apart from the gospel, self-help strategies will only lead us to pride (if we succeed) or despair (if we fail). After all, “Ten Steps Toward a Healthy Marriage” won't transform your marriage nearly as much as

learning, understanding, and meditating on the ten *billion* steps Jesus took toward you will.

What does this mean for us and our churches? It means it's possible to lead people astray not just by teaching wrong things but also by giving true things—good things—too prominent a place.

We've covered your church, but what about you? What's the one thing you are about? What is of first importance to you? Are you leading others astray by putting emphasis where it doesn't belong?

The devil would like nothing more than to divide and distract us with secondary matters.

We have a gospel too great and a mission too urgent to be distracted by any secondary thing.

We have a gospel too great and a mission too urgent to be distracted by any secondary thing. Everything we do in our own lives and in our churches must be run through the filter of how well it enables and deepens our gospel mission.

ABOVE ALL: WHERE THIS BOOK IS HEADED

What would happen if we returned the gospel to its rightful place in our lives and churches?

I'm convinced we'd see a renewal of God's presence and power through this people. That's how it happened in the nation of Israel. When they "remembered" the kindnesses of God to them, the nation awakened and experienced God's blessing. When they forgot, they descended into chaos (for example, see Deut. 4:9, Judg. 8:34, and Isa. 65:11).

That's what this book is about—helping us *remember*.

We want to remember the greatness of the gospel in such a way that it becomes of *first importance, above all* else.

Here's what I think that will look like in practice—our roadmap for the remainder of this book.

Gospel Change

The gospel will not be presented as merely the entry rite of our faith journey but the focus of our faith for the entirety of our Christian life. People will not leave our worship services or Bible studies overwhelmed by all the things they need to do for God but in awe of what he has done for them and promises to do through them.

Gospel Mission

Making disciples will be the central, defining mission of the church. The list of good things Christians and churches can do is long, but good things can divert us from the one central mission Christ gave his church: make disciples (Matt. 28:18-20). We won't cease doing everything else; we'll just bring every other assignment into service of our central commission.

Gospel Multiplication

The focus of our ministries will be empowering ordinary members to be the tip of the gospel spear in their communities. This is what characterized the early church and what has been true of the church whenever and wherever we find it expanding rapidly.

Gospel Hope

The gospel compels eternal optimism. Not the facile, whimsical, personality-driven kind but the deep-seated conviction that God's plans for the world are as hopeful as the empty tomb declares they are. The future, William Carey said, is as bright as the promises of God. When the gospel is above all, hope for and excitement about the future will define the church, no matter how dark the day seems to us.

Gospel Grace

Those who truly believe the gospel become like the gospel. When the gospel is above all, the generosity of our spirit will match the graciousness of our message. Our teaching should

merely explain with words a grace that people already see modeled by our lives. This generosity of spirit not only shapes the way we relate to people on the outside; it impacts how we treat one another too.

Gospel above My Culture

If the gospel is above all, we find a unity in it greater than the myriad of things from our heritages that might divide us. We'll always feel a natural affiliation with people of our own ethnicity and culture, with those who share similar backgrounds to us, and with those whose way of life is similar to ours. But the gospel will be larger in our hearts than even those things, and thus we'll feel *more* kinship, a *deeper* affiliation with believers whose culture differs from ours than we do with people from our own culture who don't share our passion for the gospel. This should empower the church to achieve a unity between ethnicities that our society longs for but is unable to obtain.

Gospel above My Preferences

When the gospel is above all, we will eagerly sacrifice our preferences for the sake of the Great Commission. Like Paul, we'll wear our preferences like a garment we are ready to shed for the sake of the Great Commission whenever necessary. The question we bring to church will not be, *What kind of church do I prefer?* but, *What type of ministry best reaches the people in this community?*

Gospel above My Politics

And just when you thought the book was salty enough, we'll ask how the gospel being above all should transform our approach to politics. We'll see that when the gospel is above all, every other agenda—especially political ones—take a distinct secondary place to it. This is not to say that politics aren't important or that Christians shouldn't engage in them, nor is it to say that Christians should avoid controversial issues and “just

preach Jesus.” Quite the contrary—the gospel often compels us to speak out. But when the gospel is above all, we’ll do so in a way that keeps the gospel central.

We’ll find that when the gospel is above all in our churches, just as Jesus gathered disciples of different political persuasions, so will we. And we’ll see that if that’s not happening, we have good reason to question whether the gospel really is as prominent in our churches as we think it is.

WE’RE BACK

Our culture might believe that Christianity has one foot in the grave, but we shouldn’t be intimidated. “Prophetic” voices declaring the imminent doom of our faith aren’t new. We can’t let doubt, distraction, or despair cause us to drift away from the hope of the gospel and the belief that God is still moving.

Because he is.

Disconnecting our lives and our faith from the gospel disconnects us from him, however, and that does mean certain death.

Be encouraged: from the very birth of our faith, the empire has been saying the days are numbered for followers of Jesus. The French philosopher Francois-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), better known by his pen name Voltaire (though he sounds so much less intimidating as Francoi-Marie!), famously predicted that Christianity would be dead within a hundred years of his death. By the 1880s, he wrote, “There will not be a Bible in the earth except one that is looked upon by an antiquarian curiosity seeker.”

More recently, *TIME* magazine ran a cover story on April 8, 1966, famously posing the question, “Is God Dead?” They assumed the answer was obvious. If not dead, at least ready for hospice.

But here we are, more than 250 years removed from Voltaire and more than fifty years from the *TIME* cover. God is not only not dead; his church is growing, and his Spirit is

moving. Voltaire, on the other hand, is dead. And while *TIME* magazine may still be sputtering along, more than once investors have thought about calling in hospice.

Paul wrote to the church at Colossae two thousand years ago encouraging them that the same gospel that had come to them was now expanding all over the world and transforming lives everywhere it went (Col. 1:6).

That's still true.

A friend of mine says, "If you're not dead, God's not done."
We're not dead, and God's not done with us, either.

Last year more people became Christians than any year to date. More Muslims have converted to Christianity in the last fifteen years than in the entire thirteen centuries since Islam's conception. The global South has seen a remarkable increase in evangelical Christianity in the twenty-first century. People are being saved by the thousands in South America, Africa, and Asia. Even in the West, where the numbers of evangelicals are declining, we're not witnessing the death of true Christianity but of cultural Christianity, which was never gospel Christianity to begin with. And in some of the most difficult places in the Western world, in some of our darkest corners, the church is growing. And thriving.

We don't need another Savior.

We don't need another focus.

We don't need a different power.

There is one name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

There is one source to which we turn for God's power.

His name is Jesus.

Faith in his finished work overcomes the world. We must, therefore, be resolved with Paul to know nothing but Christ and him crucified and to let the gospel occupy the place of first importance in every facet of our lives.

It must always remain *above all*.

Now let's talk about how we do this.