

GOSPEL ALLEGIANCE

What
Faith in Jesus
Misses for
Salvation in
Christ

MATTHEW W. BATES



RENEW.org

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Matthew Bates, *Gospel Allegiance*

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Introduction

Although ghostly in appearance, this was no wood spirit. The rifle he carried was solid and threatening. A soldier had emerged from the jungle and was rapidly advancing. The young adventure seeker, Norio Suzuki, ceased kneeling beside his campfire and stood while the soldier approached. Hands trembling, Suzuki saluted him.

Suzuki had traveled from Japan to the small Philippine island of Lubang for this very purpose. He hoped to find the legendary soldier Hiroo Onoda. The year was 1974.

Hiroo Onoda, a World War II Japanese intelligence officer, had been left on the island in 1945 by his commander with instructions to carry on a guerrilla battle without committing suicide—no matter what—until the Japanese forces returned for him and his troop. He had been told that he may need to wait many years.

Loyal unto death, Onoda was still fighting the Allied forces twenty-nine years later. He had recently lost his last four soldiers in a firefight with local police. Now, with no one left to command, he waged war alone. But then Suzuki, this strange Japanese adventurer, had appeared on the beach wearing rubber sandals and socks, something no native islander would do.

In his autobiography, *No Surrender*, Onoda recounts that monumental beachfront exchange. Onoda's first impulse had been to shoot Suzuki. But since Suzuki was unarmed and unusually dressed, Onoda decided to risk everything. He called out to him from the jungle. Suzuki responded on the beach with a proper Japanese salute. Onoda was astonished. Then Suzuki squealed in a high-pitched voice, "I'm Japanese," several times.

So Onoda, gun in hand, emerged from the undergrowth, asking pointed questions: "Did you come from the Japanese government?" "Are you from the Foreign Youth Cooperation?" Suzuki replied that he was a tourist. Onoda did not believe him. Then Suzuki asked, "Are you Onoda-san?" "Yes, I'm Onoda," he replied. "Really, Lieutenant Onoda?" Onoda nodded. Suzuki continued, "I know you've had a long, hard time. The war's over. Won't you come back to Japan with me?"¹

Onoda told Suzuki that he would surrender only if he received "proper orders" from his higher ranking Japanese officer, Major Taniguchi. About three weeks later Suzuki returned with Major Taniguchi. Wary of betrayal, Onoda crept out from the jungle wearing camouflage. He was reunited with Major Taniguchi, who read aloud a formal order commanding that Onoda surrender.²

If Onoda's superior, Major Taniguchi, had not given the definitive command, Onoda might still be fighting in the jungle today. And he was just one of hundreds of documented Japanese holdouts, those who continued fighting for years after Japan had surrendered. Influenced by the Bushido codes of honor that the Japanese emperor bent to serve his imperialistic ambitions, Onoda and his comrades were unswerving in their loyalty to the emperor, almost reflexively. Like the honed edge of a samurai sword, the meaning of life and death was singular. *Allegiance*.

When he was fifteen years old, he was tossing hay for mules near the barn on his family farm in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The young man had been baptized and confirmed, attended church regularly, and served as a peer leader at his church. But he was mainly interested in baseball. He heard singing coming from the barn and concluded disdainfully that his father must have allowed some religious fanatics to use the space. The boy did not attend the revival in his father's barn that night. But a salesman named Vernon Patterson did. And Patterson prayed that God would raise up a worldwide evangelist right there in Charlotte.

Several weeks later, Mordecai Ham, a traveling evangelist, rolled into town to conduct another revival for several weeks. The boy had zero interest. But when he heard that this evangelist was a fighter, identifying specific sinners in the local high school by name, he began to think it might prove entertaining to go. A local farmer bribed him to attend by allowing him the fun of driving his dairy truck to the meetings. At the meetings, the young man increasingly felt convicted of his sin and unsure that his baptism and confirmation were sufficient to save him: "Our family Bible reading, praying, psalm-singing and church-going—all these had left me restless and resentful. . . . I was spiritually dead."

Each night Ham would present an invitation. Each night the young man resisted. Finally, one evening the choir sang "Just As I Am" and then "Almost Persuaded, Now to Believe." As the choir belted out the final verses, he found that he had been persuaded and now believed. With leaden feet he went forward. He prayed a sinner's prayer, asking to receive Christ. When he returned home, he threw his arms around his mother, jubilantly reporting, "I am a changed boy!"³

Billy Graham would become the greatest evangelist of the twentieth century, proclaiming the same message he had heard from Ham: right now you can repent, believe, and receive Christ for eternal life. Millions came forward at his rallies. Graham was a straight-talking Southern preacher whose message was clear: Your sins condemn you. But there's good news of salvation in Jesus. *Repent and believe.*

Introducing Gospel Allegiance

If you love the gospel, this book is for you. It aims to describe the gospel and saving faith with greater clarity and precision than other popular Christian resources. But it may prove disruptive. I've come to the following conclusions:

The true biblical gospel can never change.

The gospel must change.

These seemingly contradictory statements crackle with electric tension. The sparks flying between them ignite this book, which is but one of many efforts going on worldwide to add to the blaze. My prayer is that allegiance to Jesus the king will spread like fire.

Nothing matters more to the individual Christian, the church, and ultimately the world than the gospel. When it seizes us, its goodness becomes a volcanic pressure in our hearts. Praise erupts. "Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens!" When you finish this book, I hope you'll have a more precise understanding of the gospel and its relationship to faith, grace, and works. My desire is that this will bring you to new heights of praise. I pray it will also equip you for the church's disciple-making mission.

But let's be real. There are obstacles. A correct retrieval of the gospel, faith, and salvation is lacking in the church. We all know that there are bad teachers—slicksters like Jim Bakker and Creflo Dollar. But it's not just bad teachers that are the problem. It's the good ones too. This is why the gospel must change.

Misunderstandings about what the Bible teaches about the gospel and faith are widespread across the full spectrum of the church. This is a strong claim, but I think its truth can be shown. These misunderstandings are present in standard resources written by pastor-scholars such as Matt Chandler, Greg Gilbert, John MacArthur, John Piper, and R. C. Sproul. I mention these because they are all well-known authors who have written books about the gospel. They are also highly respected for their fidelity to the Bible. Rightly so. They are among the best teachers the church has.

So when we discover they are *all* slightly misrepresenting what the Bible teaches about the gospel, it demonstrates that problems are pervasive. It shows that the gospel must change in our churches.

There are extensive misunderstandings of the gospel today. I think this has happened because present salvation models such as lordship salvation, free grace, TULIP, and the Catholic model are inadequate. I do not pretend to have all the answers about how salvation works. It is a rich, extensive conversation that Christians have been carrying out for millennia. But as I join with others in reaching toward solutions, I hope I am at least asking the right questions. Trying to answer them has led to this conviction: we need better language and a new model to more accurately convey what Scripture teaches about salvation. My prayer is that this will lead to enhanced evangelism and discipleship and a greater capacity to praise God. The model I am proposing is *gospel allegiance*.

Concerning Furrowed Brows

More than a few brows have furrowed after reading these first pages. The claim of widespread errors with regard to essential Christian teachings may seem far-fetched or alarmist. In fact, even as I write these words, I can imagine some readers slamming this book closed in disgust, thinking: The church doesn't need a new model for salvation—the church needs to *preserve* the unchanging gospel of faith in Jesus alone, not reevaluate it.

Still others may be too timid to explore, finding the prospects too risky. After all, false preachers have been peddling pseudo-gospel messages from the very beginning (see Gal. 1:6–7). Today the church must contend with false gospels announcing that God wants to make us rich, or physically healthy, or psychologically balanced, or well connected, or militarily powerful, or tolerant of others. One especially wacky Episcopal priest in San Francisco recently made headlines for hosting a Beyoncé-inspired Eucharistic celebration. The choir sang popular Beyoncé songs rather than offering praise to God!⁴ I'm not sure what kind of false gospel to

call this. The good news that God wants us all to be pop-music, sex icons? We live in strange times.

Unlike these false gospels, the true gospel addresses the human sin problem. It also has implications for the whole social order and for creation itself. The gospel must change us.

I need to say a further word to the reluctant, because I sympathize. In the wake of my previous book, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*, I have had many conversations about faith and the gospel. So I can say with some confidence that those who consider it a false and risky quest to rethink the gospel usually do so because they regard the true gospel as pure and simple.

For the reluctant, the gospel can easily be summarized in a variety of ways: believe that Jesus died for your sins and you will be saved; trust in Jesus's righteousness alone, not in your own works; have faith in Jesus's sacrifice for your sins and in his resurrection power. And surely no biblically informed Christian can question the necessity of grace and faith and the problematic nature of works. After all, the apostle Paul says, "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith . . . not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8–9 AT).⁵ The true church is in little danger of losing sight of these central truths—so it is thought. The conclusion: the proposed journey will lead us astray or nowhere new.

Is a New Model Necessary?

But this is precisely the problem. When the Bible presents the gospel, it is not "believe Jesus died for your sins and you will be saved." Nor is it "trust in Jesus's righteousness alone, not in your works." Neither is it "have faith in Jesus's sacrifice for your sins and in his resurrection power." And contrary to the claims of MacArthur, Piper, and others, the heart of the gospel is certainly not justification by faith (see chap. 1). The gospel presented in the Bible is quite specific. While the Bible does say that Jesus's death for sins and his resurrection are part of the gospel—and obviously central facts to be believed—this is only

a portion of the true gospel. And even to frame it in this way puts the focus in the wrong place. The consequences of these misarticulations are serious.

Furthermore, while we affirm faith and grace, are we sure we know what these words actually meant when the apostle Paul and others wrote them? After all, Paul used the Greek words *pistis* and *charis*, words that meant something different in his time and culture than what “faith” and “grace” mean in ours. Moreover, Jesus, Paul, and other New Testament writers say again and again that we’ll be judged on the basis of our deeds (e.g., Matt. 16:27; John 5:28–29; Rom. 2:6–16; see chap. 5 below for further discussion), so the role of works in salvation is more complex than first meets the eye. While we may agree that the Bible’s vision of salvation manifests a beautiful simplicity, it is not simplistic.

The gospel given to the church by Jesus and the apostles can never change. The problem is that the church as a whole—including many pastors, authors, and churches that loudly proclaim themselves biblical—have embraced distorted understandings of the gospel, faith, grace, works, and salvation.

As imprecisions ripple outward, distortions are magnified. Problems emerge for the church. This is why our gospel must change. We need a new biblical paradigm so that the saving good news can be heralded forth in all its truth and power. The gospel-allegiance structure allows us to more accurately capture what the Bible teaches about salvation. Presenting it is our task in this book.

The Gospel through a Window, Darkly

It is not that the true gospel is entirely missing or that people are not entering salvation. Far from it. The gospel is still being preached with saving effect. Rather, the current situation is like standing in a cluttered garage with a lone, dusty window. A rose-bush can be seen growing outside—an appreciable amount of goodness and beauty—but the view of the roses is obscured.

Once you recognize the need, you begin to sweep, dust, and remove boxes. And when you look out again, you see vibrant lilies, orchids, tulips, and poppies as well as more roses than you ever could have imagined—in a hundred vibrant colors. You hadn't realized that the rosebush was part of a flower garden. This book attempts to move boxes and clean the windowpanes so we can see the whole garden in all its radiant beauty—the saving gospel of Jesus the king.

I want to show that the gospel and our faith response must not be reduced to the cross, or even to the cross and resurrection. The gospel is bigger than that. Why does our gospel need to change? Because the climax of the biblical gospel is not the cross but something frequently not considered part of the gospel at all: the enthronement of Jesus. And when we see this, we might begin to see why saving faith in the Bible intends not just belief or interior trust in God's promises but *bodily allegiance* to a king. Seeing this compels us to rethink how faith, grace, and works fit together.

What Was, Is, and Will Be

This book stands on its own. You need not have read *Salvation by Allegiance Alone* first. But it is helpful to understand how my earlier book relates to this one. I keep receiving two basic questions about saving allegiance, one theological and the other pastoral: (1) How can we deepen our understanding of salvation by allegiance alone? (2) What can we do to foster an allegiance culture in our churches and personal lives?

These are huge questions that can never be exhaustively answered. *Gospel Allegiance* attempts a beginning by going beyond my previous work in the following ways:

1. *It is gospel first.* The gospel itself is defined more precisely and explored more thoroughly.
2. *It is more practical and pastoral.* This book is aimed, first, at church leaders, everyday Christians, small group

studies, and church education programs. Students and scholars are second. There are plenty of stories and examples. My principal dialogue partners are standard pastoral resources by John MacArthur, John Piper, and the like. My work is informed by scholarship and seeks to advance that conversation too, but the priority is pastoral. To maximize the book's practical and experiential aims, it should be read with the guide for further conversation in appendix 2, which gives suggested questions and activities for individuals or groups.

3. *It goes deeper.* Readers have asked for more on the gospel, faith as allegiance, grace, and works. This book moves along the trajectories established in my previous work but gives additional nuance, detail, and supporting evidence.
4. *It reframes.* Nobody wants a rehash. The principal gospel passages in the Bible will always remain principal, so some overlap in presentation is unavoidable. Yet different lenses and angles of approach can generate new insights. To minimize repetition, all the biblical texts are approached afresh and new ones are added to the discussion.
5. *It is more focused.* This is a deeper but narrower study. *Gospel Allegiance* treats the gospel, grace, and works more thoroughly. It places a premium on the apostle Paul's theology since this has been the main focus of debate regarding these topics—although it seeks to integrate and contextualize Paul's theology within the whole biblical vision.

The chapters in this book develop themes suggested by Ephesians 2:8–10, the passage frequently regarded as the premier statement of salvation theory in the Bible:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not from yourselves—it is the gift of God—not by works, in order that no

one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in the Christ, Jesus, for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (AT)

The body of this book will seek to problematize and then refine our understanding of key topics: the gospel, faith, grace, works, and how these relate to the Catholic-Protestant division. In the final chapter, we will bring it all together by applying it experientially: Can you take what you've learned and explain Ephesians 2:8–10 from within the gospel-allegiance framework? You'll be able to test yourself by comparing your attempt with this book's answer. No peeking at the last pages!

For those seeking more, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone* covers many pertinent topics that could not fit here. If you are disappointed that I don't treat a specific issue pertaining to salvation here—like the order of salvation, justification's relationship to sanctification, or imputed versus imparted righteousness—check there.

I am also presently writing a book that will extend the core gospel-allegiance model to issues that lie beyond it. I'm excited! Stay tuned.

Traveling Together

The journey into gospel allegiance mirrors my own intellectual and spiritual pilgrimage. This is a journey that I believe has been “further up and further in,” as C. S. Lewis might put it. As you've begun to travel with me, you may be interested to hear a small portion of my story.

If you are a sleuth, you've already got this figured out. I completed my doctoral work at the University of Notre Dame. I teach in a Catholic-Franciscan university. I have seven children. (You could probably even discover that we drive a huge church van to accommodate all these kids.) I pray the Catholic morning office and attend Mass on occasion. And this book argues that we are

saved by allegiance. Even if there is no incense burning, it smells Catholic.

But the clues are misleading. I am a Protestant. Although I appreciate Catholic values and have many Catholic friends, I find that uniquely Catholic doctrines do not accord with the Bible, earliest Christian history, or the truth. I was raised in a conservative independent Bible church. As a college student and adult, I moved frequently in pursuit of various educational opportunities. I have regularly attended or held membership in independent, Presbyterian, Baptist, Mennonite, and Evangelical Free churches. My formal training was at a university situated in the Reformed tradition for my undergraduate degree (Whitworth), a multi-denominational Protestant seminary for my master's degree (Regent College), and a Catholic university for my doctorate (Notre Dame).

The overall result? I am a theological mutt—a traditionally minded Christian who is pro-church but not associated with any particular denomination. I am grateful for this diversity of training and experience, as I think it has helped me appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of various Christian traditions. As for my contention that we are saved by allegiance alone, some virulently anti-Catholic readers may insist that surely I *must* have made a secret pact with the devil and the pope during my time at Notre Dame. But, in fact, nearly all my influences in arriving at this conclusion are Protestant. (Ironically, my dissertation director at Notre Dame, who bears no responsibility for my views, is a Lutheran.) I am not Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Arminian, or Baptist. I do not write from or for any official theological system. Apart from Christian and Protestant, I reject all such labels.

It is fair to say, though, that I am an unusual Protestant. This is because I do not think that my Catholic or Orthodox brothers and sisters have rejected or compromised the content of the gospel. This is why I consider them my full brothers and sisters in the Christ. This doesn't mean that our ongoing disagreements

aren't serious and substantive. But we are all *full members* of the one Christian family. If you don't think this could possibly be true, then keep reading.

Why must our gospel change? Because nonbiblical versions of the gospel are wrongly splitting the one true church. Despite improved relations between Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants, the fact remains that in present circumstances I as a Protestant would be happy to receive communion with the pope, but as a member of the Catholic church he is not willing to receive it with me—even though we confess the same gospel and have both been baptized as Christians. On the other side, too many Protestants love to spit venom at Catholics. This grieves me. Consider me an advocate of what C. S. Lewis called “mere Christianity,” a vision of the church that celebrates its common ground. Common, yes, but not at the expense of the gospel truth—rather because of it.

Ultimately, *Gospel Allegiance* cuts across traditional denominational accounts of what the Bible teaches about salvation, offering a new model. Do not allow precut labels that others have created predetermine what you find. Let Scripture—not “Reformed,” “Arminian,” or “Catholic”—be your guide. If you read with care, you'll find that such labels do not accurately describe the gospel-allegiance model. Consider this an opportunity to reassess where the biblical boundaries lie apart from such labels.

On our journey we should bear in mind that the Bible was written by and for real ancient people. It was God's word to them as much as it is God's word to us. This means we must attend to ancient word meanings and cultures, as well as to our present context. Accordingly, I sometimes cite ancient sources (such as Josephus, Philo, and the Catholic Apocrypha/Deuterocanon), not as authoritative Scripture, but in order to show how certain words were being used when the New Testament was written. Practicing gospel allegiance involves learning to negotiate between ancient and modern meanings and applications.

Toward a More Allegiant Future

I opened this book by juxtaposing the stories of Hiroo Onoda and Billy Graham. It might be obvious by now that I am suggesting that the story of Onoda's allegiance, even though it was not properly aimed, can help us correct deficiencies in Graham's evangelistic model. I admire Graham. Who would dare to suggest that he didn't achieve mountains of good?

Yet Graham's model promotes a divorce between a salvation decision and discipleship. Accordingly, Graham has been accused of encouraging what some call "easy believe-ism" or what is known today, less pejoratively, as the "free grace" position. John MacArthur and his supporters have attempted to refute so-called free grace by advocating for "lordship salvation." This has been a productive conversation for the church. But gospel allegiance provides an even more holistic vision for evangelism and discipleship. More on this later.

I have a further purpose in opening with stories about Onoda and Graham. Stories take us deeper than raw facts. They help us to experience the texture of life's fabric, to understand with both the head and the heart. So I'm going to tell a third story, one that is both true and ancient. It happened near the end of the New Testament era. It helps us both to know and to experience why allegiance mattered for salvation back then—and why it still should today.

Pliny was troubled. He was a non-Christian governor in the Roman Empire in the early second century. Certain individuals in his region had been denounced as Christians. Although he knew Christianity was illegal, he was uncertain what to do. So he sent an urgent letter to Emperor Trajan requesting direction.

In the meantime, he needed to act quickly because the "contagion" and "superstition," as he himself described Christianity, had already penetrated city, village, and countryside alike. Thus,

while awaiting the emperor's response, he settled on a personal interview to test the accused and dispatch the guilty: "I asked them whether they were Christians, and if they confessed, I asked them a second and third time with threats of punishment. If they kept to it, I ordered them for execution."⁶ So Christians were given an opportunity to recant, but if they persisted they were summarily executed.

Yet while Pliny was attempting to deal with these pesky Christian troubles, his difficulties increased. When the state started giving credence to personal accusation, the finger pointing accelerated. In fact, Pliny was given a list with the names of numerous alleged "Christians," but the list was unsigned by specific accusers. Therefore Pliny was obliged to conduct even more interviews.

Pliny was forced to refine his interview procedure so that he could determine who was and who was not a true Christian. Some of its details may prove puzzling to contemporary readers: "As for those who said that they neither were nor ever had been Christians, I thought it right to let them go, since they recited a prayer to the gods at my dictation, made supplication with incense and wine to your [Emperor Trajan's] statue, which I had ordered to be brought into court for the purpose together with the images of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ—things which (so it is said) those who are really Christians cannot be made to do."

In assessing Pliny's test from our twenty-first-century vantage point, it probably does not surprise us to learn that true Christians would refuse to curse Christ or would decline to worship the pagan gods. But Pliny's very deliberate placement of Emperor Trajan's statue is odd. If we were to do some research, we would correctly conclude that the Roman emperors were increasingly receiving divine honors during this time period. So perhaps it is fine that Pliny felt it fitting to include Trajan's statue as a god among other gods. But why wasn't it sufficient simply to test whether the accused would worship pagan idols *in general*? What did Trajan's image *in particular* have that these others lacked? Pliny's description

continues: “Others who were named by the informer said that they were Christians and then denied it, explaining that they had been, but had ceased to be such, some three years ago, some a good many years, and a few even twenty. All these too both *worshiped your statue and the images of the gods*, and cursed Christ.”

Again, the emperor’s image is given singular significance beyond the other idols in the test. Why? The other gods may rule, but the emperor’s divine rule is visible, concrete, and immediate. For Pliny, Trajan is the *living* emperor-god, the one who rightfully demands the *ultimate yet practical loyalty* of his subjects. This allegiance would be expressed by their adulation as well as their pledged loyalty, support in war, and tax payments.

Faith as Allegiance to the King

Pliny grasped something we often miss. Even though allegiance is at the margins of Christian theology today, Pliny included obeisance to Trajan’s statue as a litmus test because he had correctly discerned its absolute centrality. For Pliny, the true Christian does not merely recognize Jesus’s divinity by worshiping him to the exclusion of all other gods. Nor does he or she simply have “faith alone” in Jesus’s death for sins. Rather, Jesus as the resurrected, enthroned, and now *ever-living king* was felt to demand a similar sort of *ultimate yet practical allegiance* as did Emperor Trajan. The true Christian gave allegiance to Jesus the king, subverting the emperor’s claims to be a god, the supreme ruler, and a savior.

The word “faith” itself needs to be reconsidered by Christians today. The word ordinarily translated as “faith” is *pistis* in the New Testament’s original Greek. But *pistis* is a richer word than “faith.” It can mean allegiance. For example, in Revelation 2:13, Jesus commends the church at Pergamum for remaining loyal to him even when they were under pressure to worship the emperor instead. Jesus says to them, “You did not deny *pistis* to me” (AT).⁷

Jesus does not mean, “You did not abandon your faith in me to forgive your sins,” but rather, “You did not deny your allegiance to me as king.” Just as allegiance was key for Emperor Trajan, so it is also for King Jesus. And as we reappraise Christian theological categories—the gospel, faith, grace, works, and justification—it might prove to be key for us as well.



PART 1

Discovering Gospel Allegiance

1

Getting the Gospel Right

It was one of the most awkward dinner situations I've experienced. Through it I learned why we need to get the gospel right.

We had invited three middle-aged Chinese men over for dinner in our basement suite. I had met them through my church as a volunteer English-language tutor. Anyone could get tutoring, whether they were interested in Christianity or not. Over several months our friendship had grown. So my wife and I wanted to extend hospitality.

When we opened our door, they entered with shy grins. They came bearing gifts—eight giant clusters of bananas and dozens of tiny clementines—more than my wife and I could ever eat. My wife had prepared a rich beef stew and rolls, and I had helped with a garden salad. They raved over the attractiveness of the food: “Your salad is too lovely to eat.”

The stew was already in the bowls. I prayed. We began passing the salad. Before my wife and I realized what had happened, two of our guests had served their salad into their stew bowls! Lettuce, dressing, and chunks of parmesan were floating on hot broth, beef medallions, and red potatoes.

We were shocked and embarrassed for failing to inform our guests. We hastily retrieved new bowls from the cupboard. But they refused to accept clean bowls—even when we had ladled fresh stew into them. They were also enormously embarrassed, but preferred to help their hosts save face by minimizing our shame. (The West has much to learn from the East about humility for the sake of others in guest-host relations.) So they instead ate the stew-salad monstrosity, insisting, “This is just the way we prefer it! It is much better this way!”

Several weeks later they invited us to their basement and made us authentic noodle soup. We did not put salad on it—although we should have!—and we were able to laugh together about our previous dinner.

A Better Gospel?

As our friendship blossomed, I explained why I was at seminary. I had left a high-paying job as an electrical engineer to become a poor student in order to be better equipped to serve Jesus. This downward career trajectory puzzled them. We should never underestimate how intriguing Jesus’s ways are to those with little experience.

As time went on, I shared the gospel directly with the three men. They were interested, but unsure what to make of Jesus. Did he truly heal people? Was he really raised from the dead? One of them, Mao, was wrestling with Christianity more fiercely than the others.

When I presented the gospel to Mao, I recall asking him to repent and believe that Jesus died for his sins. We spoke about the hardships he would face in China if he became a Christian. A month later Mao expressed faith in Jesus. A few weeks after that he returned to China. I have never been able to contact him, so I do not know if he still follows Jesus. Sometimes one or two brief moments is all we get. Getting the gospel right matters.

There is no such thing as a better gospel. The true gospel is more than good enough. But is that what I shared?

I know now that Mao heard only a rough approximation. After all, what more is needed if the gospel is that “you can’t do anything for yourself, so repent and believe”? Why does it require discipleship? I attempted to sow seed. But was the gospel I presented able to dig deep enough into the soil? I trust the Spirit was working in spite of the deficiencies in my gospel presentation.

But it also motivated a quest to get the gospel right. If I were to present the gospel to Mao now, I think I could help him receive a firmer planting, one more likely to yield a harvest. I could help him holistically hold together salvation and continued discipleship within one framework: allegiance to Jesus the forgiving king.

Nothing is more vital than the pure gospel. The church must safeguard, display, and invite others to experience this treasure. When the church has come to grasp the biblical gospel imperfectly, it must change its gospel by refining toward the truth. God works to save despite our flaws. Yet it is not hyperbole to say that eternal lives are at stake. For God has entrusted the task of gospel preservation and proclamation to his church.

Gospel Matters

In this chapter we will begin examining in some detail what the Bible says about the gospel. As I have presented this material, I’ve found that many who think they thoroughly understand the gospel are surprised to learn that they hold substantial misconceptions. I think it can be shown that even popular books on the gospel by leading pastor-scholars like Matt Chandler, Greg Gilbert, John MacArthur, John Piper, and R. C. Sproul contain inaccuracies in their presentations of the gospel. These are authors who seek to be biblical. Yet I submit that the gospel they are presenting needs to be fine-tuned in light of what the Bible actually says. And these are the good ones! If their gospels need

sharpening, how much more dubious are the gospels presented by Christian teachers like Benny Hinn, Kenneth Copeland, and Joel Osteen. This shows the degree to which the gospel in the church today needs to change, for gospel imprecision is a pervasive problem. My hope in presenting this material is that discipleship and evangelism will be reinvanized.

The Gospel Is Not

We primarily learn by contrast. When we are children, we learn what the color blue is mostly by recognizing that blue is not green, red, or yellow. So if we are going to discuss what the gospel is, it can be helpful first to describe what the gospel is *not*. And it's no wonder there is widespread confusion in the church when we discover the wildly flexible ways in which the word "gospel" is used. When "gospel" comes to mean anything and everything, there is no defining contrast—no green, red, or yellow to help us identify blue. Gospel confusion ensues.

Not Vague Christian Activities

The word "gospel" has been co-opted to describe a whole host of Christian or quasi-Christian activities and projects that only loosely relate to its biblical description.

Gospel everything is nothing. When everything becomes the gospel, nothing is, because the word is meaningless. Or worse, it becomes a marketing scheme: gospel-driven this, gospel-centered that, and gospel "projects" abound. Many of these are first-rate Christian resources even when only loosely related to the gospel. But savvy marketers apply the gospel label because they know the gospel sells. This overly wide use of the term "gospel" as a marketing strategy causes confusion, for the church loses its gospel precision. The gospel is not the whole of Christianity or the entire Christian story. And it certainly shouldn't be a way to make more money.

Gospel actions? Other activities are confusingly called the gospel. The gospel is not loving others unconditionally. It is not the rule of God in your heart. It is not a style of music. Jesus heralds good news for the poor, the sick, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18–19), so some church traditions call activities aimed toward helping those groups the “social gospel.” A more accurate way to state it might be that the gospel is a political statement with social implications. And the Bible exhorts and commands Christians to undertake such actions in the name of Jesus the king. But we must distinguish the gospel proper from the various kinds of benefits it brings (see chap. 3 and “Bridge” at the end of part 1).

There are numerous activities we adopt once we are changed by the gospel, but we only introduce confusion if we call these activities the gospel. So, the gospel is not extending forgiveness or grace toward others. It is not becoming more holy, self-controlled, or generous. The actual gospel is what God has done in and through Jesus the king, not what we are becoming or doing for others. Period.

Say it! There’s a related problem: the gospel is not actions divorced from words. Saint Francis of Assisi is reported to have said, “Preach the gospel at all times; use words if necessary.” We find this saying attractive because talking about Jesus and salvation to those outside the church can be intimidating. But the Bible describes the gospel as something that cannot be proclaimed purely through good deeds toward others. Our good deeds can amplify the gospel message, but the message itself must first be verbally proclaimed by someone in order for our actions to reinforce it. And actually there is no evidence Saint Francis said any such thing.

So the gospel is not the whole Christian story, a marketing slogan, helping out, feeding the poor, loving others, or extending grace or forgiveness toward others. And it must be proclaimed not merely through our actions but through our words that tell *what God has done through Jesus*. The gospel is not the Christian activities that we do. It is about Jesus’s actions, not ours. To present the gospel we must describe his actions using our words.

Not the Romans Road

There are many who present the gospel as if it is equivalent to what has come to be known as the “Romans Road.” In this system, verses from the book of Romans are used to explain salvation. The path begins with the recognition that all fall short of God’s righteous standard (Rom. 3:23) and that none are righteous (3:10). Since God is just, he must pay us the wages we deserve for our sins: death (6:23). But even while we were sinners, Christ died for us (5:8) as a free gift for eternal life (6:23), so that anyone who believes and confesses that Jesus is Lord will be saved (10:9–10).

The Romans Road is presented in a variety of forms, including books, tracts, bookmarks, crafts, kits, banners, and flash cards. You can get a ruler, a bracelet, or even a pen with a pullout banner for a mere \$2.24—you know, just in case you are doodling a cross, someone asks, and you require assistance in sharing the gospel. Two very popular recent books take this general approach.

In the first, Matt Chandler’s *The Explicit Gospel*, the aim is announced in the title.¹ Chandler wants to present the biblical gospel in the plainest possible terms. The book is structured so as to expose the reader to the gospel from two directions—from the ground and from the air. The gospel from the ground presents basic biblical information about God’s perfect righteousness, God’s just wrath on fallen humans, Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice that bears that wrath, and the way God’s grace enables the human response of faith. So the first half of the book follows a traditional Romans Road approach—even if that is not made evident. In the second half, the gospel from the air takes an even wider view, focusing on how God’s good creation was tainted by the fall but how God has reconciled *all things* in Christ, so that the whole creation is destined for renewal.

Greg Gilbert’s *What Is the Gospel?* helpfully catalogues a vast number of evangelical statements that attempt to define the gospel.² His point is that there is surprising disagreement

over the boundaries of the gospel. As a corrective, he suggests it might be prudent to look at what the Bible itself says. Indeed! But in the end he settles on a tour of Romans as the best way to define the gospel. Is it not predictable, then, that the gospel presentation in his book ends up traveling the well-worn ruts of the Romans Road? God is the righteous creator, humans are sinners, Jesus Christ is the Savior, and we must respond with faith and repentance.

The problem with the Romans Road approach is not that the verses it uses are devoid of pertinent salvation truths. Those verses contain saving truths. The problem is that a distorting framework is introduced through which these truths are presented. The Romans Road contributes to what Scot McKnight helpfully calls a “salvation culture”—the easy believe-ism associated with Billy Graham and other evangelists—but it does little to cultivate an authentic gospel culture.³

Why? The Romans Road approach superimposes *our ideas* about what the gospel must be as we seize upon prooftexts from the book of Romans and then arrange them into an artificial structure that we then call “the gospel.” Instead, we can get closer to the truth by giving primacy to Bible passages that intentionally and directly address gospel content. These explicit passages give us an outline and framework. (So, ironically, Chandler’s *The Explicit Gospel* is not nearly explicit enough.) When we grab a verse here and there—even when those verses contain core salvation truths—we introduce distortions to the gospel.

The Romans Road is not the gospel. If the Bible’s own description of the gospel is the standard, the Romans Road entirely misses most of the gospel’s true content—and it adds many ideas that aren’t part of the gospel at all. This is why Chandler’s and Gilbert’s efforts to describe the gospel accurately fall short. The Romans Road is best regarded as the contemporary church’s rearrangement of a few salvation-related facts. It is definitely not the gospel. After you finish this chapter, I think you’ll see more fully why this is true and why it matters.