



THE UNDERESTIMATED GOSPEL

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J. Ligon **DUNCAN** III

Jonathan Leeman - General Editor



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FOREWORD

Matt Schmucker

For Mark Dever’s pastoral installation service at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in September 1994, a neighboring church’s pastor was asked to participate. He welcomed Mark to the Capitol Hill neighborhood by referring to “my good friend Mark Dever,” but he pronounced Mark’s last name “Deaver” as in beaver, rather than Dever as in never.

Good friend? Really?

That week marked my tenth anniversary of being a Christian, and I cannot say I had been encouraged by what I had seen of church leaders in those ten years. Mostly I had encountered the clubby, partisan, institution-bound individuals who lived by the creed “Go along to get along.” Or I had run across the strongly dogmatic characters who have biting and condescending words for any fellow Christians who disagreed with them. Needless to say, I wasn’t impressed with either group; and certainly I was not impressed with the pretense of friendship when there is none.

This is why I love Together for the Gospel (T4G). The men behind this conference—and the authors of this book—have a real and deep knowledge of and affection for each other. Even more impressive, they have a real and deep unity despite the myriad issues

that have separated other men. Back in 2006 at the first T4G conference Mark Dever's introductory comments included this about his fellow speakers:

We wouldn't agree on any number of matters. We didn't even agree on what to wear, or what kind of pulpit to use. We barely got agreement on the music. Our music is not all alike, nor are we similarly expressive in singing. Our introductions would be different. Some would respond to a sermon with applause, others would say "Amen" (and even that we would pronounce differently!). But, it was for none of these reasons that we come together. We come together for what we do agree on; we come together for the gospel.

Al Mohler put it succinctly when he said, "I have more in common with a thick Presbyterian than I do with a thin Baptist." He and Ligon Duncan, a "thick" Presbyterian, share far more in common than either do with someone in their own denominations who don't affirm the inerrancy of Scripture, the resurrection, or the virgin birth.

Has their friendship been tested? I grew up with six brothers. I know brothers can fight. These guys fight and argue like everyone else. (I've found myself dazed and confused many times sitting in their meetings watching the great theological debates of the day flash before my eyes.) But what I've seen from them is that the gospel is thicker than blood. Unity prevails! Some of these men have endured great physical challenges, others blistering public scrutiny such that you'd rather have the skin ripped off your back. Yet they stood—together. Job could have used friends like these.

In Philippians 2:2, Paul told the Philippians to "make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in

spirit and purpose” (NIV 1984). I have seen this call beautifully modeled in how these brothers, preachers, and authors differ with one another in eschatology and ecclesiology.

How do I know? I have had the privilege of a lifetime to work with these men to help organize T4G 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2012. We have met many times. I’m happy to call all of them “Pastor.” Therefore, with full confidence I commend both the messages of this book and the men behind them. More important, I join with these brothers and commend Jesus Christ who is the gospel and the only reason we are *together*.

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” (Ps. 133:1 NIV 1984)

INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Leeman

If you have not read Arnold Dallimore's two-volume biography of George Whitefield, you might consider taking the first volume on your next vacation. It is both edifying and enjoyable, but you will need more than one vacation to get through both tomes.

The book offers a remarkable chronicle of "the life and times of the great evangelist of the eighteenth-century revival," as the subtitle has it. Interestingly, it opens by describing the moral corruption and spiritual decay that characterized post-Puritan England in the early eighteenth century, the kind of declension that caused some to conclude that God was done with England. Maybe you think the same thing about the global West today? Yet into this dark night came a young Anglican minister who preached the justice and mercy of God, the goodness and guilt of humanity, the substitution and resurrection of Christ, and the call to repentance and belief. Unaccommodating clergy forced Whitefield out of their church buildings and into the open fields, where, by God's typically atypical designs, thousands, even tens of thousands, could gather to hear Whitefield's underestimated gospel. And respond. Throughout England and America, conversions numbered in the tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands. Historians call it the First Great Awakening.

Yet Dallimore did not write as a dispassionate historian. He admits in the introduction that “this book goes forth with a mission.” First published in 1970, when the oldest preacher in the volume that you are now holding was a seminary student and the youngest was nine years short of birth, Dallimore hoped the stories of Whitefield would stoke the fires of gospel revival in our own day. And he knew it would take a new generation of preachers to stand squarely on the Scriptures and the gospel. Prophetically, he writes:

Yet this book is written in the desire—perhaps in a measure of inner certainty—that we shall see the great Head of the Church once more bring into being His special instruments of revival, that He will again raise up unto Himself certain young men whom He may use in this glorious employ. And what manner of men will they be? Men mighty in the Scriptures, their lives dominated by a sense of the greatness, the majesty and holiness of God, and their minds and hearts aglow with the great truths of the doctrines of grace. They will be men who have learned what it is to die to self, to human aims and personal ambitions; men who are willing to be “fools for Christ’s sake”, who bear reproach and falsehood, who will labour and suffer, and whose supreme desire will be, not to gain earth’s accolades, but to win the Master’s approbation when they appear before His awesome judgment seat. They will be men who will preach with broken hearts and tear-filled eyes, and upon whose ministries God will grant an extraordinary effusion of the Holy Spirit, and who will witness “signs and wonders following” in the transformation of multitudes of human lives.¹

The biographer concludes these remarks with the “earnest prayer that, amidst the rampant iniquity and glaring apostasy” of our day, God would raise up a new generation of such men “toward the granting of a mighty revival such as was witnessed two hundred years ago.”²

Any Christian who stops to consider the matter would surely echo the late Dallimore’s prayer. What Christian’s heart does not yearn for our neighbors to wake up to the deceitful nature of sin. Sin promises the world, but only provides a two-dimensional cardboard version, like a theater stage set, not to mention the divine wrath to come. And we know that, if only our friends and neighbors would turn and be converted, the full-life, warm-breath embrace of a Creator and Savior awaits. How this embrace has given joy and hope to our own sin-clouded hearts!

Lord God, will you raise up a generation of such preachers? Will your Spirit use them toward the granting of a mighty revival in our day? In our land? Among those whom we know and love? Will you bring not just a few but many conversions?

In April 2012, almost eight thousand church leaders sat for three weekdays in the cramped folding chairs of a college basketball arena in Louisville, Kentucky, to hear the nine sermons and eight testimonies which comprise this volume. Some of us sitting in attendance wondered if the event (and others like it going on these days) represented more evidence of God’s answer to Dallimore’s prayer. The event was called Together for the Gospel (T4G), which is a biennial pastor’s conference that began with the friendship of four preachers in 2006 and has always included several other prominent voices in the movement of reformed evangelical churches.

No one dares assume that any of T4G’s speakers will make the multinational, multi-centuries impact of George Whitefield. And the conference itself is aimed not at unconverted plowmen and housewives, lawyers and soldiers, like Whitefield’s open-air

sermons. It is aimed at converted pastors and other church leaders. In fact, the closest thing to Whitefield today, at least in terms of sheer statistics, would be one of several prosperity preachers whose road show fills stadiums around the globe week after week with tens of thousands of souls desperate for the God of health and wealth to provide them with salvation *and* a bigger house. No, four installments of the T4G conference, including 2012's, gives no ground for triumphalism. It has not visibly led to the salvation of tens of thousands and changed the face of a nation, as God seemed to do through the famed preacher of yesteryear.

But the phenomenon of T4G has produced longing. Deep longing. Revival longing. Imagine standing in a room with eight thousand other people of God, singing the words "In Christ alone my hope is found, he is my light, my strength, my song." Feel the stadium's echo press those voices back onto your chest while the floor beneath your feet vibrates and adrenaline makes your hands tingle. Then sit and listen as some of the finest preachers of our day extol the power of the underestimated gospel, gripping, again, both body and soul.

Might God not do something extraordinary today? God, please? Maybe there is no ten-megaton bomb like Whitefield, but what about placing a single stick of dynamite in eight thousand pairs of hands? What kind of explosion would that make as such gospel proclaimers spread across the face of the nations? It is the Lord's to decide such things, but it is ours to ask and to work. It was not finally Whitefield who was so powerful; it was the gospel that he preached and the Lord that he served. And do we not have Whitefield's gospel and Lord?

The hope of T4G and other like-minded conferences and organizations in the present day is that they would represent not the culmination of revival, but the kindling.



The sermons that have become chapters in this book have been lightly edited in order to favor a reader instead of a hearer. And they have been reordered in the table of contents to better fit under topical subheadings. But their general sermonic form and voice remains, and the sermons which explicitly addressed the audience as pastors retain that address.

The theme of the 2012 conference was “The Underestimated Gospel.” The idea is that the gospel consists merely of words, but those words have the unexpected and underestimated power to create new life, to justify, to prepare a bride, to give the foretaste of glory. Christian conversion depends upon the underestimated power of the gospel.

Such conversions were recounted throughout the course of the 2012 conference. I was a drug dealer. I grew up in a bar. I was raised by Christian parents. I was an illegal immigrant. I was a counselor to a US senator. But God saved me. But God changed me. Don’t underestimate the power of the gospel.

These testimonies have been written down and interspersed throughout the chapters of this book. The bulk of the book, of course, are the sermons. T4G began in 2006 with the friendship of Mark Dever, J. Ligon Duncan III, C. J. Mahaney, and R. Albert Mohler Jr., who then invited a marginally older generation of friends: John Piper, R. C. Sproul, and John MacArthur. As the years have passed and the older generation has gradually stepped away, the four friends have turned and begun to invite a younger generation, beginning with Thabiti Anyabwile in 2008, and then Matt Chandler, Kevin DeYoung, and David Platt in 2012.

In this volume, R. Albert Mohler Jr., Thabiti Anyabwile, and David Platt get the ball rolling by reflecting directly upon this

powerful gospel. Mohler draws from Romans 10 to argue that gospel must be spoken in words. You cannot know the good news of God in Christ unless someone draws near to you and speaks words. Yes, deeds are a crucial component of Christian witness, but there is no salvation apart from articulated words. Anyabwile turns to 1 Timothy 1:12–17 in order to showcase the conversion of one of the Bible’s worst terrorists, the murderous Saul who became the apostle Paul. He then leverages this remarkable example to ask about our own confidence as gospel-believers. Are we putting our confidence in something besides the gospel’s power, and do our evangelistic practices demonstrate that we believe God can convert the most unlikely of sinners? Platt picks up on this theme of confidence by looking especially at one aspect of the gospel featured in Revelation 5:1–14, namely, that Christ’s atonement is “graciously, globally, and gloriously particular.” The fact that Christ has graciously died for a global and particular people means that pastors and churches should pray confidently, give sacrificially, go intentionally, and die willingly. Do we?

If the power of conversion and change depend upon God’s work through the gospel, how should we understand Christian growth both individually and corporately? This is the question that Kevin DeYoung and Mark Dever undertake to answer. If we are justified through faith, isn’t it true that we are also sanctified through faith? Yes, says DeYoung, but “through” means something different. This latter gift from God comes through divinely enabled toil and effort. It is not enough to say, “look to the Lord” or “get gripped by the gospel.” Growth in the underestimated gospel requires Spirit-powered, gospel-driven, faith-fueled work. Dever in turn considers how carelessness in our life and doctrine have led to so many false conversions, which, in turn, deceive people about their own salvation and undermine the church’s witness. So preach the gospel fully and rightly, which includes the promise of God’s judgment and the exclusivity of Christ. Don’t shape the gospel around consumer

preferences, lest your church become a market for consumers who only think they are Christians.

Three more pastors then personally draw from the hard roads of experience to offer gospel-soothing words to weary brothers walking down the same roads. C. J. Mahaney meditates on 2 Corinthians 4 in order to find comfort from Paul's example: "death is at work in us, but life in you." This gospel ministry feels like death, but don't you remember that ministerial death produces life? As with your Savior? We discover the power of the resurrection through the very process of suffering. John Piper flips forward to Jude to ask whether we can measure this underestimated and unaccountable power that saves the believer and then preserves him through life's toils and snares. Piper wonders, do we measure it like pounds of pressure? Or kilowatts of electrical force? Or roentgens of radiation? The answer, you will see from the title of his talk, has to do with the glory, majesty, dominion, and authority of God. Matt Chandler then escorts us into the throne room of Revelation 21 and asks us to cast our eyes around. Yes, the glories and agonies of pastoral ministry, each succeeding the other in rapid succession through the course of a working week, can make the head spin. But great hope can be found by keeping the end in sight. Are you looking?

J. Ligon Duncan III, finally, points to all our good longings—our longings for conversions, for healthy churches, for a new generation of faithful preachers and evangelists, for revival—and he gently takes us by the hand and walks us back to Elijah. He asks us to sit down with Elijah for a moment as Elijah nurses his own wounds and contemplates his pastoral disappointments and failed dreams. How do we respond when God does not give the good things for which we've prayed and yearned and suffered for years of ministry? Could it be that we, somehow, have idolized the good things? And could it be that God is preparing us for an even greater vision to come?

Do not underestimate the gospel, and do not underestimate the God of this gospel.



Everyone is looking for power. Political campaigns play to the power of fear and hope. Advertising agencies rely on the power of appetite.

But churches have something different and better. Churches have the gospel.

Though we live in the world, we must not wage war like the world, or fight with its weapons. On the contrary, we have divine power to demolish strongholds. To declare the forgiveness of sin. To create life. To promise the very transformation of the universe. Talk about power.

Witness the underestimated gospel!

1

THE POWER OF THE ARTICULATED GOSPEL

R. Albert Mohler Jr.

Scripture quotations in this chapter are from ESV.

Even as we are together for the gospel, we want to be certain that we are together for the authentic gospel. There is only one gospel that saves—the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. We want to make certain that we are accountable to that gospel. We do not want to underestimate it or, to use a word coined by former President George W. Bush, we do not want to misunderestimate the gospel. We want all of it, and we need all of it.

When we first came “Together for the Gospel” in 2006, we put forth a written series of “Affirmations and Denials.” We began with these words:

We are brothers in Christ united in one great cause:
to stand together for the gospel. We are convinced
that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been misrepresented,
misunderstood and marginalized in many

churches and among many who claim the name of Christ. Compromise of the gospel has led to the preaching of false gospels, the seduction of many minds and movements and the weakening of the church's gospel witness.¹

In other words, coming together to be in the gospel means that we have to know what the gospel *is*, and that also means we have to be candid about what the gospel is *not*. What was true in 2006 is all the more the reality today; we are surrounded by misunderstandings and misconstruals of the gospel.

I must admit something up front. I miss *Calvin and Hobbes*—and I am referring specifically to the comic strip by that name, not the theologian and the philosopher. I miss *The Far Side* too. Ever since these two went into retirement, we are left without anything quite like them. My daily mirth from the newspaper is not nearly as mirthy as it was before. I am not a big fan of *Dilbert*, but there is one that has just stuck in my mind. Dilbert, the office worker and main character of the comic strip, talks with Dogbert, his little dog-friend. As the two of them are in conversation, Dilbert spins out an elaborate theory of the universe. Dogbert listens patiently all the way to the end, only to say, “That comes so close to being interesting.”

I have heard sermons that I thought came dangerously close to having a point, dangerously close to actually getting it right—but did not. As Christians in general, and as ministers of the gospel in particular, the haunting fear we have is that we will fall short, coming dangerously close to preaching the gospel. That is yet another reason why we need to talk about the gospel—to make certain we are saying the right things about the gospel. We must hold one another accountable to fulfill what Paul said to Timothy: “Follow the pattern of the sound words” (2 Tim. 1:13)—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The gospel has enemies, but sometimes it is underestimated even by its friends. In Romans 1:16, Paul said, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” We preach this gospel because we know it is the power to save; Christ saves! We want to be a gospel people leading gospel churches in a great global gospel movement. We long to see the renown of Jesus and his salvation known among every tribe and people and nation (Rev. 5:9). We want to live gospel lives filled with gospel evidences and gracious signs of the gospel. We want to know the joy of the gospel, bear the fruit of the gospel, and see gospel people set loose in the world. And, as we do so, we must realize the very real danger that we can underestimate the gospel—even as we think and say we love it.

Within the previously mentioned “Together for the Gospel: Affirmations and Denials” adopted in 2006, we made these statements about the gospel:

Article VIII: We affirm that salvation is all of grace and that the gospel is revealed to us in doctrines that most faithfully exalt God’s sovereign purpose to save sinners and in His determination to save His redeemed people by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to His glory alone.

We deny that any teaching, theological system or means of presenting the gospel that denies the centrality of God’s grace as His gift of unmerited favor to sinners in Christ can be considered true doctrine.

Article IX: We affirm that the gospel of Jesus Christ is God’s means of bringing salvation to His people, that sinners are commanded to believe the gospel and that the church is commissioned to preach and teach the gospel to all nations.

We deny that evangelism can be reduced to any program, technique or marketing approach. We further deny that salvation can be separated from repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Article X: We affirm that salvation comes to those who truly believe and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

We deny that there is salvation in any other name or that saving faith can take any form other than conscious belief in the Lord Jesus Christ and His saving acts.²

Since 2006, not one of these issues has gone away. Furthermore, new complexities, compromises, and temptations have been added. The issues are reframed, but the question remains: Are we really preaching and obeying the whole gospel?

We know that what is called Evangelicalism includes those who see the gospel as nothing more than a transaction or decision that leads to their eternal salvation, with no reference to the lordship of Christ and the command to be his faithful disciple. We know that many churches would say that they love the gospel but are filled with people who do not look like gospel people and seem unaware or unconcerned about that fact.

Over a generation ago, Carl Henry wrote a book, the title of which made clear the problem: *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration*.³ Henry's call is rightly being heard anew today by a generation that will not be satisfied until our churches begin to look more like gospel people. This is real and right and necessary. But first, the gospel has to be heard, and for it to be heard it has to be articulated. Therefore, we dare not underestimate the power of the articulated gospel.

Romans 10

The apostle Paul makes clear the necessity and potency of the articulated gospel in the tenth chapter of his letter to the Romans:

For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing,

and hearing through the word of Christ. (Rom. 10:5–17)

Paul's great apostolic concern here is the refusal of his kinsmen to believe in Christ and be saved. Within the context of this section of Romans, Paul writes about the relationship between the Jewish people (the people of the old covenant) and believers (the redeemed in the new covenant). Although a Jew by birth and religious practice, Paul writes as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ to a congregation consisting of believers who come from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Paul writes of the priority of God's covenant people and of the promises that were made to Israel, but he makes the centrality and the universality of the gospel clear. He makes the universality of our human need clear in terms of our depravity: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

Paul demonstrates justification by faith as having been revealed in the Old Testament when Abraham was declared righteous on the basis of his faith. Later, we come to understand that it was on the basis of what Christ had done for Abraham. In Romans, we read how Christ's atonement fully satisfies both the wrath and the righteousness of God. We come to understand how God set forth Christ as a propitiation in his blood such that the Father is now demonstrated to be both the just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus Christ. As a result, in Christ there is no condemnation that comes to us (Rom. 8:1). Then, the apostle Paul writes a chapter which quintessentially displays the sovereignty of God (Rom. 9), before turning to our present text which Charles Spurgeon described as "the whole machinery of salvation."⁴ The gospel is all here, and it is all glorious.

The Word Brought Near

First, we see in this text that the Word must be brought near. How did any of us come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior, to have our sins forgiven, and to come to faith in Christ? We are saved because the Word is brought near to us. As the author of the book of Hebrews writes, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1–2). The Word is brought near in revelation, in the promise of the prophets and the Torah, and in every particle of Scripture. Then, the Word is brought near ultimately in Christ, who came near to us and tabernacled with us in his incarnation. Then, the Word is brought near in the apostolic preaching of the gospel.

Then, in verse eight of Romans 10, Paul explains how the Word is brought near to us: “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (v. 8). Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30:14 to show that the Word was first brought near to Israel. Moses reminded the children of Israel that they did not go to *find* the Torah. No, the Torah was *given* to them. This serves as a helpful reminder that our salvation is all of grace. Just as they were God’s elect people, chosen from among the nations, one of the reasons they knew God chose them is because of the testimony of Deuteronomy 4:33: “Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live?” No! The Word was brought near to us and now it is near to us. Life is in obedience and death is in disobedience.

In like manner, the apostle Paul here writes to Jews who now know the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ because the gospel of Christ was brought near to them. He also writes to Gentiles who have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior because the Word of the gospel was brought near to them.

The “word being brought near” is a beautiful metaphor of evangelism and of the preaching of the gospel. This is one of the most precious privileges of the Christian life. Proximity to the gospel is not the point; the hearing of the gospel is the point. God brought the Word near to us, and it is our sacred responsibility to bring the Word near to others. For our salvation, the Word was brought near to us in the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ and in his saving acts. It is now brought near to sinners through the preaching of the gospel.

Proximity to the gospel is not the point. The hearing of the gospel is the point, and it is by the means of preaching that the gospel is brought near. A Christian may live in close relationship with a person who does not know Christ, but unless the Christian actually articulates the gospel, there is no salvation. The gospel is brought near in verbal form. It is “the word of faith that we proclaim” (Rom. 10:8). This word leads to faith as it articulates the saving acts of Christ and the promise of the gospel. The gospel requires this articulation so that the one who hears it may believe, confess, and be saved.

Paul’s apostolic ministry was centered on bringing the Word near to others. He commissioned preachers who would take the Word and preach it in order to bring it near. Paul envisioned all Christians to be evangelists, agents of bringing the saving Word of the gospel near. Therefore, our task is to bring the Word near to others even as it was brought near to us.

The Power of the Gospel to Save

Second, we need to see in this text the power of the gospel to save. This is where we rightly refer to the “well-meant offer of the gospel.” We believe that we are to preach the gospel to all persons everywhere, in the firm and unshakable conviction that if they believe and confess, then they will be saved. Paul speaks clearly to this in verses 9–13:

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

There is no footnote or asterisk attached to this verse. There is no conditionality. This is not a hypothetical statement about the power of the gospel. It is an actual, biblical, apostolic, revealed, inerrant, infallible promise: if sinners believe and confess, they will be saved. That is the well-meant offer of the gospel. We don’t present the gospel with one hand behind our back, thinking about the person to whom we are speaking, “This *might* be for you . . . or it might *not* be for you.” We don’t find refuge in the sovereignty of God in order to say that we don’t have to preach the gospel to all persons.

The same Paul who, in chapters eight through nine wrote so clearly about our salvation in terms of God’s absolute sovereignty, foreknowledge, predestination, calling and election leading to justification and glorification, now also affirms without qualification that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How do we know the elect? It is because they believe and they confess and they are saved—and that requires the means of the preaching of the gospel. Gospel people believe this, live this, and teach this: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

What does it mean to call upon the name of the Lord? The answer to that is found in verse nine. Calling on the name of the

Lord means you “confess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead.”

Verse eleven would lead us to be promiscuous and indiscriminating in our preaching of the gospel: “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” Jesus’ sower of the seed in the parable of the soils provides confidence and encouragement for us in this work. We are to sow the seed, and we are to do so indiscriminately. We are not in the soil sampling business; we’re not in the soil management business; we are in the sowing business. We are told that the harvest will be so magnificent that the sowing of the seed of the gospel will produce believers from every tongue and tribe and people and nation. God bless those evangelists, preachers, teachers, and believers who just keep at it—sowing and sowing and sowing—when they don’t even get to see any harvest. They are not confident in their own power to witness, but they are confident in the power of the gospel to save.

Central to all of this is our understanding of the necessity of personal confession, the evidence of personal faith and belief that produces repentance: “For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Rom. 10:10). The death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ are indeed the saving acts of God that are declared in the gospel. We believe that election to salvation and the transforming power of the gospel become evident in faith and repentance and in confession.

Then, in verse twelve, we encounter the revolutionary statement, “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek.” Paul, writing to a church experiencing division between those with a Jewish and those with a Gentile background, teaches that at the cross there is no distinction. In terms of our need for a Savior and the Savior’s provision, there is no distinction. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” This hearkens back to the opening of Paul’s letter: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for

salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). That includes all of us; there is no distinction.

This explains why we are saved. In the mystery of the sovereign purposes of God and by his sheer grace and mercy alone, the Word was brought near to us. As a result, we were called, made alive, and regenerated. We then believed what we otherwise would never have been able to believe, and we grasped hold of it, knowing that it is the sole provision of our need. We came to know of our need and of God’s response and provision for us in Christ, and then we came to know of our necessary response of faith, repentance, confession, and belief.

The Necessity of Articulating the Gospel

Third, we see in this text the necessity of articulating the gospel. Although our ministry is multidimensional and multiphasic, it is most important and essentially verbal. God calls preachers to preach. In order for the gospel to be either received or rejected, it must first be heard, and that requires words. The power of the gospel is that God uses words that, when rightly bearing witness to the saving acts of Christ and to the promise of God in Christ, bring sinners to believe and to be saved.

It has become popular these days to quote Francis of Assisi as saying, “Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.” By way of a historical footnote, these words were probably not said by Francis. There is no reference to this phrase in this form until about two hundred years after his death. I will admit, however, that the quote does sound like something Francis would say. It certainly sounds like all those who would like to believe we can bring the gospel near just by being close to people, or by acting kind, just, righteous, or loving. The reality, however, is that even as we are called to be all of those things—recognizing them to be signs of

the gospel—the gospel nonetheless requires articulation. The gospel requires words.

To be clear, we don't want to turn the Francis quote on its head. We don't want to suggest that Christians should be satisfied with a verbal witness to the gospel that is not backed up with the evidences and signs of the gospel. We shouldn't expect to have credibility in preaching the gospel if we are satisfied in not looking like gospel people. We must show evidence of the gospel by our actions and our deeds. However, though the church must demonstrate the gospel with deeds, we cannot evangelize or preach the gospel without words.

The majority of what we do that is most important in life is dependent on words. Think about any major or formative experience in your life, and try to imagine that event happening without words. For example, you might be able to *insinuate* a marriage proposal to your beloved, but if I may give a suggestion to single men: use words!

The fact is, part of what it means to be made in God's image is that we use words. God is a speaking God and we are a speaking people. Words are essential to our understanding of who we are, what life means, and most important, what the gospel is.

Walter Ong, one of the great scholars of orality in the twentieth century, argued that virtually all language originates in speech, and only later does it take written form.⁵ That is to say, speech is verbal in a way that distinguishes human beings from any other creature. As Ong makes clear, meaning requires orality—the expression of words.

In many churches, the words of the Scripture and the sermon are provided to those who are hearing disabled, by means of American Sign Language. But these are not mere gestures, for the signs are a clear communication of words.

Linguists such as Noam Chomsky and others say that central to what it means to be human is the use of embedded linguistic units—otherwise known as gestures. Some scholars spend a lifetime

studying human gestures, and from this study they have come to the conclusion that gestures can be effective in two ways. First, gestures aid in the basic communication of affirmation or denial. Every culture has a basic gesture for “yes” and for “no.” Second, gestures are fairly adept at communicating emotional states. Beyond that, however, gestures don’t actually do much and, in fact, often bring confusion rather than clarity. That is why Duane Litfin, former president of Wheaton College, argues for the priority of the word over the limitations of gesture.⁶

A friend told me a story that illustrates the limitations of gestures. He pastored a large church, and one Sunday as he was preaching, one of his members suffered a heart attack. A physician in the audience attended to him as several men carried him out the back and closed the door. The congregation, slightly traumatized by the emergency, stopped the service and prayed for the man.

Then, the doctor slipped through the back door and made a hand gesture to the pastor—a gesture also observed by all the members of the large choir sitting behind the pulpit. The pastor read the gesture as meaning, “He’s fine,” but the choir understood the doctor to be saying, “He’s dead.”

The pastor proceeded to preach. He preached his full sermon—the entire exposition he had prepared. He held nothing back.

After the service, he met up with his wife and knew something was wrong by the look on her face. “You are one of the most self-centered, arrogant, job-focused men on the planet,” she declared.

“What did I do?” he asked.

“A doctor came into your church to tell you that one of your members just died, and you just carried on with your sermon without skipping a beat!” she said.

My friend said, “Wait! You mean, he died?”

He went running down the hall until he found the doctor and asked, “What does *this* mean?”—making the hand gesture the doctor had used.

The doctor reassured him that the sign meant, “He’s fine. The man had not died.”

The pastor said, “Well, next time please use a different gesture because I have an entire choir, and wife, angry with me because they think your gesture meant he was dead.”

It turns out that gestures can get extremely confusing. “Yes” and “no” aren’t as clear as they were thought to be.

In contrast, here is the clear indictment of Scripture: we are dead in our trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:13). Without words, we remain in our trespasses, but as we hear the pattern of right words and believe and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, we are saved.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:13, the apostle Paul writes a beautiful summary of evangelism and of the preaching of the gospel:

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

Paul tells the Corinthians, “You received the word of God,” and then explains how it is that they received it: “you heard from us.” They heard the word, then they accepted it as the Word of God.

We only use the words that are available to us—that is, human words. But when those human words rightly represent and present the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, they are not heard as merely human words; they are heard as the Word of God, which is at work within believers.

In 1 Corinthians 15:1–11, Paul writes:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Note the importance of the word “so” in verse eleven: “*So* we preach and *so* you believed.” Without the preaching, there is no believing. In terms of our assignment and the gospel’s promise, Paul’s logic is airtight: “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). The hearing requires the telling; the telling requires words. Faith comes by hearing; it doesn’t come by any other means.

Now, just to clarify, we are not talking about merely the auditory experience of hearing the gospel—the outward call. We know that salvation comes to those who also receive the effectual calling of the

Holy Spirit—the inward call. We understand exactly what Martin Luther said to his pastoral students:

His word should do the work alone, without our work. Why? Because it is not in my power to fashion the hearts of men as the potter moulds the clay, and to do with them as I please. I can get no farther than to men's ear; their hearts I cannot reach. And since I cannot pour faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force any one to have faith. This is God's work alone, who causes faith to live in the heart. . . . We should preach the Word, but the consequences must be left to God's own good pleasure.⁷

This is not something that happened *to* the gospel; the gospel is not entrapped. Our sovereign God did not present the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, only to now be dissatisfied and frustrated that it has to be communicated in words. From the start, he intended it to be communicated. He demonstrates the power of the gospel in the fact that words—even human words—take on the saving authority of his own Word as the word of faith, which produces faith and belief and confession. Therefore, we are not to be ashamed or reluctant to understand that we are to use words to persuade and to contend.

Some people remove the threat of this problem by taking refuge in universalism or inclusivism. Others simply deny the existence of hell and eternal judgment. Still others believe in the idea of “anonymous Christians” or the like. But none of these options are available to the one who seeks to maintain fidelity to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I am unapologetically a conversionist. Paul clearly believed that the transformation of the gospel brings us from one state and status to another that is radically different. In John 6:63, we read, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.” Our Savior told Nicodemus, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which

is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’” (John 3:6–7). And this clear statement on the necessity of the Holy Spirit and the new birth comes just before the equally clear promise “that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

When you put all of that together with Romans 10, you come to understand the unbreakable logic of Paul’s argument. How do we expect anyone will believe and be saved if they do not hear? And how are they going to hear if the gospel is never proclaimed? And how will the preaching take place if no one is sent? Although this text is a natural place to turn when commissioning missionaries to their field of service, within its context, the logic of Romans 10 is the entire mechanism of salvation. It is God’s plan for how the gospel is to be preached, how sinners are to be reached, and how the name of Jesus is to be made famous among the nations. How will they believe if they never hear? How will they hear without a preacher? Lean into those questions and you will feel the weight of the call for all Christians to take the gospel—the articulated gospel—to all people.

When faithful, we have always known this. As evangelicals, we named ourselves as those who believe in the gospel. We are supposed to be the gospel people. We believe in the authority of the gospel, the life-transforming power of the gospel, and the articulation of the gospel. Furthermore, when we have been at our best and most faithful, we have always said this to one another. Only in fairly recent years have we heard such things as, “Stop talking and show me the gospel.” Well, we do need to show the gospel, but what we are really showing is the power and the effect of the gospel. But for the gospel to be heard and believed, it must be articulated.

Evangelicals met together in 1966 for The Berlin World Congress on Evangelism. At that Congress, a definition of evangelism was adopted that quintessentially expressed the necessity for gospel articulation. The statement said:

Evangelism is the proclamation of the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ, the only Redeemer of men, according to the Scriptures, with the purpose of persuading condemned and lost sinners to put their faith in God by receiving and accepting Christ as Savior through the power of the Holy Spirit and to serve Christ as Lord in every calling of life and fellowship of His church, looking toward the Day of His coming in glory.⁸

That definition is saturated with Scripture; it is consistent with Scripture. More could be said, but I dare say nothing less can be said. Interestingly enough, this 1966 statement was adopted by evangelicals in order to respond to a 1918 statement which had been adopted by the World Council of Churches. The evangelicals meeting in Berlin in 1966 said that the statement from the 1918 World Council of Churches was not saying enough about the gospel. The statement of 1918 came dangerously close to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but it was not the gospel. The gospel requires exclusivity and the gospel requires confession.

In the preparation for the first Lausanne Conference in 1974, John Stott said,

Evangelism then is sharing this gospel with others. The Good News is Jesus and the good news about Jesus that we announce is that He died for our sins and was raised from death by the Father, according to the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments. And then on the basis of His death and resurrection, He offers forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit to all those who repent, believe and are baptized.⁹

Those evangelicals at Lausanne, meeting under the theme, “The Whole Gospel for the Whole World,” adopted a covenant which stated:

Evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Savior and Lord with a view to persuading people to come to Him personally and so be reconciled to God.¹⁰

Most recently, the Lausanne Movement meeting in 2010 in Cape Town, South Africa, produced the “Cape Town Commitment,” which affirmed, “The gospel is not a concept that needs fresh ideas, but a story that needs fresh telling.”¹¹ It has to be told. It requires words.

I agree with Christopher Wright when he summarizes the gospel in six points. The gospel is:

1. a Christ-centered story to be told
2. a hope-filled message to be proclaimed
3. a revealed truth to be defended
4. a new status to be received
5. a transformed life to be lived
6. a divine power to be celebrated.¹²

Notice that the first three of these all require words. In order to get to the demonstration of the power of the gospel (points four through six), you first have to have a Christ-centered story to be told, a hope-filled message to be proclaimed, and a revealed truth to be defended. If we are left without words, we cannot fulfill the commission and command of Christ, for we cannot articulate the gospel without words.

We live in a world confused and enticed by false gods and false gospels. The only means of reaching people with the saving gospel of Christ is the articulation of that saving message in words. “Faith

comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

Faith without works is dead. We know this is true. We long to see more evidence of the gospel in our churches and in our lives. I certainly long to see more of the fruit of the gospel in my own life. I know that our faith is to be demonstrated, not merely declared. Together, we must learn to be more faithful in demonstration so that the world may see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:16).

But salvation will not come until the gospel is articulated—complete with the account of our need, God’s provision, and our response. We must use words to tell the sacrificial and substitutionary death of Christ on the cross and the power of his resurrection from the dead. We must use words to contend for this gospel and to distinguish it from all false gospels. As John Piper has rightly said on many occasions, “We are the people who have to be willing to die for sentences.” I will press that even further to say that we have to be willing to die for words. We cannot preach or teach, nor tell the gospel without words.

The pattern of right words reminds us of our responsibility to get the gospel right. We never want to underestimate the power of the articulated gospel.

Ask yourself this question: How is it that you came to believe? How is it that the gospel came to you? We can think of various ways in which the providence of God, who is so rich in mercy toward us, has been demonstrated to us and how the Word was brought near to us. We can think of a preacher we sat in front of or, amazingly enough, a preacher that was simply seen and heard by means of the Internet, television, or the radio. Sometimes we are surprised to hear that the gospel articulated, even if by means of those technologies, saves. But we should not be.

Sometimes it is someone in a hotel room who, in a moment of desperation, opens a drawer and finds a Gideon's Bible. They open that Bible and the convicting power of the Word leads them to faith and repentance.

Sometimes the opportunity to articulate the gospel comes in one of those completely unexpected and unpredictable providential moments when you are sitting next to someone and you have the opportunity to give an answer for the hope that is in you. The individual to whom you are speaking says, "I believe." You say, "You do?" Why is it that we can be so surprised?

Some of us were raised by Christian parents in a Christian home, and the Word was brought near to us by means of our childhood and the wonderful ministry of the church and the means of grace therein. Even surrounded by all of this, at some point we know the gospel had to be articulated, heard, and believed. These words produced belief in us by means of the mysterious, saving purposes of God.

Pastors, when you get up to preach, your absolute confidence is that—insofar as your words are that pattern of sound words, insofar as they are scriptural, insofar as they are true, insofar as they are gospel-centered, insofar as they present the saving acts of God for us in Christ and call sinners to believe and to repent and to confess—you can take confidence that this is the very means whereby God redeems and saves. Through the articulation of the gospel, God brings persons to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that they may be forgiven of their sins and receive the gift of life everlasting.

Preaching and articulation are the gospel means of a gracious God who, from before the foundation of the world, desired that his gospel would be proclaimed to the nations by his redeemed people who use words.

So use them. Use the right ones. Never underestimate the power of the articulated gospel.

*Go tell it on the mountain,
over the hills and everywhere.
Go tell it on the mountain,
that Jesus Christ is Lord.*¹³

Testimony: Mez McConnell

My name is Mez McConnell. My mother ran away with the best man in my parents' wedding. My father was an alcoholic and a gambler who abandoned me and my disabled sister. I was left to the streets at age two, and then lived in foster and children's homes until my teens. I was back on the streets when I was sixteen and in prison at twenty-one, and I was a drug addict for six years.

A group of young men from a local church presented me with the gospel when I was living on the streets. They started playing football in our area and told us about the Lord. At the time I was dealing drugs outside a community center. They talked about my sin and God's wrath. I kicked against it.

Later, men came to see me in prison. Once out of prison, they gave me a place to live. Their witness was critical, but the moment of conversion came when reading a Matthew Henry commentary. I realized that I had to take responsibility for my own rebellion against God and not blame it on my terrible childhood. For the first time I believed.

By God's grace, I went back to school and Bible college, and I am now married and have children. I planted a church for street children and prostitutes in Brazil. I recently finished my second plant, and am now looking to train other young men to do likewise in Scotland's poorest housing projects where more than 50 percent of people have no gospel witness.

Praise God for those who brought the Good News to me. Don't underestimate the power of the gospel!