

# CREATURE OF THE WORD

THE JESUS-CENTERED CHURCH

MATT CHANDLER • JOSH PATTERSON • ERIC GEIGER

In *Creature of the Word* you will learn that the Bible is not about us; it is about Jesus and how to live all of life with Him, like Him, and for Him. This is a foundational, practical, and helpful book for both Christians and church leaders.

—Mark Driscoll, pastor, Mars Hill Church, Seattle, Washington

I love Matt Chandler, his heart for the gospel and his love for the church. I am so glad that he, Josh Patterson, and Eric Geiger wrote this book addressing the fact that God's Word should be the foundation of the Church rather than the latest trend that seems to be working in the world. This book provides a fresh challenge for all of us and will help us establish a biblical foundation in regard to the ONE THING that Jesus promised He would build!

—Perry Noble, senior pastor, NewSpring Church, South Carolina,  
and author of *Unleash!: Breaking Free from Normalcy*

Our homes, communities, cities, and nations need churches that are immersed in the gospel and fueled by the gospel. Why? Because the good news of Jesus Christ changes everything! I am encouraged and excited by the strong gospel challenge found in *Creature of the Word: The Jesus-Centered Church*. Matt, Josh, and Eric provide a clarion call for our churches to recapture their awe for Jesus and His perfect work accomplished on our behalf. They help us see how the beautiful bride of Christ can be possessed by both a doctrine and a culture centered on Jesus. This is the kind of book the Church has needed for a long time.

—Daniel L. Akin, president, Southeastern Baptist  
Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina

*Creature of the Word* is a crystal clear call to the Church to recenter around Jesus and the gospel. Practical yet theological, I recommend this book as essential reading for anyone who would lead or plant a church.

—Matt Carter, pastor, Preaching and Vision at The Austin Stone  
Community Church, Austin, Texas

Too often Jesus Christ is central to our theology but not to the way we do church. This book serves as a needed reminder and a powerful corrective for those of us who must continually recalibrate our ministry *for* Jesus with the person and work *of* Jesus.

—Larry Osborne, pastor, North Coast Church,  
Vista, California, and author of *Sticky Church*

When a church goes vertical, it's the small adjustment that leads to a major renovation. It's an active, hard-hats-only construction zone where every decision has just one goal: to honor God. When we get that right, God Himself shows up and *builds*. My friend Matt Chandler and his collaborators Josh and Eric are calling us to make church about Jesus, again.

—Dr. James MacDonald, senior pastor, Harvest Bible Chapel,  
Chicago, Illinois, and author of *Vertical Church*

Be careful if you read this book. *Creature of the Word* will make you rethink much of what you think you know about the Church, its message, and its mission. Matt Chandler, Josh Patterson, and Eric Geiger have conspired to write a book that will make you think more faithfully about the church and what it means for Christ's people to be formed by the gospel. I welcome the conversations this book will spark.

—R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president, The Southern Baptist  
Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

Lately many books are coming out with a title that has “gospel” in it. As you begin to read the philosophical and allegorical talk about the gospel, there is a disconnect from the Word of God. However, what is phenomenal about *Creature of the Word* is that it is gospel-centered and rooted in the Word of God with uncanny readability. I hope that this

work will devotionally impact the whole people of God and increase our intimacy with our God.

—Eric Mason, lead pastor, Epiphany Fellowship,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Bible has been referred to as the “Him Book” because it’s all about Him. In *Creature of the Word*, we will be challenged to keep everything Jesus centered. This commitment always leads us into His work.

Johnny Hunt, pastor, First Baptist Church,  
Woodstock, Georgia

There is no greater need for church leaders than for the reality of the person and work of Christ to permeate our entire being. This not only results in personal holiness but spills out all over the people to whom we minister. *Creature of the Word* will change you and those you shepherd.

—Darrin Patrick, lead pastor of The Journey Church in St. Louis,  
Missouri, and author of *Church Planter*

Godly leaders from my generation have prayed and deeply desired for a new generation of church leaders to lead His bride well. Works like *Creature of the Word* are an answer to our prayers. I am excited and hopeful for the local church after reading the encouragement and challenges Matt, Josh, and Eric offer. What an incredible book by three incredible leaders!

—Thom S. Rainer, president and CEO, LifeWay Christian  
Resources, Nashville, Tennessee

I look for five things when reading a book: readable, accessible, practical, helpful, and fresh. This book by Chandler, Patterson, and Geiger scores highly on all counts. It is a book church leaders should read,



but it would be a great pity if the target audience was limited to that select group. Whatever your role or place among the people of God, do not hesitate to pick up this book and be refreshed by the insights, observations, and challenges you'll find here. But primarily, the fresh encouragement to us to focus on, and be all about, Jesus.


—Steve Timmis, director for Acts 29 (Western Europe)  
and coauthor of *Total Church*

*Creature of the Word* excites me because I know the result of churches centering themselves on Jesus, and His redemptive mission will result in God's people engaging in kingdom work. Church leaders and staff teams should read and discuss this book in community.

—Ed Stetzer, lead pastor of Grace Church,  
president, Lifeway Research

*Creature of the Word* paints a compelling and exciting picture of what a church can be under the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Matt, Josh, and Eric offer sound and practical insight that will encourage and challenge church leaders. How refreshing it is in a model-driven church world to read the call to all to be a Jesus-centered church! This alone makes me want to shout!

Dr. Ronnie W. Floyd, senior pastor, Cross Church, Fayetteville,  
Arkansas, and author of *Our Last Great Hope*



# CREATURE OF THE WORD

THE JESUS-CENTERED CHURCH

MATT CHANDLER • JOSH PATTERSON • ERIC GEIGER

**B&H**  
PUBLISHING GROUP  
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Copyright © 2012 by The Village Church  
All rights reserved.  
Printed in the United States of America

978-1-4336-7862-2

Published by B&H Publishing Group  
Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 269.2  
Subject Heading: CHURCH \ EVANGELISTIC WORK \ BIBLE.  
N. T. GOSPELS

Scripture quotations marked HCSB are taken from the  
Holman Christian Standard Bible® Copyright © 1999,  
2000, 2002, 2003, 2009 by Holman Bible Publishers.

Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible,  
New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984  
by International Bible Society.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from the English  
Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a ministry  
of the Good News Publishers of Wheaton, IL

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from  
The King James Version.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 • 16 15 14 13 12

# CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: A People Formed. . . . .	1
CHAPTER 2: The Creature Worships. . . . .	22
CHAPTER 3: The Creature in Community. . . . .	45
CHAPTER 4: The Creature Serves. . . . .	64
CHAPTER 5: The Creature Multiplies. . . . .	82
CHAPTER 6: Jesus-Centered Culture. . . . .	94
CHAPTER 7: Preaching the Word . . . . .	119
CHAPTER 8: Pulpit to Preschool (and Puberty Too) . . . . .	137
CHAPTER 9: The Jesus-Centered Leader. . . . .	157
CHAPTER 10: Jesus-Centered Flower Committee . . . . .	177
CHAPTER 11: Jesus-Centered Contextualization . . . . .	198
CHAPTER 12: Jesus-Centered Ministry . . . . .	213
Conclusion. . . . .	235
Notes . . . . .	237





## CHAPTER 1

---

# A PEOPLE FORMED

---

*It is the promises of God that make the church, and not the church that makes the promises of God.*

~ MARTIN LUTHER<sup>1</sup>

PASTOR BARRY PULLS INTO HIS driveway at exactly 12:21 early Sunday afternoon, wondering, *How is it that I always arrive home from church at the exact same time every single week?*

His day thus far has occurred with the same clockwork precision as all his other Sundays. He rose early to look over his sermon notes. Kissed his kids good-bye shortly after they woke. Hustled off to church for his morning routine: a brief sound check, a walk around the facility, a time of customary prayer with a few men in the church before leading his “pastor’s class.”

And though he prayed with several more friends immediately before the worship service, he’d be embarrassed to admit he didn’t really expect anything special to happen that morning. Just preaching

his usual sermon to the usual people—same as last week, same as every week—people who seem unmoved, a church that appears to be barren.

After the worship services, he stood in the back and shook the hands of people he loves and others he tolerates, receiving the same type of casual compliments he hears every week, along with the same few hugs and the same few suggestions.

The same. The same. Always the same.

Even sitting here in his driveway like this, staring at these same green numbers on the same dashboard clock, having plodded his way again through the same routine, everything's playing out the same as every other Sunday. Everything except this . . .

He would usually be out of the car and inside by now, if the pattern held true. But today, something's different. The passage he'd just preached this morning is still resonating in his heart, lingering more powerfully than usual. Matthew 16—about Jesus' promise to build His church, punctuated by the phrase: "the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (v. 18 NIV). That line, that thought, still messing with his mind.

When Jesus spoke of His Church withstanding the gates of Hades, surely this is not what He envisioned—a church without life.

Barry thinks back to his first encounters with Matthew 16 as a young pastor, back when he was convinced that the churches he'd be called to lead throughout his ministry would become unstoppable movements of grace, threatening the very gates of Hades. But today his youthful belief seems replaced by a sinking feeling in his gut, enough that he's started to seriously consider doing something else with his life—not because his love for Jesus has waned, but just because this is not what he envisioned when he committed to pastoring.

He longs for life. And this, well . . . this just feels dead. Like he's no longer alive. Inspiring little passion for God among the people in his church, little hunger to worship, little compassion for those in the community. Just a continual cycle of the same lifeless motions.

Why?



Several hours later, across town in a newer neighborhood, Pastor Chase pulls into his driveway. He's been running on adrenaline all day. Huge crowd at church this morning—a big response to the new teaching series his staff has been planning for weeks, one with an edgy title, a tightly produced sermon bumper video, and a crisp assortment of mass marketing packages. It's been a full, bustling day already.

Yet he feels empty inside. Because if next week is anything like past history, the attendance for Part Two of his splashy new teaching series will be way down, and the staff will immediately want to start strategizing for another big launch. Probably on sex. He wonders if his church will set the record for the number of sex series in one year.

*Why does it take that?* he wonders. *Why does everything have to be so forced, so fabricated, built on hype instead of substance? Why this emptiness inside after all the energy they'd generated in the past few hours?*

As he sits in his driveway, looking down at his cell phone, friends from his networks are already texting to see how “the big day” went. He knows what they're wanting to hear. Success in ministry still seems defined by Sunday attendance. And based on that scale, his is a growing ministry with attention from all around the country.

Why then does he feel so empty?

He thinks about some of his earlier teaching messages, ones where he knocked and rebuked empty religion and dead rituals. He wonders if his current ministry is just a newer, cooler version of what he once hated. Has he learned how to give the appearance of life without actually being alive? The outside looks so good. Lots of people. Lots of activity. But on the inside he senses minimal life change, minimal spiritual growth. And whatever little there is, it almost seems to happen accidentally amid all the buzz.

On the outside, Chase and Barry could not be any more different. One is wearing jeans with his shirt untucked; the other is still in his suit and tie. One is in an SUV with Coldplay blaring in the background; the other recently noticed the speakers have gone out in his

old Camry. One enjoys sushi late at night; the other prefers meat and potatoes—at six, on the dot.

Yet they have much more in common than they realize.

Both men walk into their homes longing for more. One is tired of the deadness; the other is tired of the empty activity.

And what both men need, as well as both of their churches, is a return. They need to return to their first love. A simple, yet significant return to Jesus.

As God said to the church at Ephesus:

I know your works, your labor, and your endurance, and that you cannot tolerate evil. You have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and you have found them to be liars. You also possess endurance and have tolerated many things because of My name and have not grown weary. But I have this against you: You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then how far you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. (Rev. 2:2–5 HCSB)

Like the church at Ephesus, Barry and Chase are good men for the most part. Both are faithful to their wives. They invest in their children. They work hard and are morally above reproach. Both have continued in the ministry despite difficult days, criticism, and disappointment.

But both of these pastors have slowly lost their awe for Jesus and His finished work. Intellectually, of course, they still hold firmly to the gospel. Each could easily share a snapshot of its truths without thinking hard—a brief, biblical presentation of Jesus and His gracious gift of salvation. Yet they’ve both learned to rely on other things to form the center of their daily work, to motivate the life and activity of their churches. Their drift has not been one of overt rebellion but of an inner twisting of the heart, a loss of appreciation for the gospel and all its ramifications. Both could articulate the gospel well, but they don’t view the essence of the gospel as the foundation for all of ministry.

And that's a huge difference—the difference between knowing the gospel and being consumed by the gospel, being defined by the gospel, being driven by the gospel. It's one thing to see the gospel as an important facet of one's ministry. It's quite another to hold firmly to it as the centerpiece for all a church is and does, to completely orbit around it.

*The gospel.* Though such a glorious thing, it's also such a simple thing—so simple we almost overlook it. Such a basic thing, we're tempted to feel as if we've somehow graduated beyond it. And yet without this simple thing, this basic thing—without the life-giving gospel driving and defining both us and our churches—there really isn't much of anything that makes us distinct and alive, nothing that other people, groups, and organizations aren't already doing.

And that's where our lives begin to intersect with these two men—where Barry and Chase's names dissolve into the name that's etched on the front of our own Bibles, the name of the guy who uses our deodorant every morning. Us. You. In your heart perhaps—if you're being very honest—you sense a loss of awe for the gospel, a failure to connect its power to your entire ministry. You'd admit you've become distracted by other motivators, impressed by other ways of measuring success and discerning direction.

There is a solution to the death and emptiness. A way back to where we started. But only by returning to a fascination with Christ.

And that's where we all can begin again.

"We were born," Tertullian explained, "for nothing but repentance."<sup>2</sup> As Martin Luther said, "To progress is always to begin again."<sup>3</sup> So here at this place of recognition and regret, we meet together to start a fresh journey into the heart of the gospel, prepared to be newly amazed by it, resolved to let its principles begin shaping how our churches worship, serve, and operate. For just as an individual must continually return to the grace of Jesus for satisfaction and sanctification, a local church must continually return to the gospel as well. Our churches must be fully centered on Jesus and His work, or else death and emptiness is certain, regardless of the worship style or sermon

series. Without the gospel, everything in a church is meaningless. And dead.

## Distributaries of Death

The 137-mile long Atchafalaya River is a distributary of the Mississippi River that meanders through south central Louisiana and empties into the Gulf of Mexico, serving as a significant source of income for the region because of the many industrial and commercial opportunities it offers. Yet as scenic, productive, and enriching as this river is, it owes all its strength—all of it—to the mighty Mississippi.

That's because a distributary doesn't have its own direct water source; it is an overflow of something else. So when the Mississippi is high, the Atchafalaya is high; and when the Mississippi is low, the Atchafalaya is low. What the Atchafalaya accomplishes depends wholly on something other than itself.

The Church is a lot like the Atchafalaya River. Anything of value she accomplishes is always tied to her source. So if she somehow loses connection with it—with her first love, the Living Word—she loses all power. She dries up and empties. If any church becomes fed by a less potent source, by some other supply system than the gospel of Christ, her level of transformative power is directly affected. It's like trying to overflow the banks of a river with a twelve-ounce bottle of water. Impossible. Pointless.

The Bible, of course, gives us good and right teaching on everything from sex to parenting to money to morals. All good things. Wonderful things. God's design and desire for all of life. But our ability to walk in these truths with freedom and joy—and our church's ability to lead people into this ongoing, abundant-life experience for themselves—is dependent on something else: an accurate and deep understanding of the gospel. *That is our Mississippi.*

Without a proper understanding of the gospel, people will miss the big biblical picture and all the joyful freedom that comes from living it. They will run from God in shame at their failures instead of running toward Him because of His mercy and grace.

Just as the river forms distributaries, the gospel forms the Church. The distributaries do not form the river, just as the Church does not form the gospel. When a church confuses the order, she loses her true effectiveness. When a church chooses something other than the river of the gospel as the driving force behind her teaching, programming, staffing, and decisions, she empties herself of all power. Instead of becoming a distributor of life, she becomes a distributary of death. She doesn't really have anything else to offer.

That's why we've felt a significant amount of joy in watching what appears to be a resurgence in gospel thinking, writing, and preaching in recent days. When Michael Horton, Trevin Wax, J.D. Greear, Tullian Tchividjian, Greg Gilbert, and a host of others write books explicitly on the gospel, we're encouraged to think we're once again focusing on what is of "first importance."

In addition to books like these, we're seeing connections formed around initiatives like the Gospel Coalition, Together for the Gospel, and endless blogs and banter about the gospel. In all of this, we do need to be careful not to see the term *gospel* as a sort of junk drawer that holds any and every piece of our theology. Although the gospel does impact everything, everything is not the gospel. If everything about Jesus and the Bible becomes "the gospel" to us, then we end up being gospel-confused rather than gospel-centered. That's why we've chosen to use "The Jesus-Centered Church" instead of "The Gospel-Centered Church" as the subtitle of this book. The gospel centers us on Jesus' person and work or it isn't the gospel . . . and it isn't where our first love should be. Ultimately, the gospel is not a nebulous or ethereal concept, but Jesus Himself.

The gospel. What is it, really? In its simplest form, *the gospel is God's reconciling work in Christ—that through the life, death, and*

*resurrection of Christ, God is making all things new both personally for those who repent and believe, and cosmically as He redeems culture and creation from its subjection to futility.*

And that's what this book is about—the Church and the huge implications of this glorious gospel upon her.

Sadly, as in the case with Pastor Barry and Pastor Chase, a big gap exists between understanding the gospel and understanding what the gospel means for the Church. Perhaps this is largely because we tend to think of the gospel as an *individual* message that causes *individual* transformation—which is partially true. But the gospel is much more than that. The gospel also forms the church. Scripture says Jesus “gave himself up” for the Church (Eph. 5:25 ESV), buying the Church “with his own blood” (Acts 20:28 ESV), in order “to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14 ESV). The gospel needs to be seen in this total perspective.<sup>4</sup>

The gospel is, of course, for individuals—yes—and it should and ultimately does cause transformation in the life of every person who believes on the Lord Jesus. However, that's only part of what God is accomplishing in His plans to make all things new. And we cannot afford to forget it.

## Watching the Story Unfold

When I (Matt) was six years old, my dad took us to see *The Empire Strikes Back*, the second installment in the original *Star Wars* trilogy. I have no memory of seeing the first film, which might have given me some context for what I was seeing, but this one just confused me. It seemed like the bad guys were winning at every turn, and Luke (the eventual hero) actually bothered me more than he inspired me. Even at the age of six, I was turned off by his whiny attitude and easily breakable spirit. He almost had me rooting for the Empire instead. I found

myself pulling for the ruthless, powerful Darth Vader to hurry up and kill Luke so that Han Solo (the far more manly and capable of the two) could emerge as the new hero. Little did I know I was being set up for another movie that would come out three years later (followed by three more, of course, two *decades* later).

Genesis 3 is kind of like *The Empire Strikes Back*—a heartbreaking chapter of the Bible where the bad guys appear to have won a decisive victory. Sin has fractured the “shalom” of the universe. Everything that God had declared “good” is now broken and tainted, and the crown jewel of creation is in outward rebellion, hopelessly broken.

But Genesis 3 is not how the story ends.

God had told Adam and Eve they would die if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, yet they ate its fruit anyway, bringing spiritual and physical death into the creative order. But not only did God provide a way to clothe their shame and nakedness by slaughtering an animal and crafting garments for them to wear, He also added the whisper of a promise within this dark chapter, declaring that He would one day make all things right again.

God said to the serpent (to Satan, the embodiment of evil, deceit, and death), “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15 ESV). A man would come, God promised, born of woman, who would crush the head of the enemy once and for all. Yes, this man would be wounded in the process. But the “heel strike” He endured would be nothing compared to the death blow inflicted on His enemy’s head.

Time went on and the story continued with God unfolding more and more of how His restoration of all things would occur. In Genesis 12, He came to a man named Abram to give this startling command and promise:

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I



will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (vv. 1–3 esv)

Make sure you don’t miss this, because it’s very significant. God spoke and through His Word formed a “nation”—a people!—not just individuals but an entire community of faith. Yes, His promised One was still set to come at a definite point in history to crush the head of the enemy and restore peace to creation, but He would do so by first creating a covenant community of faith, a people of His own possession.

Israel was to be a picture of what life should look like when a group of people submit with gladness to God. He would govern everything for them through His law, lining them up with how He designed the universe to work, allowing the rest of the nations to see their joy and to recognize His glory. God gave His people laws about marriage, business, relationships, sex, parenting, worship, and even agriculture, not merely as isolated points of emphasis but as insights into His larger purposes and plans, to unify their corporate lives around His grand story of redemption.

Continuing along in the Old Testament, we see Israel unable to follow God’s good and right commands—rebellious against Him, refusing Him, in certain seasons even mocking and belittling Him. God rightly judged and disciplined His dearly loved people, as all good fathers do, but He never strayed from the promise He made to Abraham: that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Israel. This was an early hint of the gospel “mystery” that was there for the understanding to anyone “with ears to hear.” Repeatedly throughout the Old Testament, God would remind His people through the prophets that the salvation coming to them was intended for all nations, not just the Jewish people. Consider Isaiah 60:3–5:

And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side. Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee. (KJV)

Israel, of course, was thinking nationally and ethnically much like some still think of the gospel today, primarily in individual terms. Yet God was reminding His ancient people they were thinking way too small. Which means we think even smaller. Truly, God's plan of redemption is about more than me and you and our neighbor down the street. It's about men and women from every tribe, tongue, and nation on earth becoming a part of His covenant community.

This story of reconciliation continued rolling forward as Jesus was born, fulfilling all the prophetic words of who the Messiah would be: born in the line of David (2 Sam. 7:12) by way of Abraham (Gen. 49); born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14) in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2); ministering primarily from Galilee (Isa. 9:1); acquainted with suffering and sorrow (Isa. 53); and finally resurrected in glory (Ps. 16:8–11). “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you,” Jesus said before returning to the Father, “that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44 ESV). And even as He spoke these words, “He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (v. 45 ESV), showing the men on the road to Emmaus that the Old Testament promises of a Messiah—not only to Israel but to all peoples of the earth—were fulfilled in Him.

Stop for a second now and think about Luke 24 in the context of Genesis 3—a bit of time-travel my six-year-old mind couldn't pull off

while watching the Empire strike back “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.” God promised in Genesis 3 to restore what was broken from the fall. And as biblical history revealed, He would do it through a man who came into a community of faith to serve and reflect the glory of God to the rest of the world, fulfilling all the law of Moses, the words of the prophets, and the expressions of the Psalms along the way.

Ask yourself: Does this sound like a logical place then for this enormous, redemptive plan of the ages to suddenly become a purely individualistic pursuit, somehow separate from a body of people who are called into eternal, covenantal unity with Him?

What happens next answers that question for us.

## A Creature of the Word

After Jesus’ ascension, the disciples went into an upper room. And prayed. And waited. Waited and prayed. While they were praying, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon them . . . and all heaven broke loose. This mob of misfits who had struggled to understand what Jesus had taught and explained, this cluster of cowards who had fled when Jesus was arrested and tried, this pack of junior-varsity rejects who had argued with Jesus were laid low by the manifesting power of the Spirit. The wind and fire of that divinely inspired Pentecost removed much of what had hindered them from boldly following Him, and they began “to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4 ESV).

The Bible goes on to describe a chaotic scene that most of us wouldn’t welcome on Sunday morning in our quaint, little services, and fewer of us can fully get our minds around—Jews from “every nation under heaven” (v. 5 ESV) hearing this rough band of Galileans (a region not known as a hotbed of intellectual insight) speaking in the languages of everyone present. It was enough to leave the people “amazed and astonished” (v. 7 ESV)—or certain that these followers

of Jesus had been soaking their sadness in an early-morning binge of adult beverages.

Into the middle of this messy scene, Peter (who else?) stood up to address the crowd, informing the Jewish throng in town for an otherwise staid religious observance that the disciples were most definitely not drunk. Rather, this was the fulfillment of what God had spoken through the prophet Joel, who said that in these “last days” God would “pour out” His Spirit on His people (v. 17 esv). And by the time Peter finished his impassioned sermon, complete with a fitting explanation for the recent death and resurrection of Christ—a gospel message—some three thousand people were “cut to the heart” (v. 37 esv), repented of their sins, received the Holy Spirit, and were baptized.

And look what naturally followed . . .

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47 esv)

Yes, they clearly repented and believed as individuals, but the Scriptures immediately begin to talk of them as a group:

- They devoted themselves to teaching.
- Awe came on every soul, on the whole gathering.

- All who believed came together, sharing all things in common.
- They attended the temple together.
- They shared meals together.

That's because the Word, the gospel, creates not just *people* individually, but *a people*, collectively. The gospel isn't just individual and cosmic; it is also deeply corporate.

There's a reason why teachers are drawn to this text when the topic of biblical community comes up. Whether we're talking about Sunday school, small groups, missional communities, or just a gathering of people with spiritual intent, what we see in Acts 2:42–47 becomes the hope of what our fellowships could and should look like. The deepest hope of many Christian leaders is that our people would engage one another at this level, knowing that God never intended us to grow our faith in isolation but rather within a community of faith called “the church.”

With their individual gifts, resources, and levels of faith, these early believers built one another up into maturity. They encouraged one another, blessed one another, rebuked one another, disciplined one another, outdid one another in showing honor, taught one another, and trained one another in the gospel. All over the ancient world, churches were planted in an eerily similar way: “Repeatedly in Acts, the growth of the Church is attributed to the fact that ‘the word of God spread’ and ‘prevailed’ (Acts 6:7; 13:49; 19:20).”<sup>5</sup> So like Israel before it, the Church became the picture of what life should look like when a group of people submit with gladness to how God designed the universe to work. By carefully watching what happens in Acts 2 and beyond, we see it's really not all that different from what God was already talking about in Genesis 12. He had stayed with His plan to reconcile all things to Himself individually and cosmically through His Son—and through a people.

In Acts 2, the Word of God formed a people yet again.

This awesome reality—the fact that God spoke the Church into existence—would later lead the Reformers to call the Church “the Creature of the Word.” What they meant was that the Church is not a human invention or institution; it was birthed from God’s Word. God spoke and created the universe. God spoke to Abraham and created Israel; and in the same way, God created the Church through the proclaimed gospel of the revealed Word, Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther spoke and wrote passionately about this truth, instilling in those who heard him an understanding that the Church did not form the gospel but was formed (and must be continually formed) by the gospel. He wrote:

The church was born by the word of promise through faith, and by this same word is nourished and preserved. That is to say, it is the promises of God that make the church and not the church that makes the promise of God. For the Word of God is incomparably superior to the church, and in this Word the church, being a Creature, has nothing to decree, ordain, or make, but only to be decreed, ordained, and made. For who begets his own parent?<sup>6</sup>

Without the Word of God, we don’t have a covenant community of faith. The gospel precedes the Church, informs the life of the Church, and sustains the growth of the Church. Michael Horton helps us understand how the Word gives birth not only to us but also to the Church, when he writes:

The new birth, as part of the new creation, is effected *in* the church (i.e., through its ministry of the Word), but not *by* the church. The individual does not give birth to him- or herself, nor does the community give birth to itself; both are born from above (John 3:3–5). The origin and source of the church’s existence

is neither the autonomous self nor the autonomous church: “So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Rom. 9:16). Where there is God’s Word and Spirit, there is faith, and where there is faith there is a church.<sup>7</sup>

The Word of God went out in Holy Spirit power, granting the gift of faith in the hearts of men to believe in the grace offered in Jesus. When that gift of faith was extended, men were saved and the Church was formed.

### The Creature Sustained and Shaped

A big question needs to be answered before we can move on. And if we can’t answer it, we’re in big trouble. This is it: What makes the Church able to succeed where the Israelites so often failed? Martin Luther and Tim Keller explain:

It is an absolute and unique teaching in all the world to teach people, through Christ, to live as if there were no law or wrath or punishment. In a sense, they [these laws] do not exist any longer for the Christian but only total grace and mercy for Christ’s sake. Once you are in Christ, the law is the greatest guide for your life, but until you have Christian righteousness, all the law can do is show you how sinful and condemned you are.<sup>8</sup>

The Church now has the power of the Holy Spirit and the manifest grace of Christ, having been set free from guilt and shame by the imputed righteousness and wrath-absorbing death of Christ. So no longer should the fear of rejection and God’s vengeance be the motivating factors in our pursuit of holiness, but rather the delight of being loved, pursued, and saved by a gracious Father whose “kindness leads us to repentance” (Rom. 2:4 ESV).



That's a gospel difference.

Like children whose father delights in them, we can run to our Father knowing that nothing can “separate us from the love that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:38–39 HCSB). We can approach His throne with confidence—not confidence in ourselves but in Christ, who has fulfilled the requirements of the law for us. And this is why the Church succeeds, maturing by the power of God's Spirit working in and through the Word as He massages it deeply into the life of His body. A church is alive and full when she is sustained by the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ and is drawn back to that precious reality again and again, every time she gathers.

So . . . if challenged to give an answer for why we've lost a great deal of our power as the Church, one of the major reasons we'd give is this: our misunderstanding about what the gospel actually does. We seem to have developed gospel amnesia, forgetting that the gospel not only creates and sustains the Church but also deeply shapes the Church. Present and future.

All of the Epistles in the New Testament were written to Christians, and they each contain a heavy emphasis on the gospel and its implications for the people of God. This suggests that for churches who *believe* the gospel, the Spirit of God repeatedly wants to bring them *back* to the gospel. It means the Church is gospel-centric in its existence. She must not move on from the gospel, must never graduate from the gospel. The gospel, in fact, provides our ongoing, day-by-day motivation to pursue holiness and to experience the reality of what God claims we already are in Christ: perfect, spotless, and blameless.

How does the gospel do this, though—not only save but also sanctify? The pattern we see in Scripture is an *indicative/imperative* pattern. Notice that whenever a command is given in the Scriptures (an imperative)—in either the Old or New Testament—it is attached to a “why” (an indicative) for obeying that command. Here are some examples:

Leviticus 20:7–8 (ESV): “Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy [*imperative*], for I am the LORD your God [*indicative*]. Keep my statutes and do them [*imperative*]; I am the LORD who sanctifies you [*indicative*].”

Luke 6:36 (NIV): “Be merciful [*imperative*], just as your Father is merciful [*indicative*].”

1 John 4:12 (ESV): “If we love one another [*imperative*], God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us [*indicative*].”

Hebrews 10:19–25 (NIV): “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God [*indicative*], let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching [*imperative*].”

1 Peter 2:9 (ESV): “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession [*indicative*], that you may proclaim the excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light [*imperative*].”

1 Peter 2:10–12 (ESV): “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy

[*indicative*]. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation [*imperative*].”

2 Peter 1:3–7 (ESV): “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire [*indicative*]. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love [*imperative*].”

1 John 4:19 (ESV): “We love [*imperative*] because he first loved us [*indicative*].”

This pattern becomes incredibly important for the Church, always to be viewed through the lens of the gospel. If we don’t see this pattern, we are at risk of buying into a false gospel that seems adequate to save us but then sends us back to the law to be sanctified or made holy.

Our motivation to obey the commands (or imperatives) of Scripture can finally become a delight when we see that the reasons (the indicatives) almost always center around God’s love and provision for us in Christ. Through the gospel, the Holy Spirit empowers our motivations so that we are driven with gladness, not guilt, being ever reminded of our forgiveness in the gospel, not our failures in the law. It is God’s ability, not ours. Again and again . . . and always.

We are created by, sustained by, and empowered by something other than ourselves. *By the gospel of Christ*. What the Mississippi River is to the Atchafalaya River, the gospel is to the Church.

At issue is the kingdom of God among us. Because the kingdom of God has the concrete form of fellowship with God and others, the gospel as the message of reconciliation to God must everywhere lead to the founding of congregations that have among themselves a fellowship that provisionally and symbolically represents the world-embracing fellowship of the kingdom of God that is the goal of reconciliation. The fellowship of the church that the gospel establishes is thus a sign and a provisional form of the humanity that is reconciled in the kingdom of God—the humanity that is the goal of the event of reconciliation in the expiatory death of Jesus Christ. The gospel thus takes precedence over the church. . . . Though the gospel is proclaimed in the church and by its leaders, it is not a product of the church; rather, the gospel is the source of the church's existence. The proclamation of the gospel, then, is not merely one thing among others in the church's life. It is the basis of the church's life. The church is a Creature of the Word.<sup>9</sup>

“The Church is a Creature of the Word . . .”

Yes, a Creature. She is alive. A living, breathing movement of God's people redeemed and placed together in collective community. But she is not alive in her own doing. She has been made alive by the Word. God spoke her into existence through the declaration of the gospel—His righteousness on our behalf.

The more a church is tapped into the gospel, the more transformative power will be present by the Holy Spirit in that church. But the more that church gets away from the centrality of the gospel, the more a church will run on fumes, seeing people conformed to a pattern of religion rather than transformed by the Spirit of God.

All that the Lord commands is good and right. There is no word wasted in the inerrant Word of God. But we must always proclaim the Scripture with the gospel at its heart or we will set people up for failure, teaching them to continue trying to earn what's already been freely given.

Try this sentence on for size. A church that understands where its power comes from is a place *where individuals are transformed and empowered to join God's corporate family and participate in God's plan to reconcile all things to Himself*. Did you see all the pieces there? Individual salvation and transformation leads to a corporate identity, which is then used by God to redeem, restore, and reconcile all things in heaven and on earth by making peace through the blood of His cross.

And all by the gospel.

In the first half of this book, we will look at what the gospel does to the hearts of people, their relationships, and how they understand their position and purpose. We will discover that the Creature God formed—the Church—is a Creature that worships, lives in community, serves, and multiplies, while God simultaneously sanctifies His Church more and more as she practices these things. In His wisdom, God has ordained worship, community, service, and multiplication that is centered on Jesus to mature and develop His people.

After we have encountered the beauty of this “Creature” centered on Jesus, we will move on in the second half to what a Jesus-centered culture looks like, how it is formed and sustained. A church that is centered on Jesus looks more and more like Jesus. And since Jesus is the perfect Prophet-King-Priest, the church will begin to more faithfully and effectively carry out these prophetic-kingly-priestly functions. While these roles should not be utilized in a way that excludes one from another, they do provide a helpful and biblical framework for shaping a “Jesus-Centered Church.” By God's grace, we will offer practical thoughts on letting the gospel shape the life of a local church so that we might be more aligned with the mighty, life-giving river of the gospel.

Let's continually return to our first love.

To our Christ and His gospel.