

**stand
up,
stand
strong**

**A CALL TO BOLD FAITH
IN A CONFUSED CULTURE**

SARA BARRATT

“*Stand Up, Stand Strong* is an extraordinary book. Sara Barratt clearly understands the appealing but deceptive cultural values that confuse and derail countless believers, who, apart from learning to think critically, will likely abandon their faith. Sara is immersed in a biblical worldview that permeates everything she says. She writes with rare wisdom and insight. Often I read books that don’t quite live up to what they could have been. This one actually does. I highly recommend it for young people everywhere. Older believers could benefit just as much. This is a terrific book for families, groups, and churches to discuss together!”

Randy Alcorn, author of *Heaven, If God is Good*, and *Deception*

“*Stand Up, Stand Strong* is a clarion call for students today to live out the worldview of Jesus in a countercultural fashion. Sara offers a bold challenge to this generation, and she equips them with the tools to carry it out. I highly recommend it.”

Sean McDowell, PhD, professor at Biola University, speaker, and author of *Chasing Love*

“In *Stand Up, Stand Strong*, clear and biblically grounded cultural analysis is joined with a compelling and Christ-centered call to action. While this moment is full of challenge, Christians are called to speak and act with conviction and compassion. Highly recommended!”

John Stonestreet, president of the Colson Center and coauthor of *A Practical Guide to Culture*

“In a time when many young adults feel paralyzed by anxiety and uncertainty, Sara Barratt shows the way to hope and courage. Gen Z is ready to rise, and *Stand Up, Stand Strong* shows them how to do it. Desperately needed and timely.”

Jeff Myers, PhD, president of Summit Ministries

“Sara Barratt is a fresh and needed voice in the church. In *Stand Up, Stand Strong* she addresses issues critical to this generation with a calm, clear, and compassionate voice. If you’ve got young people

in your life (whether Christians or not), get this incredibly timely resource!”

J. Warner Wallace, *Dateline* featured cold-case detective, senior fellow at the Colson Center for Christian Worldview, and author of *Person of Interest*

“In *Stand Up, Stand Strong* Sara offers vital answers to some of life’s most critical issues. I value and appreciate Sara’s grasp of the challenges young people face and the meticulous care she takes to equip them to know and live out God’s truth. A must-read for any Christian struggling to communicate what they believe in a secularized and sexualized culture.”

Jason Jimenez, founder of STAND STRONG Ministries and bestselling author of *Challenging Conversations*

“In *Stand Up, Stand Strong* Sara Barratt thinks deeply through some of the toughest issues of our day. She offers her readers a biblical lens through which to view this cultural moment—a lens that is shaped not only by truth, but also by grace. Both reason and humility are on these pages. I love that Sara is willing to go here and would love to see more Christians do the same.”

Jen Oshman, author of *Enough about Me* and *Cultural Counterfeits* and podcaster, *All Things*

Praise for *Love Riot*

“Sara Barratt wants to start a riot. An uproar. A disturbance for Jesus. Unlike some teenagers who want to disrupt and destroy, she wants to bravely build. With *Love Riot*, she is calling apathetic bystanders around the church to become wholehearted followers of Christ. She is actively driving and motivating her generation to live with reckless abandon because of God’s great love. Undoubtedly, when you read, you will be captivated by her unrestrained outburst of irresistible faith.”

Kyle Idleman, author of *Not a Fan* and *Don’t Give Up* and senior pastor of Southeast Christian Church

“God is at work among my generation. There’s no denying that, especially after reading *Love Riot*. In this passionate plea to fellow teenagers, Sara calls us to join her in rebelling against spiritual apathy and choosing instead to wholeheartedly follow Jesus, no matter the cost. This book will challenge you, encourage you, and ignite your pursuit of Christ. I highly recommend it!”

Jaquelle Crowe Ferris, author of *This Changes Everything*

“Every teenager needs to read this book. *Love Riot* will challenge your idea of what it means to be a teen that truly follows Christ. Sara Barratt raises the bar and calls her peers to a higher standard. This book has the power to change lives!”

Kristen Clark and Bethany Beal, authors of *Sex, Purity, and the Longings of a Girl’s Heart* and cofounders of Girl Defined Ministries

“*Love Riot* calls the teenagers of the world to step up and step out in their faith and cause a riot against the low expectations set for youth across the globe. It may be aimed at one generation, but *Love Riot* has the ability to cause the riot it’s intending through the hearts of the young to the old.”

Riley Banks-Snyder, author of *Riley Unlikely*
and founder of Generation Next

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BakerBooks

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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barratt, Sara, 1999– author.

Title: Stand up, stand strong : a call to bold faith in a confused culture / Sara Barratt.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2022.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021036894 | ISBN 9780801094415 (paperback) | ISBN 9781540902085 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493434015 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian teenagers—Religious life. | Christianity and culture.

Classification: LCC BV4531.3 .B3655 2022 | DDC 248.8/3—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021036894>

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Published in association with The Steve Laube Agency.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For the glory of my precious Savior, Jesus Christ.
While I was writing this book, You gave me a deeper passion for
Your Word, a stronger commitment to Your truth, and a greater
understanding of Your love. I'm humbled and thankful. Your truth is
not always safe, easy, or comfortable, but it is always good. I echo the
words of the apostle Peter: "Lord, to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

By Your grace. For Your glory. Always.

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Introduction

Standing Strong in a Crazy, Upside-Down World

All around me, I see a world going crazy.

I look at the rapidly changing headlines, the online debates, the political unrest, the constant noise of everyone sharing their opinions, and it's easy to freak out. I see evil applauded as good and good depicted as evil. I squirm in my seat every time I sit in the movie theater while the previews play, and I have a hard time fathoming the lyrics of most hit songs. Gender and sexuality have become options you can choose and change, decided by emotions instead of biology. Conversations about abortion, racism, and politics grow more volatile and divisive every day. Issues of morality have gone from unthinkable to unquestionable, and the pressure to conform to societal demands continues to increase. The landscape of the culture is changing so fast it's hard to keep up. Even if you can keep up, it's difficult to process it all and know how to live in the middle of this crazy, upside-down world.

It's even harder being a teen in this culture. While I'm technically no longer a teenager, I can still relate to the experience of growing up in the middle of our messy society. Those of us in our teens and twenties are learning our foundational beliefs, riding the emotional

roller coaster of entering adulthood, and figuring out how to handle everything coming at us from every side.

If it's hard being a teen, try navigating life as a *Christian teen*. How do we process the messages the world is screaming at us from our iPhones and TV screens? How do we determine which voices are worthy of our attention? How do we rationalize the gap between what the world tells us and what our churches, parents, and Bibles say? How do we stand strong under the pressure of the culture and our desire to fit in?

Deep in our hearts we may think, *I want to follow God . . . but I'm afraid of missing out*. Or, *I want to know what's true . . . but everything feels so confusing*.

I've seen this struggle in the lives of countless teens. I've seen it in my own life.

It's the quick burst of embarrassment we feel when everyone knows a popular song or joke and we don't. Or the hot rise of rebellion when our parents censor what we watch or tell us who we can and cannot hang out with. It's the desire to finally be accepted when we've always felt excluded and not-enough. It's the craving to experience everything the world has to offer and taste the pleasure it promises. It's the pressure to hook up and give in to our sexual desires or the confusion of same-sex attractions. It's not knowing what to say when a friend tells us they're gay. It's the tug-of-war between popularity and holiness, obedience to God and acceptance in the world.

Have you felt this pressure, or is it just me? I've often found myself asking questions like, "How can I know what's actually true when truth seems subjective? What does living for God in a turbulent culture really look like? Why are God's commands so different from the world's perspective on [such and such a hot-button topic]?" As I've searched God's Word for answers, I've learned He doesn't leave us to navigate our crazy world alone. He has clear answers to our most confusing questions, guidance for our most difficult decisions, and holy truth to lead us along the way. This truth has transformed my daily lifestyle, mindsets, and beliefs and led me to live with clarity and confidence.

God created us for this cultural moment and placed us in this time in history for a purpose. It's our responsibility to live well in the

days we've been given. The challenges of our current moment do not alter our God-given purpose. Neither can they change what is true or steal the hope we have in God's sovereign goodness. Throughout history, Christians have always impacted the world when they made the conscious decision to run toward the brokenness armed with love and the power of Christ, instead of away. But in order to be ambassadors of God's love to a hurting world, we must be equipped with the truth and healing He extends.

Do you want to know how to navigate the opinions you face every time you scroll social media or sit in a classroom? Do you crave solid truths for your struggles with identity or sexuality? Do you long for something concrete to stand upon instead of being tossed back and forth by every headline and viral news story? If so, this book is for you. We're going to dig into today's hot-button topics and learn how to biblically navigate culture as we cut through the confusion to discover the clarity of God's Word.

You'll be hearing the word *culture* a lot in the upcoming pages. It might sound like an overused catchphrase or maybe an abstract force looming over the world, but it's actually as practical and personal as the smartphone in your pocket. It's the environment around us, the shared ideals of a collective group that have become so ingrained in our mindsets and lifestyles we call them normal. *Culture* is, as Merriam-Webster defines, "the characteristic features of everyday existence . . . shared by people in a place or time."¹ Culture itself isn't immoral or wrong. Instead, it's the ideas and perspectives held within a particular culture that make it either harmful or helpful, God-honoring or sin-glorifying.

The ingredients of every culture are decisions, mindsets, and beliefs that overflow into actions, laws, and inventions. If you have good ingredients—wise decisions, moral mindsets, and biblical beliefs—you'll end up with God-glorifying actions, laws that do good instead of evil and protect instead of harm, and incredible inventions and creations that help humanity thrive. But if the ingredients are toxic or corrupted—unwise decisions, immoral mindsets, and unbiblical beliefs—you'll end up with a culture flooded with dysfunctional ideas that is harmful to the weakest and most vulnerable members of society.

Introduction

Sadly, many of the “ingredients” within our society directly contradict God’s Word and go against a biblical framework of truth. The prevailing opinions often do not align with wisdom, morality, and biblical truth, and we’re experiencing the results of the brokenness daily.

Culture matters because culture shapes us. We become what we’re exposed to. But is it shaping us for good? Are we becoming all God wants us to be? These are questions we’re going to ask, and in order to do so, we need to take a step back and rethink our normal.

Are you ready? This book is a journey through the minefields of the world around us. It won’t be safe, and I can’t promise it’ll be easy, but I believe it’s worth it. I invite you to join me on this journey as we learn how to stand up and stand strong in a culture of tremendous pressure—no matter the cost.

PART ONE

rethinking normal

1

One Man Flipped the World

*(Jesus Changed Everything . . . and Why
That Matters Today)*

Jesus turned the patterns of the world upside down.

From the beginning of Christ's life, He began impacting culture—as an ordinary yet extraordinary infant who made kings fear and wise men worship. This baby grew into a man who made the blind see, the lame walk, and the dead live again. Everywhere Jesus went, He created a stir and defied the normal order of people's lives and ideas. He pushed back against the status quo that shrugged and said, "This is how it's always been done" to initiate new and better standards defined by the culture of heaven. He made outlandish claims, saying He not only knew the truth but *was* the truth. Not only that He knew a way to God but was *Himself* the only way to God.

He was surrounded by followers and fans who later turned into mobs, bloodthirsty soldiers, and betrayers crying out with shouts of "Crucify Him!" and nailing Him to a cross. He breathed His last on that cross with the words "It is finished!" only to do the unthinkable, unimaginable, and incomprehensible three days later: come back to life.

Now, two millennia later, Jesus is still making waves.

The words and message of Christ have spanned the centuries and reached into our generation. Just like every prior generation, we have a decision to make.

We have to decide what to do with Jesus's words.

Some claim He was just a prophet or well-known teacher. If that were the case, we could take Him or leave Him.

But what if He is who He claimed to be? The very Son of God? The Savior of our souls? The way, the truth, and the life?

That would change everything. In fact, it *did* change everything. Ever since the empty tomb, the gospel has radically impacted individual lives and entire cultures. What impact does the gospel make on *our* culture? More to the point, what impact does the gospel make on the way we *live* in our culture?

As with the people who first experienced Christ's countercultural message, these gospel implications might rub us the wrong way. To have the boldness and grit to live according to His teaching, we need to fully understand the answers to two questions: First, are the words of Christ true? And second, do they have the authority to tell us how to live our lives?

Life Led by the Gospel

Most Christians would say they believe the gospel.

But not all Christians *live* like they believe the gospel.

Let's take a minute to define what I mean by "the gospel." The message of the gospel opens with a holy God and rebellious people in need of a Savior. When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden, humanity's relationship with God shattered and there wasn't anything we could do to fix it. Instead of leaving us to fend for ourselves, God mercifully set a plan in motion to restore our relationship with Him. When Jesus died on the cross, He took our punishment upon Himself and paid our debt with His own blood, building a bridge over the canyon of our sin. When He rose from the dead, He arose as conqueror over sin, Satan, and death. Because of Christ's death, but more importantly, because of Christ's resurrected life, we can have life in Him. His gift of salvation is freely given to all who repent of

their sin and believe in Him. The way to relationship with God has been made, but there's only one way and that's Jesus.

This gospel—this *good news*—isn't like any other news in the world. This news is life changing. The gospel hits deep into the core of a person and flows through every part of life. It shows us the true condition of ourselves—sinners who deserve God's judgment—and provides the only way of salvation.

Most of us who are Christians will nod and skim past these words. We know the story. But here's the real question: *Do we actually believe it?* If we do, it will radically overhaul our lives and revolutionize how we engage the world. If we believe the gospel, it will become impossible for us to live like the rest of society—because our lives will be built on a drastically different foundation.

But too often Christians embrace a watered-down message. We're content to believe Christ's death means we can have eternal life—but it doesn't cross our minds that it should affect how we live here and now. We're thrilled Jesus loves us enough to save us, but the thought of Him also wanting to change us is uncomfortable. Yet we can't have it both ways. The truth of the gospel means that Christ's words *do* have authority to tell us how to live. That authority changes everything.

Believing the full, undiluted message of the gospel is the first step to living counterculturally. If our view of Christ's teaching is compromised, we'll crumble under the pressure to conform instead of standing strong. Shallow convictions lead to shallow living and shallow Christianity, but solid principles and convictions help us obey Christ's command, "Follow Me."

What does that look like?

The Gospel Changes Our Life Purpose

Christ's words are action filled.

"Go into all the world" (Mark 16:15).

"Take up your cross and follow Me" (see Mark 8:34).

The call to follow Christ is not simply a call to believe a set of facts but to live a drastically transformed life. When we accept Christ's gift of salvation, our life purpose alters, and that changes how we view and live in the culture.

The world defines life purpose mostly in terms of “getting” or “achieving.” While most might view success through the lens of a job, bank account, or relationship status, Jesus tells us “treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:20; see vv. 19–21) are worth far more. While popular opinion declares happiness is an emotion to be sought by whatever means in whatever way (through relationships, sex, possessions, position, pleasure, entertainment, etc.), Jesus shows us that building His kingdom is the path to true fulfillment.

The gospel changes our life purpose by giving us meaning beyond the transient things of this world. We live for Jesus, not ourselves.

The Gospel Designates a Source for Morality

The Bible shares a jarring declaration: “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10). The basic idea of morality today says you’re moral if you’re a good person who doesn’t harm others. The flaw with this idea, however, is that it suggests humans can determine what is and is not moral. If we look to ourselves or other people to determine morality, we’ll find an ever-changing definition.

Going back to the Bible, we realize “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). A sinner can’t be an authoritative source for morality. We need a source of morality outside ourselves. Morality is not a concept for *us* to determine. Jesus, the only sinless person, has already determined it.

The Gospel Defines Truth

How do you know how to live if you don’t know what to believe? How do you know what to believe if you don’t know what’s true? This is the conundrum our culture finds itself in. Truth has been subjected to feelings, and no one knows what’s true anymore.

One of Christ’s most audacious claims was about truth. He didn’t say He had it or He knew it. He said He *was* truth. “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). We can have confidence that our Christian message is actually true. Not true because we believe it to be but true whether or not we believe it. Christianity tells the truth about all of reality and the world itself.

In a society that denies the authority of objective truth, we're called to live according to the gospel's definition of truth. Because the key player in the gospel—Jesus Christ—isn't just a bearer of truth, but truth Himself.

The Gospel Reorders Our Priorities

“No one can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24). Enter again the radical words of Christ, leading us to a crossroads. Throughout the Gospels, the kingdom of God is portrayed as a prize above all else. To those who love possessions, Jesus tells to seek treasures in heaven (see Matt. 6:19–21). To those who crave comfort, He hands a cross (see Mark 8:34–37). To those who long for familiarity, He says, “Don't look back” (see Luke 9:62). We are to seek *first* the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33).

Our daily lives reveal our priorities. Christ? Comfort? Wealth? Security? Success? We can't serve them all. The heartbeat of the gospel is that Christ died so “that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (2 Cor. 5:15). The gospel reorders our priorities, placing Christ above all.

The Gospel Realigns Our Authorities

Whether we realize it or not, through the saturation of social media, we've given our favorite YouTubers, Instagram influencers, and TikTok stars authoritative voices in our lives. We can all admit to being swayed by the loudest and most prominent voices around us, simply through the permeation of their influence. The gospel realigns these authorities, distinguishing between voices worthy of our respect and those that shouldn't have influence. We filter all authority through Christ—our supreme authority. We don't turn to the voices of the world for guidance on how to live, but rather to the words of Scripture.

For authorities designated by God (such as political leaders and law enforcement), we humbly submit to their governance in areas that align with God's laws. In the words of Christ, we “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's” (Mark 12:17). But if earthly authorities ask us to sin, like the apostles forbidden to preach the gospel, we turn to our ultimate authority, declaring we “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). As the Manhattan Declaration proclaims, “We will fully

and ungrudgingly render to Caesar what is Caesar's. But under no circumstances will we render to Caesar what is God's."¹

The Gospel Infuses Our Hearts with Hope

Because of Christ's jaw-dropping redemptive work in our lives, we can have hope in the midst of chaos and uncertainty. "Let not let your heart be troubled," Jesus said in John 14:1 (NASB). In a world gone crazy, we have confidence in His words: "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). And not only has He overcome this broken place we call earth, He has also secured an eternally perfect place in heaven for those who trust in Him. We have hope that this world is not all there is. One day, every sorrow will be turned to joy (John 16:22), every tear wiped from our eyes, and every broken thing made new (Rev. 21:4–5). No matter what happens in this earthly life, this promise is secure. When we understand this, it radically shifts how we live here and now. Fear and anxiety don't have to rule our lives, but rather we can live with confidence and hope—our eyes fixed on Jesus, our hearts set on the goal of drawing others to know the hope we have in Him (Heb. 12:1–2).

A World Turned Upside Down

What would happen if we lived a gospel-defined life? How would the world change? How would *we* change?

As we consider how the gospel affects our lives, we're presented with a difficult and costly decision. Every day, you and I make a choice between three options:

1. We can live in sync with the world. We can disregard the words of Christ, follow secular patterns wherever they lead, or blaze our own path according to personal preferences.
2. We can push the issues of the world to the back burner in our minds and retreat from 100 percent following Christ. We can hold biblical beliefs on topics that make us feel good and speak out when it's uncontroversial. We can settle for an easy

life defined by compromise and subtle complicity, believing God's Word when it's convenient and comfortable. We'll be "Christians" but won't live as followers of Christ.

3. We can boldly counter the culture and live according to God's truth no matter the cost or risk. We can believe the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, mold our lives to its standards, and seek God for strength to live according to His ways.

I don't know about you, but for me the greatest temptation is the second option—retreat. It's the easiest choice for those who want to be Christians but also want a comfortable and risk-free life. Retreat is the choice many believers have subconsciously made. We've sat back in apathy and comfort and turned our backs on the brokenness instead of engaging the world as Christ commissioned.

Yet each day, we are given the opportunity to make our choice again. So, which path will we choose? Will we sit on the sidelines or will we rise up? Will we let the voice of truth die out on our watch or will we be the ones to raise our voices and proclaim it?

This is our time, and it's *not* time to retreat. Yes, it will be hard. We won't be popular. We won't be politically correct or culturally accepted. But God is calling us to this work and searching out those who will rise up and live out His truth. He's calling us to be a church that neither succumbs nor retreats, but stands firm upon His truth and shines a light in the darkness of our world.

Two millennia ago, that's what Jesus did. He shone the greatest light humanity has ever seen into the blackness of a broken world and illuminated the dark. That light was His love, His shed blood, and His resurrected life.

Wherever the gospel goes, it makes waves. If you counter the culture with the gospel and live according to its precepts, you will too. Are you willing to take the risk? Because it will be a risk, make no mistake about it.

With a wooden beam, a few nails, an empty tomb, and perfect love personified, one man flipped the world. The world desperately needs to encounter the power of the gospel. Will they see it in us? Believe it

or not, the first step in letting the world see Christ in us is evaluating how *we* see the world.

Going Deeper

1. What's the hardest part of being a young adult in the current culture for you?
2. Would you say you believe the gospel? Do you think you live like you believe the gospel?
3. Have you ever encountered or believed a compromised gospel? What does a compromised gospel look like?
4. Outside of the six ways listed above, how else should the gospel transform your life?
5. Which of the three options of how to live daily did you choose? Which have you chosen in the past?

Further Resources

- *Counter Culture: Following Christ in an Anti-Christian Age* by David Platt
- *This Changes Everything: How the Gospel Transforms the Teen Years* by Jaquelle Crowe Ferris