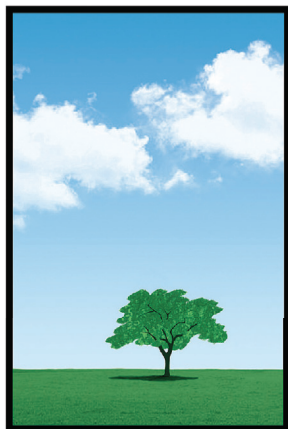


# how people change



Timothy S. Lane | Paul David Tripp

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## foreword

The Word of God contains hundreds of thousands of words—but no photographs, drawings, maps, or charts. God’s words are all words.

And yet, your Bible is a colorful picture book, a vivid storybook, and more. It’s as multisensory as life itself. You are meant to see—in your mind’s eye—the wildflowers tended by no one but God. You are meant to feel the apprehension as Esther steps into the Persian throne room uninvited. You are meant to feel the gladness of hosannas and the sting of mocking. You taste roasted grain, apples, raisin cakes, and honey—and become able to imagine how wisdom might be “sweeter than honey.” You smell incense and cedar, fresh bread and lamp oil, blood and fire and smoke—and learn something about the mercies and glories of the Lord. As Jesus’ life story unfolds, you sense the mounting hostility from religious leaders, the stunned disappointment in his disciples when he is killed, and then the dawning of indestructible joy as they realize he is alive and well.

God tells dramatic stories. He puts earthy metaphors to work. Reading and listening, you see moving pictures in your head. So the impact is visceral as well as conceptual. God speaks earthy, holy words in order to change you, not just to give you more information.

Compare the impact of the following sentences. First, “The Bible says that God loves people.” Second, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Both statements are true. They even mean the same thing. But they don’t do the same thing. The second statement gets to you, stays with you, works on you. That’s because it comes with pictures and stories attached.

In the pages that follow, Tim Lane and Paul Tripp intend to teach you things about how the Christian life works. This isn’t for theory, it’s for real. So the truths they teach come with pictures and stories attached. Tim and Paul will tell you stories about real people, illustrating the ways that God’s grace operates in our lives. In fact, frequently you will be asked to add your own story, to make what is taught personally relevant.

This book will also use one particular visual image throughout chapters 3–14 (chapters that mirror the lessons in the *How People Change*

curriculum). It pictures two kinds of plants growing in the burning desert. The barren thorn bush grows where there is no moisture. The fruit tree flourishes where its roots tap a steady source of sweet water. The Lord, who laid down his life for us, is that spring of living water.

The authors asked me to write this foreword because they borrowed their particular visual image from a course called “The Dynamics of Biblical Change” that I first developed in the 1980s. I’m honored to be credited by two respected colleagues who were formerly my students. But, of course, I can’t take much credit. I also borrowed that visual image—from the Bible, in Jeremiah 17—and simply adapted it into a more comprehensive metaphor for the Christian life. I hope that this picture will assist readers, helping you to take to heart and put into practice all that you will be reading in the chapters that follow.

In the wider world, as in the church, many voices cry out in our ears, “Listen to me! I’m important. I will give you happiness, health, money, knowledge, success, love.” A few of those voices are, in fact, important and helpful. But most of those voices are simply hot air. At best, the things they offer are not nearly as important as they’re made out to be. At worst, they get it all backward.

What about *How People Change*? If the authors speak truly, then you need to listen. It’s really important—a matter of life or death—whether or not you grow up into a wiser human being: “Nothing you desire can compare with her [wisdom]” (Prov. 3:15). In fact, there’s only one thing more important. Here’s how God himself weighs in on the question:

“Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight.” (Jer. 9:23–24)

*How People Change* starts with God, and so avoids the fatal flaw in all the self-help books. You become profoundly different as you come to the growing realization, “It’s not all about me.” It’s all about the One who is remaking us—each one and all together—into his image, and thus into a community that practices lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness in the earth. “In these things I delight.”

DAVID POWLISON  
July 2005

## Acknowledgments

While several people have been instrumental in writing this book, in large part this book would not even exist without the leadership, vision, and insights of our friend and colleague, David Powlison. The content of this book grew out of a class that David has developed and taught for over twenty years. Each of us had the privilege of taking this class: one of us in 1984, when it was in its early form, and one of us as recently as 2000. Whatever strengths exist in this book belong to David; whatever weaknesses exist, we humbly own.

One of the benefits we experience daily is to work in a place where the gospel and its application to life are talked about regularly. We also have countless opportunities to apply what we talk about to our own lives and relationships together. As in any community of believers, we do this imperfectly, yet God remains faithful and our friendships remain intact. Many thanks to David, Ed, Bill, Winston, Jayne, John, and Mike for your friendship, encouragement, and patience as we work and grow in grace together. You have had a profound effect on our lives and ministries.

We are grateful yet again for the work of Sue Lutz, who is not only a very gifted wordsmith but also has a deep understanding and appreciation for the content of the gospel. Because of that, she is a capable guide and helpful sounding board concerning the message of this and all of our books. She has even made this acknowledgments page sound better!

On a practical note, we wish to thank Punch Marketing (Joan Johnson) for believing in this material and for her financial investment and encouragement throughout this process. Special thanks to Ray Burnette for the passion, creativity, and care he has demonstrated on our behalf. We're also grateful for our publishing partner, New Growth Press, for their commitment and dedication to this project.

Seldom in ministry does a person have the opportunity to write. Rarer still is the opportunity to write with a colleague who is also a friend. We have had this opportunity and privilege and are amazed that we actually get paid to do this! Three years ago, we started cowriting a discipleship curriculum for local churches that laid the foundation for this book. At the time, we had no idea whether our writing partnership





would work. We are thankful that it has, and that our appreciation for each other has grown through the process.

God has used our families in tremendous ways to remind us how much we need the grace we celebrate in this book. To our wives, Barbara and Luella, and our children, Hannah, Timothy, Kathryn, and Benjamin, and Justin, Ethan, Nicole, and Darnay: thank you for your patience as we continue to grow as husbands and fathers.

It is our hope that the same gospel we need every day will become clearer and more captivating as you read this book. As we come to the end of this project, we are very aware of how much we need what we have written. Simply because you can explain something with some degree of clarity does not mean that you have mastered it—or that it has mastered you. We remain, until the day we die or Christ returns, two sinners in need of grace. We thank God that this is what he gives us on a daily basis!

TIMOTHY S. LANE  
PAUL DAVID TRIPP  
September 2, 2005

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## the gospel gap

At first I was impressed. Phil was not only familiar with Scripture and systematic theology, he also owned an extensive library of biblical commentaries by the “who’s who” of theological writers. There were few places I could go in Scripture and few theological references I could make that were new to Phil. Yet there was something dramatically wrong. If you were to turn from Phil’s library and watch the video of his life, you would see a very different man.

Phil always seemed to be pointing out something wrong around him, yet he was successful at very little himself. He had the theological dexterity of a gymnast, but he lived like a relational paraplegic. His marriage to Ellie had been tumultuous from day one. He seemed completely unable to diagnose or correct the unending stream of problems that had sucked the oxygen out of this relationship. His relationships with his grown children were distant at best, and he always seemed to be embroiled in some drama with his extended family. He was never satisfied in his career, and he had been involved in four churches in three decades. The time he spent dealing with his own problems left little time for ministry to others.

The problem was that few seemed to know the “video” Phil. He and Ellie never fought publicly, never separated, and never considered divorce. They were faithful in church attendance and in giving. In Sunday school classes and Bible studies, Phil came across as knowledgeable and committed. Yet at home he was easily irritated and often explosive. Most of his free time was spent on the computer. He and Ellie rarely talked beyond the level of plans for the day, and even then his responses toward her were harsh and impatient. Terms like love, grace, and joy did not characterize Phil’s life.

Ellie carried around a frustration with the church because she felt like no one really “got” Phil. He wasn’t physically abusive, he wasn’t addicted to substances or pornography, and he wasn’t about to forsake his family, so he flew under the radar of pastoral care. Knowing how many people looked up to Phil, Ellie struggled every time he was asked to lead a Bible study or teach a theology class. She did everything she knew to resist becoming bitter and cynical, but she was beginning to lose the battle. Some days Ellie

would find herself at the kitchen table, lost in daydreams of a life without Phil.

Finally, Ellie told Phil she could not go on like this any longer. She knew she needed help, and she asked him to come along for counseling. At first, Phil angrily refused, but he eventually agreed to give it a try. During our first time together, I let them spend most of the time talking. There was something strange about their story, but I couldn't put my finger on it. It wasn't until I was driving home that it hit me: They had given me an extensive history, yet there was little or no reference to God. Here was a theological man and his believing wife, yet their life story was utterly godless!

Phil and Ellie had a huge gap in their understanding of the gospel. It was as if they were attempting to live with a gaping hole in the middle of their house. They walked around it every day. Things would fall into it, and the hole would get bigger, but they didn't seem aware that it was there. They didn't realize that other houses didn't have a hole, and that those that did needed to be renovated or demolished. Phil even had a "hole repair manual" that he had read thoroughly, but it hadn't led him to fix his. Ellie suffered from the dust, smell, and heat that drifted up from the hole, but she had no idea what to do about them. This was their Christianity.

I wish I could say that Phil and Ellie are alone, but I am convinced that there are many Phils and Ellies among us. Often there is a vast gap in our grasp of the gospel. It subverts our identity as Christians and our understanding of the present work of God. This gap undermines every relationship in our lives, every decision we make, and every attempt to minister to others. Yet we live blindly, as if the hole were not there.

## Understanding the Gap

Second Peter 1:3–9 describes this gap better than any other passage.

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your

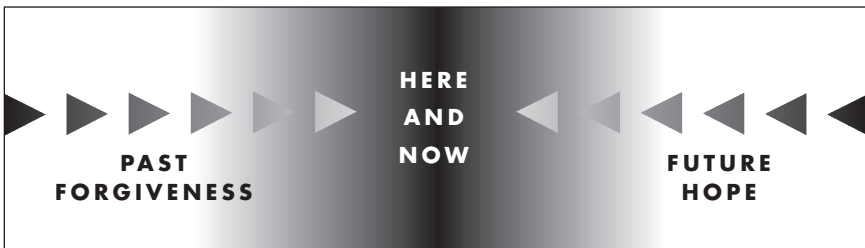
knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

Let's look at the symptoms of the gap. In verse 9, Peter points out that there are people who know the Lord, but whose lives fail to produce the expected fruit of faith. Their lives are not characterized by peaceful, loving relationships, a sweet, natural, day-by-day worship of the Lord, a wholesome and balanced relationship to material things, and ongoing spiritual growth. Instead, these believers leave a trail of broken relationships, a knowledgeable but impersonal walk with God, a struggle with material things, and a definite lack of personal growth. Something is wrong with this harvest; it contradicts the faith that is supposed to be its source.

Peter's words describe Phil and Ellie. They were "ineffective and unproductive" in many ways. The scars of conflict had so crippled their respect for each other that there was little trust or spontaneous affection left between them. They did not get along with their neighbors and left three churches badly. There was little tenderness or affection in their worship of God. Their Christianity seemed more an ideology than a worship-driven relationship, and God's practical call on their lives was more a duty to be performed than a joy to be pursued. It wasn't surprising that Phil and Ellie struggled with debt. Physical things had replaced spiritual things long ago. More than anything else, they seemed stuck. If you had recorded their complaints against each other ten years ago, the tape could have been seamlessly inserted into any of the arguments they had today.

Why are many Christians "ineffective and unproductive"? Peter provides the diagnosis in verse 9: they are nearsighted and blind, having forgotten that they have been cleansed from their past sins. They are blind to the power and hope of the gospel for today. What does this mean?

The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is a "then-now-then" gospel (see figure 1.1) First, there is the "then" of the past. When I embrace



**FIGURE 1.1** The Gospel Gap

Christ by faith, my sins are completely forgiven, and I stand before God as righteous. There is also the “then” of the future, the promise of eternity with the Lord, free of sin and struggle. The church has done fairly well explaining these two “thens” of the gospel, but it has tended to understate or misunderstand the “now” benefits of the work of Christ. What difference does the gospel make in the here and now? How does it help me as a father, a husband, a worker, and a member of the body of Christ? How does it help me respond to difficulty and make decisions? How does it give me meaning, purpose, and identity? How does it motivate my ministry to others?

It is in the here and now that many of us experience a gospel blindness. Our sight is dimmed by the tyranny of the urgent, by the siren call of success, by the seductive beauty of physical things, by our inability to admit our own problems, and by the casual relationships within the body of Christ that we mistakenly call fellowship. This blindness is often encouraged by preaching that fails to take the gospel to the specific challenges people face. People need to see that the gospel belongs in their workplace, their kitchen, their school, their bedroom, their backyard, and their van. They need to see the way the gospel makes a connection between what they are doing and what God is doing. They need to understand that their life stories are being lived out within God’s larger story so that they can learn to live each day with a gospel mentality.

### **Three Kinds of Blindness**

The “here and now” hole in the middle of our lives produces three fundamental forms of spiritual blindness. First, there is the blindness of identity. Many Christians do not have a gospel perspective on who they are. For example, Phil was a good theologian, but his personal identity was more rooted in knowledge and achievement than in the gospel. This lack of gospel identity shows up in two ways. First, many Christians underestimate the presence and power of indwelling sin. They don’t see how easily entrapped they are in this world full of snares (see Gal. 6:1). They don’t grasp the comprehensive nature of the war that is always raging within the heart of every believer (see Rom. 7). They’re not aware of how prone they are to run after God replacements. They fail to see that their greatest problems exist within them, not outside them.

My work with teenagers has convinced me that one of the main reasons teenagers are not excited by the gospel is that they do not think they need it. Many parents have successfully raised self-righteous little Pharisees. When they look at themselves, they do not see a sinner in desperate need, so they are not grateful for a Savior. Sadly, the same is true of many of their parents.

Many believers also fail to see the other side of their gospel identity: their identity in Christ. Christ not only gives me forgiveness and a new

future, but a whole new identity as well! I am now a child of God, with all of the rights and privileges that this title bestows. This is important because each of us lives out of some sense of identity, and our gospel identity amnesia will always lead to some form of identity replacement. That is, if who I am in Christ does not shape the way I think about myself and the things I face, then I will live out of some other identity.

Often in our blindness, we take on our problems as identities. While divorce, depression, and single parenthood are significant human experiences, they are not identities. Our work is not our identity, though it is an important part of how God intends us to live. For too many of us, our sense of identity is more rooted in our performance than it is in God's grace. It is wonderful to be successful at what God has called you to do, but when you use your success to define who you are, you will always have a distorted perspective.

Second, a "here and now" gap in the gospel also causes us to be blind to God's provision. As Peter states, in Christ we have been given "everything we need for life and godliness." Why does he use two words here, both "life" and "godliness"? The second word is meant to qualify the first. If Peter had simply said that God has given us everything we need for life, it would be easy to add the word *eternal* before it. This is how this passage is often interpreted. We find it much easier to embrace the gospel's promise of life after death than we do its promise of life before death! But when Peter says that God has given us everything we need for "godliness," we know that he is talking about life now. Godliness is a God-honoring life from the time I come to Christ until the time I go home to be with him.

Peter is saying that we cannot live properly in the present unless we understand the provision God has made for us. Many believers are blind to the fact that this provision runs deeper than the commands, principles, and promises of Scripture we normally associate with the pursuit of a godly life. It is even more fundamental than the conviction of the Holy Spirit or our legal forgiveness. God's provision for a godly life now is literally Christ himself! He has given us himself so that we can be like him.

Paul says in Galatians 2:20, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." Jesus is Emmanuel not only because he came to earth and lived with us, but because he actually lives within us now by his Spirit. His presence gives us everything we need to be who we are supposed to be and do what we are supposed to do.

Without an awareness of Christ's presence, we tend to live anxiously. We avoid hard things and are easily overwhelmed. But a clear sense of identity and provision gives us hope and courage to face the struggles and temptations that come our way.

A third form of blindness that a gospel gap produces is blindness to God's process. The New Testament is clear that our acceptance into the family



of God is not the end of God's work in us, but the beginning. God has not called us to a life of "I have spiritually arrived" or "I am just waiting for heaven." Rather, he calls us to a life of constant work, constant growth, and constant confession and repentance. Making us holy is God's unwavering agenda until we are taken home to be with him. He will do whatever he needs to produce holiness in us. He wants us to be a community of joy, but he is willing to compromise our temporal happiness in order to increase our Christlikeness.

Any time we find ourselves in difficulty or trial, it is easy to think we have been forgotten or rejected by God. This is because we do not understand the present process. God is not working for our comfort and ease; he is working on our growth. At the very moment we are tempted to question his faithfulness, he is fulfilling his redemptive promises to us. After all, it's not like there are only some people who really need to change. Change is the norm for everyone, and God is always at work to complete this process in us.

### **What Fills the Gap?**

There is one thing that physical and spiritual holes have in common: They don't stay empty for long. A hole in the sand will quickly fill with water. A hole in a field will accumulate sticks and leaves. Holes always seem to get filled.

Under the main staircase in our house is a large walk-in closet. It is the bane of my wife's existence. Every six months or so, Luella summons the courage to attack this closet. She empties it completely, sorting its contents and uncovering the floor for the first time in months. She always says that she wants us to try to keep the closet in this pristine condition. I don't oppose the idea since I like being able to walk into it, but the closet always seems to fill up again. Our children visit and leave artifacts of their new existence in the closet. Packages come in the mail, and the boxes seem to mysteriously wind up in the closet. All the "stuff" that has no home somehow finds its way there. And before long, the closet door can barely shut, and Luella has to attack it again.

The gospel gap in many of our lives doesn't stay empty either. If we do not live with a gospel-shaped, Christ-confident, and change-committed Christianity, that hole will get filled with other things. These things may seem plausible and even biblical, but they will be missing the identity-provision-process core that is meant to fill every believer.

I like the term Paul uses for these counterfeits in 2 Corinthians 10:5. He calls them "pretensions." Not every lie is a pretense. A pretense is a plausible lie. I could tell you that I was a female Olympic gymnast. That would be a lie, but it would not be a pretense because it would lack plausibility. But if I dressed in a suit and stood in front of an office with a briefcase and a set

of architectural drawings, I could probably fool you into thinking I was a building contractor.

The most dangerous pretensions are those that masquerade as true Christianity but are missing the identity-provision-process core of the gospel. They have their roots in the truth, but they are incomplete. The result is a Christianity that is mere externalism. Whenever we are missing the message of Christ's indwelling work to progressively transform us, the hole will be filled by a Christian lifestyle that focuses more on externals than on the heart. I believe that a war for the heart of Christianity is raging all around us, seeking to draw us away from its true core toward the externals.

What sorts of Christian externals tend to fill the gospel gap? They are all things that are part of the normal Christian life; each tends to attract us at different times and in different ways. Look for yourself in these descriptions. Is it possible that you have a gap in your gospel and that it has been filled in ways you didn't realize?

## **Christian Externalism: Things That Fill the Gap**

### *Formalism*

If you want to know the church calendar, just look at Jim's schedule. Whatever the meeting or ministry, Jim is there, Bible in hand. He's done his stint as a Sunday school teacher and regularly volunteers for short-term missions trips. He is faithful in giving and a willing volunteer when work needs to be done around the church. But Jim's world and God's world never meet. All of his church activities have little impact on his heart and how he lives his life.

God railed against the formalism of the Israelites (see Isa. 1), and Christ condemned the formalism of the Pharisees (see Matt. 23:23–28). Why? Because formalism allows me to retain control of my life, my time, and my agenda. Formalism is blind to the seriousness of my spiritual condition and my constant need for God's grace to rescue me. Jim sees his church participation simply as one healthy aspect of a good life. He has no noticeable hunger for God's help in any other area. For him, the gospel is reduced to participation in the meetings and ministries of the church.

### *Legalism*

Sally is a walking list of dos and don'ts. She has a set of rules for everything. They are her way of evaluating herself and everyone around her. Her children live under the crushing weight of her legalism. To them, God is a harsh judge who places unreasonable standards on them and then condemns them when

they can't keep them. There is no joy in Sally's home because there is no grace to be celebrated. Sally thinks that performing her list gives her standing with God. She has no appreciation for the grace given her in Christ Jesus.

Legalism completely misses the fact that no one can satisfy God's requirements. While Sally rigidly keeps her rules, her pride, impatience, and judgmental spirit go untouched. Legalism ignores the depth of our inability to earn God's favor. It forgets the need for our hearts to be transformed by God's grace. Legalism is not just a reduction of the gospel, it is another gospel altogether (see Galatians), where salvation is earned by keeping the rules we have established.

### *Mysticism*

Christine careens from emotional experience to emotional experience. She is constantly hunting for a spiritual high, a dynamic encounter with God. Because of this, she never stays with one church very long. She is more a consumer of experience than a committed member of the body of Christ. Yet in between the dynamic experiences, Christine's faith often falls flat. She struggles with discouragement and often finds herself wondering if she is even a believer. Despite the excitement of powerful moments, Christine isn't growing in faith and character.

Biblical faith is not stoic; true Christianity is dyed with all the colors of human emotion. But you cannot reduce the gospel to dynamic emotional experiences with God. As the Holy Spirit indwells us and the Word of God impacts us, most of the changes in our hearts and lives take place in the little moments of life. The danger of mysticism is that it can become more a pursuit of experience than a pursuit of Christ. It reduces the gospel to dynamic emotional and spiritual experiences.

### *Activism*

Shirley stands on the right-to-life picket line wondering why more Christians aren't there. Of course, Shirley feels the same about the protests at the adult bookstore and her work on the coming local election. These causes define what it means to be a Christian. Her constant refrain is, "Stand up for what is right, wherever and whenever it is needed." There is something admirable about Shirley's willingness to devote time, energy, and money to stand up for what is right.

But on closer examination, Shirley's Christianity is more a defense of what's right than a joyful pursuit of Christ. The focus of this kind of Christian activism is always on external evil. As a result, it can take on the form of a modern monasticism. The monastics essentially said, "There is an evil

world out there, and the way to fight evil is to separate from it.” But monasteries failed because they forgot to focus on the evil inside every monk who entered their walls!

Whenever you believe that the evil outside you is greater than the evil inside you, a heartfelt pursuit of Christ will be replaced by a zealous fighting of the “evil” around you. A celebration of the grace that rescues you from your own sin will be replaced by a crusade to rescue the church from the ills of the surrounding culture. Christian maturity becomes defined as a willingness to defend right from wrong. The gospel is reduced to participation in Christian causes.

### *Biblicism*

John is a biblical and theological expert. His theological library includes rare, antique Christian volumes, and he is always seeking to buy first editions. John frequently uses phrases like “biblical worldview,” “theologically consistent,” and “thinking like a Christian.” He loves the Bible (which is a very good thing), but there are things in John’s life that don’t seem to fit.

Despite his dedicated study of Christianity, John isn’t known for being like Christ. He has a reputation for being proud, critical, and intolerant of anyone who lacks his fine-grained understanding of the faith. John endlessly critiques his pastor’s sermons and unnerves Sunday school teachers when he enters the room.

In John’s Christianity, communion, dependency, and worship of Christ have been replaced by a drive to master the content of Scripture and systematic theology. John is a theological expert, but he is unable to live by the grace he can define with such technical precision. He has invested a great deal of time and energy mastering the Word, but he does not allow the Word to master him. In biblicism, the gospel is reduced to a mastery of biblical content and theology.

### *“Psychology-ism”*

Jen always has a group of people ministering to her. She talks a lot about how many “hurting” people are in her congregation, and how the church isn’t doing enough to help them. An avid reader of Christian self-help books, she is always recommending the latest one to someone. She often says that Christianity is the only place to find real help and healing, yet she doesn’t seem to find that healing herself. Jen spends much of her time discouraged and often leaves church meetings in tears.

Jen is right that our deepest needs are met in Christ, but she sees Christ more as a therapist than as the Savior. Jen is convinced that her deepest needs

come out of her experience of neglect and rejection, and so she sees herself more in need of healing than redemption. She is blind to how demanding, critical, and self-absorbed she actually is.

Without realizing it, Jen has redefined the problem that the gospel addresses. Rather than seeing our problem as moral and relational—the result of our willingness to worship and serve ourselves and the things of this world instead of worshiping and serving our Creator (Romans 1)—she sees our problem as a whole catalog of unmet needs. But whenever you view the sin of another against you as a greater problem than your own sin, you will tend to seek Christ as your therapist more than you seek him as your Savior. Christianity becomes more a pursuit of healing than a pursuit of godliness. The gospel is reduced to the healing of emotional needs.

### *“Social-ism”*

George was so thankful for the relationships he had found in the body of Christ. They were unlike any friendships he had experienced before. He was so full of joy for his Christian family that he participated in any activity that put him in contact with other believers. George loved his twenty-something Bible study, but he particularly enjoyed going out with the gang afterward. He loved the retreats, the camping trips, and the short-term missionary projects. For the first time in his life, George felt alive and connected.

George’s trouble started when one of his closest friends was transferred out of state and another friend got married. Then his church called a new pastor who decided to de-emphasize ministry to singles. When the small groups at his church were reorganized, George felt that he was stuck with a group of older married people with whom he couldn’t relate. Church wasn’t the same anymore, so he quit going to his small group. Before long his attendance on Sunday began to wane. Going to church, he said, was like going to someone else’s family reunion.

George didn’t realize it, but fellowship, acceptance, respect, and position in the body of Christ had replaced his dependence on communion with Christ. The church had become his spiritual social club, and when the club began to break up, he lost his motivation to continue. For George, the grace of friendship replaced Christ as the thing that gave him identity, purpose, and hope. The gospel had been reduced to a network of fulfilling Christian relationships.

## **Why Are These Replacements So Attractive?**

In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul talks about “pretensions that set themselves up against the knowledge of God.” Remember that a pretense is a plausible lie,

with enough truth to be believable. The lies that capture us as Christians usually seem to fit well within the borders of our Christianity. Perhaps postmodernism and sexual immorality are not the greatest threats to the church of Christ in our day. Perhaps we are in more danger from the subtle lies that flow from subtle shifts in how we understand the gospel. We have not forsaken the faith, but we may have redefined it in ways that are fundamentally different from the gospel laid out in Scripture.

This redefinition of the faith does not happen all at once. It may not even surface in the public theological discussions of the church. Rather, the redefinition is a process of subtle steps at the practical level of the church's fellowship, life, and ministry. Hope in Christ gets replaced with Christian activity, emotional experiences, Christian fellowship, or something else, without anyone consciously redefining or forsaking the faith.

All of the isms we have considered are attractive because they each emphasize one important aspect of the gospel. The gospel does call me to lead a godly life and to gather with God's people for worship. God will meet me in special ways at certain times. The gospel does call me to influence the world for good, to love truth, and to meditate on it. God is a God of comfort who meets us in all our sorrows. We are to be enthusiastic participants in the fellowship of the body of Christ.

The danger occurs when we reduce the gospel to any one of these elements. Whenever I do, my Christianity is no longer motivated by a humble admission of my daily need for Christ and a humble pursuit of his grace. Things that are intended to be the means of this pursuit instead become the ends. For example, the goal of understanding the truths of the gospel is to have a deeper relationship with Christ. But when theological knowledge becomes the goal, Christ is displaced.

There is another, deeper reason why these isms are so attractive. Each in some way appeals to spiritual problems we need to address. First, they appeal to our self-righteousness. None of us wants to think that we are as bad off as the gospel says we are! We prefer to think that we just need some minor theological tweaking or more faithful church attendance to function as God intended. Yet the gospel says that no system or activity can provide what we need. Our sin is so great that only Christ's work on the cross can rescue us.

These isms also appeal to our selfishness. As sinners, we like to be at the center of the universe. We like being the ones who control the agenda. Yet the gospel makes it clear that the only way to really live is first to die, and that those who strive to live, end up dying as a result. When the gospel is reduced to a catalog of isms where I choose the one most attractive and comfortable for me, I can participate extensively in Christianity without much personal sacrifice, and with my self, unchallenged, at the center of it all.

These isms also appeal to our environmentalism. We tend to believe that the sin that surrounds us is more dangerous than the sin that resides inside us. This is why it is hard for a husband to understand that he can't blame his coldness on his wife, nor can the wife blame her bitterness on her husband, nor can their child blame his rebellion on his parents' failures.

When we forget how desperate our condition really is, Christian activity begins to replace a heartfelt reliance on Christ and his grace. We get more excited about changing the world than we do about the radical changes of heart and life that the gospel promises because of Christ's presence in our hearts.

These isms also appeal to our independence. It's hard for us to embrace how weak, blind, and vulnerable sin actually makes us. We don't like to think that we need wisdom and correction daily. We prefer the lie of our own self-sufficiency. Sure, we can recognize the blindness and foolishness in others, but we like to think that we are the exception to the rule. It is uncomfortable to see ourselves as needy and weak, but we are, and that is exactly why Christ is the only answer.

Knowledge of the truth and participation in church activities, when viewed improperly, can give you a distorted view of who you are. Knowledge of doctrine is not the same as Christian maturity and victory over sin. Participation in Christian causes should not mask the sin struggles going on in my heart at the same time.

To the degree that you forget you are a sinner, you will underestimate your daily need for Christ and the relationships in his body that are his tools of change.

We all know on some level that Christ must be our identity, meaning, purpose, hope, and goal. Yet our self-righteousness dies hard. We want to be at the center of our world, and we think we are capable of more independence than would be spiritually helpful. So we tend to reduce the gospel to comfortable elements, none of which do justice to the message of grace found in Christ.

## **What Should Fill the Gap?**

It's amazing how long it took me to really understand the gospel. Like many Christians, I understood early on that my sins had been forgiven (past grace) and that I was going to spend my eternity with Christ (future grace). But I did not grasp the depth of my need for the benefits of the work of Christ now (present grace). My externalist Christianity needed to be infused with the present power of the gospel. It is not enough to embrace Christ's promise of life after death. We must also embrace his promise of life before death, which is only possible because of Christ's grace at work in our hearts today. This is what this book is about. It celebrates the grace of forgiveness

that is ours because of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and it keeps its eye on the hope of eternity. But the primary focus of this book is on present grace.

How does God grow and change us while we live here on earth? What has Christ given to help me with that tough conversation with my spouse last Tuesday night? How does his grace impact a person's struggle with depression or fear? What has Christ given to help me deal with the pressures of parenting or the workplace? What provision has he made for my struggles with lust, fear, or materialism? What do repentance and change actually look like? Why do we struggle with one area of sin more than another, doing the thing we never intended to do?

These are the kinds of practical questions this book will address. Our intention is to take the gospel of Christ's grace into all the specific places where you live your life. We believe that you can know why you do the things you do. You can have a clear sense of where change is needed in your life and what that change should look like. You can understand what God is doing in the present and how you can be a part of it.

But let me warn you: there is nothing new in this book—no secrets or magic formulas. We are very excited to offer you something you already know, but may not understand fully and practically. Our goal is to bring the old, old story of the gospel to your heart and life in a way that has been heart- and life-changing for us. Often there has been too much of a separation between the theology we say we believe and the world we struggle in every day. The purpose of this book is to bridge that gap.

## **Five Gospel Perspectives**

Five gospel perspectives give this book its direction.

### *The Extent and Gravity of Our Sin*

It has been said that the doctrine of sin is the one doctrine you can prove empirically, yet we all tend to minimize it. Early in our marriage my wife, Luella, graciously pointed out many failures in my love for her. She wasn't being overcritical; she had seen real areas of sin rooted in wrong attitudes in my heart. I knew she loved me and that she wasn't crazy, but I simply couldn't believe that I was as bad as she was making me out to be! I look back and cringe at how self-righteous I was. Self-righteousness is your own personal defense attorney. In a scary moment of self-defense, I said to her, "Ninety-five percent of the women in our church would love to be married to me!" (How's that for humility?) Luella sweetly informed me that she was in the 5 percent!



I was a pastor at the time and regularly counseling married couples, helping them deal with the sin that stood in the way of the loving unity God intended for them. I was good at helping other people see and own their sin. But I was not willing to believe that my need was just as desperate. Maybe I was blinded by my theological knowledge or my pastoral skill. But one thing is sure: I had forgotten who I was, and I was offended that Luella had such a low opinion of me!

I don't think I am alone. The struggle to accept our exceeding sinfulness is everywhere in the church of Christ. We accept the doctrine of total depravity, but when we are approached about our own sin, we wrap our robes of self-righteousness around us and rise to our own defense.

Scripture challenges this self-righteousness with clarity and power: "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5), and "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10). The effects of sin twist every thought, motive, desire, word, and action. This disease has infected us all, and the consequences are severe.

Why is this perspective so essential? Only when you accept the bad news of the gospel does the good news make any sense. The grace, restoration, reconciliation, forgiveness, mercy, patience, power, healing, and hope of the gospel are for sinners. They are only meaningful to you if you admit that you have the disease and realize that it is terminal.

### *The Centrality of the Heart*

The average Christian defines sin by talking about behavior. For example, what is the goal of most Christian parents? Is it not to get their children to do the right things? We set up all kinds of relational, motivational, and corrective structures to constrain and direct our children's behavior. These structures are not without value, but if this is your only response to your child's rebellion and sin, you will leave him defenseless against sin once he leaves home and the structures are no longer there.

Beneath the battle for behavior is another, more fundamental battle—the battle for the thoughts and motives of the heart.

The heart is the real or essential you. All of the ways in which the Bible refers to the inner person (mind, emotions, spirit, soul, will, etc.) are summed up with this one term: *heart*. The heart is the steering wheel of every human being. Everything we do is shaped and controlled by what our hearts desire.

That is why the Bible is very clear that God wants our hearts. Only when God has your heart does he have you. As much as we are affected by

our broken world and the sins of others against us, our greatest problem is the sin that resides in our hearts. That is why the message of the gospel is that God transforms our lives by transforming our hearts.

Lasting change always comes through the heart. This is one of Scripture's most thoroughly developed themes, but many of us have missed its profound implications. We need a deeper understanding of Proverbs 4:23, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."

### *The Present Benefits of Christ*

The Christian hope is more than a redemptive system with practical principles that can change your life. The hope of every Christian is a person, the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. He is the wisdom behind every biblical principle and the power we need to live them out. Because Christ lives inside us today, because he rules all things for our sakes (see Eph. 1:22–23), and because he is presently putting all his enemies under his feet (see 1 Cor. 15:25–28), we can live with courage and hope.

Our hope is not in our theological knowledge or our experience within the body of Christ. We are thankful for these things, yet we hold on to one hope: Christ. In him we find everything we need to live a godly life in the here and now. Paul captures it so well: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

### *God's Call to Growth and Change*

It is so easy to coast! We have been accepted into God's family, and someday will be with him in eternity. But what goes on in between? From the time we come to Christ until the time we go home to be with him, God calls us to change. We have been changed by his grace, are being changed by his grace, and will be changed by his grace.

What is the goal of this change? It is more than a better marriage, well-adjusted children, professional success, or freedom from a few nagging sins. God's goal is that we would actually become like him. He doesn't just want you to escape the fires of hell—though we praise God that through Christ you can! His goal is to free us from our slavery to sin, our bondage to self, and our functional idolatry, so that we actually take on his character!

Peter summarizes the change this way: "Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:4).

## *A Lifestyle of Repentance and Faith*

God has blessed you with his grace, gifted you with his presence, strengthened you with his power, and made you the object of his eternal love. Because we belong to him, we live for his agenda. And if change is his agenda, then repentance and faith is the lifestyle to which we have been called.

Near the end of his career, Michael Jordan was asked why he always came early to practice before a game, even before the rookies. He was already being called the greatest basketball player of all time. He replied that his shooting percentage was just over 50 percent, which meant that over his career, he had failed almost as much as he had succeeded. He was committed to keep on practicing as long as there was room for him to improve.

There are always new sins for the Christian to address and new enemies to defeat. The Christian life makes God's work of change our paradigm for living, while we celebrate the grace that makes it possible. "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:11–13).

## **A Celebration**

This book is more than an explanation of the Christian life. It is a celebration of the Lord and his daily provision of grace. We invite you to celebrate with us a grace that not only forgives, but changes us from the deepest, darkest corners of our hearts to the smallest action and every idle word.

No matter what you struggle with now, no matter how successful or stuck you see yourself to be, no matter how young or how old you are in your faith, no matter if you are a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, if you are Christ's child, there is hope for you! It is not based on who you are or what you know. Your hope is Jesus! He lives in you and, because of that, you have a reason to celebrate each new day. You no longer live, but Christ lives in you! We welcome you to a lifestyle of celebrating just what that means.