

REVANGELICAL

Becoming the Good News People
We're Meant to Be

LANCE FORD

FOREWORD BY DAN KIMBALL

Lance Ford brings a blast of fresh air and fresh perspective. *Revangelical* is highly recommended for those who are ready for a clear-eyed and good-hearted diagnosis of what's gone wrong in American evangelicalism, and a prescription for how it can get back to being the Good News it was meant to be.

TOM KRATTENMAKER

Contributing columnist to *USA Today* and author of *The Evangelicals You Don't Know*

Part personal narrative, part iconoclasm, part confession, Lance Ford's *Revangelical* challenges the entrenched idols—nationalistic, cultural, and religious—embedded in modern evangelicalism. Ford calls for renewal along the lines of evangelicalism's own primary concern . . . that of the gospel itself. A prophetic call to re-evangelize the church.

ALAN HIRSCH

Author of *Untamed*, *The Permanent Revolution*, and numerous award-winning books on adventurous Christianity; founder of Forge Mission Training Network

Here is a path forward for evangelicalism that integrates the best of the past (e.g., the missiology of E. Stanley Jones) while it innovates for the future out of theological integrity, not political correctitude. Enjoy finding nuggets of wisdom on every page, not, as all too often, scattered throughout like breadcrumbs in a forest.

LEONARD SWEET

Bestselling author, professor (Drew University, George Fox University), and chief contributor to sermons.com

What would it mean for evangelicals to get saved? Lance Ford carefully and whimsically considers what changes such an awakening might bring. His book *Revangelical* is an “alter call” for all of us who seek renewal in the church we love so much.

DAVID FITCH

BR Lindner Professor of Evangelical Theology, Northern Seminary, and author of *The End of Evangelicalism?* and *Prodigal Christianity*

What I like most about this book is its courage and candor. I find Lance Ford's careful but plainspoken assessments and exhortations very refreshing and welcome—in fact, needed! He offers sound wisdom that calls the people of God to first-order things.

MARK LABBERTON

President of Fuller Theological Seminary and author of *Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today*

President of Fuller Theological Seminary and author of *Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today* Lance is dealing with questions that simply are not going away; if anything, they are becoming more pronounced. The core of this conversation is not *what* we believe, but how we relate to others and how we communicate in the public square. Sadly, we evangelicals have come to act more like a political party or an angry tribe than the body of Christ. We are to be salt and light, lifting up Jesus, loving all men—blessing them. As I have worked with leaders all over the world, and not just Christian leaders, I have come to find that the problem is not our gospel—it's us. Lance raises the questions the world has been raising for a long time.

BOB ROBERTS JR.

Senior pastor, NorthWood Church, and author of *Real-Time Connections*

Lance Ford is a significant voice among a rising core of evangelicals. Deeply concerned about the integrity of the church's witness, he offers a bold yet gentle admonition and re-introduces the evangelical church to the concept of the Kingdom of God. Speaking directly to the heart of evangelical America, *Revangelical* sounds a clarion call for the faithful to re-embrace the gospel's roots and to let those roots take hold in their hearts, their lives, their communities, and the world. Lance Ford's prophetic voice is cause for hope.

LISA SHARON HARPER

Senior director of mobilizing for Sojourners; author, speaker, activist, and playwright

Lance Ford's new book is an uncompromising call for us to be rewired by the Good News of King Jesus in order to bring restoration and renewal to an exhausted, chaotic, and strife-ridden world, regardless of the implications for our priorities, our politics, or our pocketbooks. Inspiring and prophetic in the best sense of that term.

MICHAEL FROST

Author of *Incarnate*, *The Road to Missional*, and *Exiles*

American evangelicalism is in crisis. The problem is complex, but the solution is not. In *Revangelical*, Lance not only provides a much needed, thoughtful critique of present-day evangelicalism, he paints a clear picture of what it looks like for followers of Jesus to truly be the Good News people we have been called to be.

BRAD BRISCO

Coauthor of *The Missional Quest* and *Missional Essentials*

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Foreword

THERE IS A WELL-KNOWN quote widely attributed to Mahatma Gandhi that continues to make the rounds online and has even made its way onto bumper stickers:

I like your Christ, but I do not like
your Christians. Your Christians are so
unlike your Christ.

Whether Gandhi ever said it directly, or it is simply a summary of some of his thoughts, we don't know; to my knowledge, the true origin of this quote has not been found. But I do know that these sentiments have struck a chord in the hearts of many, many people.

Our culture has a very compelling interest in the person of Jesus—the Jesus who cared for the marginalized; who talked about loving your neighbor as yourself; who said not to judge others; and who hung out with both sinners and saints. But when we press the average person on the subject of Jesus, so often it turns out that he or she has never studied *all* of Jesus' teachings—such as when he speaks of judgment; of heaven and hell; of being forgiven only through faith in

him and what he did on the cross; of not continuing in sin; and of repentance. Overall, the average person has a positive view of Jesus. But not of Christianity. Type “Christianity is . . .” into any web browser and you will see words like *judgmental*, *evil*, *crazy*, and *hateful* pop up. In the culture at large, the perception of Christianity is more often about organized religion, church buildings, and power and control.

Now let’s take this a step further: How about the word *evangelical*? In some circles, to say you’re an evangelical is even worse than saying you’re a Christian—the extreme stereotype is that they’re “anti-almost-everything,” and for many in our society, this extreme stereotype isn’t far from the reality of how they see evangelicals. But most evangelicals are *not* like that.

When I say that I’m an evangelical, I’m basing that description on the original meaning of the word, which Lance Ford discusses in this book. Evangelicalism was initially a refreshing middle way between liberalism and fundamentalism, based on the belief that the Bible is fully inspired by God, and because of that we take the teachings of the Bible seriously and desire to bring the *Good News* of Jesus to the world around us. I am proudly an evangelical in that way. The grace and beauty that once characterized evangelicalism has now been tainted by a new definition and impression. But the truth about what *evangelical* really means is still very Jesus-mission focused; and evangelicalism is still a vibrant, loving third way between other, extreme forms of theology that are out there.

There's really one way to change the faulty impression of evangelicals that some people have. It's not a new marketing campaign or a strategic rebranding of the word *evangelical*. It's simply demonstrating with our lives and actions the truth of what we proclaim. Whether we like it or not, people often make decisions about Jesus based on their opinions of the people who follow him. And there truly are some crazy-embarrassing evangelicals who fit the stereotype. But most of us don't! The simple beauty of the gospel, though, is that when we act like Christ, people see Christ in us, and the Good News goes forth.

If we care about Jesus, we will care about people. And if we care about people, we will be passionate, desperate, and motivated to share with them the Good News that Jesus died for their sins, was buried, and then rose on the third day to triumph over sin and death. That's what it means to be an evangelical.

Lance now shows us how to live out our mission for the sake of others. This book is a mobilizing book, a sending book, and it's full of practical ways for the evangelical message of Jesus to be heard and seen by those who don't know him yet. I am thrilled when I think of the lives that will be transformed as a result of this book. The more we embody the Good News of Jesus, the greater the impact on our society will be.

Dan Kimball

1

RECALIBRATE

If I weren't a church leader or if I weren't friends with Christians who really are following Jesus in a loving and balanced way, I would probably judge Christians and Christianity based on what I could see from the outside. And it isn't a pretty picture.

DAN KIMBALL

AS THE SUN SETS on a lazy summer evening, a handful of suburban neighbors kick back around an ice chest on a well-manicured front lawn. As Alan takes the last bite of a grilled burger, his friend Brian—ice-cold beer in hand—motions toward a moving van parked a few houses down the street. “Has anyone met the new people moving into Jeff and Stacie’s old place?”

“I met the wife,” Brenda says. “I was out running a couple of days ago and she was getting something out of her car, so I stopped and introduced myself and welcomed her to the neighborhood. She was really friendly. I think she said they’re from Cincinnati.”

“What does *he* do?” Alan asks.

“I think he works at a tech firm or something,” Brenda says, before adding, “Oh yeah! And here’s the best part. I was meaning to tell you all. They’re *evangelical Christians*. She’s got a Jesus fish and a pro-life bumper sticker on her car and everything.”

Upon hearing this last bit of news, Brian gives Steve a high five. “*Yes! That’s great news.*”

Leslie, too, is clearly elated. “Oh man, that is so awesome!”

“No kidding,” says Steve. “That is *exactly* what this neighborhood needs. Some evangelicals.”



Whenever I speak to live audiences and paint that scenario, the room—without fail—erupts in laughter. Why is that? Because we all know better. Who gets excited when they hear, “The evangelicals are coming!” The answer is *nobody* . . . except maybe other evangelicals.

Today, the term *evangelical* is a loaded word in American culture, packed with a variety of contradictory meanings. The emotions it evokes in one person can be the polar opposite of how it affects someone else. What *evangelical* is supposed to mean—*bringer of good news*—is completely different from what it has come to mean for many in our society: judgmental, misogynist, bigoted, homophobic. How did this happen? How did the “good news” people come to be widely regarded as *bad news*?

To answer that question, I didn’t have to look much further than my own upbringing.

Evangelicalized

During the decade of the 1960s, my father, an accomplished guitarist, played in honky-tonks throughout the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex. Along with his love for my mother, my sister, and me, my dad loved country-western music chased down with a few beers. Actually, more than a few. Where most people might have one or two cans or bottles, my dad would have one or two six-packs. Daddy coming home drunk was an all-too-frequent occurrence in our home. The only things that kept divorce at bay were my mother's love for my father and her unrelenting commitment to keep our family together.

Sometime around 1969, the year of the lunar landing, my father had a health scare and wound up in the hospital. While he was there, my grandfather and his pastor visited my father's bedside and prayed the "sinner's prayer" with him after walking him down "the Romans Road."¹ Amazingly, it stuck, and my father got *saved*. And soon the rest of our household got saved as well.

Growing up in the Bible Belt in the 1970s meant that every school day began with the Pledge of Allegiance and possibly a prayer, led over the intercom by the school principal. At some point during the school year, we were certain to receive a little green copy of the New Testament, compliments of the Gideons.

On Sundays, we sat side by side on rock-hard church pews that were just uncomfortable enough to keep us awake while the pastor delivered the Word of God from behind an

imposing pulpit, flanked on the platform by two important symbols—the American flag and the Christian flag. When the church service was over, we went home for Sunday dinner. In the afternoon, there might be a trip to the park or a lake, but we certainly wouldn't be going to the mall or the movies. Commercial enterprises for the most part were closed in accordance with the blue laws.²

As the 1970s progressed, the Cold War grew darker on the international front while a culture war intensified state-side. The ever-present danger of communism and nuclear war lurked in the shadows, tainting our innate American optimism with fear. We were convinced that the Russians could launch their missiles at us at any moment. Anything with a mere hint of communism was to be stamped out. Certain phrases came to be viewed not merely as opinion but as unquestionable fact to all but the most ignorant, unpatriotic traitor or communist:

- “America is a Christian nation.”
- “America is the greatest nation on earth.”
- “God, guns, and country” (or “God, guns, and Texas” if you were fortunate enough to have been born in the Republic).

On the home front, two major court decisions—the 1962 Supreme Court prohibition of organized school prayer and

the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion—combined to galvanize evangelical leaders around a handful of issues. Evangelical pastors and leaders began to speak loudly—and often—on a particular set of political and moral subjects. Abortion and school prayer became key points in a battle that would eventually create an identity and agenda for the majority of evangelicals in the United States.

For us kids, one week each summer was devoted to Vacation Bible School, where we pledged our allegiance in triplicate—first to the American flag, and then to the Christian flag and the Bible. It was clear in our young minds that we were to commit to, live by, and defend all three with equal devotion. I was pretty sure that when God sat on his throne, Jesus was on one side, with the American flag next to him, and the Holy Spirit was on the other side, with a Christian flag of equal size.

Sometime in the midseventies, I remember being terrified by the rapture movie called *A Thief in the Night*, with its haunting rendition of Larry Norman’s song “I Wish We’d All Been Ready.” Coming home to an empty house one winter evening, not long after I had watched this film about people who missed out on being taken up to heaven before the Great Tribulation (in accordance with a dispensational interpretation of Matthew 24:36-44), I became convinced I had been “left behind.” My dad was working the night shift at the time and my mom was way past her normal arrival time after work. This was decades before cell phones, and with no way to get in touch with my mom, I grew panicky and tears

began to flow. I climbed onto the roof of our house to watch in all directions for signs of life. I saw a few cars coming and going, but figured those were lost people like me who had been passed over by the coming of the Lord. Then again, I didn't see any cars going out of control or crashing like the movie had portrayed. Soon enough, my mom arrived home and my rapture fears subsided. Nevertheless, I didn't ever want to have that terrifying feeling again.

I couldn't wait to get to church the next Sunday because I knew exactly what I needed to do. Though I was just a youngster, I had gone to church enough to know what would happen following the pastor's sermon. We would all get "the invitation," followed by "the question," and then I would have my opportunity to get my ticket punched for heaven.

It was all I could do to sit still until the sermon was over and I heard the familiar words: "Every head bowed and every eye closed. No one looking around. . . . Now, if you were to die tonight and stand before God and he were to ask you why he should let you into his heaven, how would you respond?"

After the pastor recited a list of possible answers and why every one of them would fail to secure our entry into heaven, he said, "If you do not want to face an eternity of torment in hell, I invite you to signify your desire by raising your hand."

My hand shot up as quickly and as high as I could raise it. And then I heard the all-important words that the pastor had spoken umpteen times before in countless church services: "I see that hand."

Abh. Sweet relief began to flow. *Yes, he saw my hand!* I then

answered the invitation to walk to the front of the church to pray the “sinner’s prayer” and accept Jesus as my Savior, as my parents sang “Just As I Am” along with the rest of the congregation. *Whew*. I was in. I would not be going to hell.

Over the next decade, there were only a handful of Sundays when I did not attend church services with my family. I became adept at finding my way around the Bible, and I developed a familiarity with all the key stories: Noah and the ark, Jonah and the whale, Samson and his great strength, David and Goliath, and so on. I knew the names of most of the twelve disciples and could recite the narrative of Jesus’ birth, a few of his miracles, and the story of his trial, death, and resurrection. And along with other members of our church, I was taught that the most important issue of all—our number one priority—was to keep other people from going to hell.

We were given a few “tools” (mostly canned sales pitches) to help us in our evangelistic efforts to rescue people from eternal fire and damnation, but otherwise the “good news” of the gospel we learned was pretty much limited to “you don’t have to go to hell.” It was a message about what happens to us *after* we die. It didn’t have much to say about what we might do *before* we die. Oh, there were plenty of expectations, both spoken and assumed, about what we *wouldn’t do* (and every church had its list), but the emphasis was mostly on believing a few key facts about Jesus—his birth, death, resurrection, imminent return, and status as Savior—and then we were good to go. We were all familiar with the standard question,

“If you died tonight, do you know where you would spend eternity?” but nobody ever seemed to ask, “If you *live* tonight, how will you enter the Kingdom of Heaven?”

I have been an evangelical Christian long enough to know that what I’ve just described is a condensed version of the gospel that most of us learned. I may have overstated the issue a little bit—maybe a smidgen—but not by much. For the most part, the evangelical gospel has been reduced to a message that has a lot more to do with dying than with living. It has been more about “hellfire insurance” than living a life on fire from heaven.

After my salvation experience, and for the rest of my adolescent years, I took this truncated gospel to heart and pretty much lived as I pleased and chased what I wanted, with scant regard for the ways of the Lord. I fully relied on God’s amazing grace to make everything work out in the end.

Us vs. Them

Shortly after graduating from high school, I experienced a Prodigal Son–like return to a life of earnest devotion to the Lord. I immediately enrolled at a Bible college and set off on a course of “full-time ministry.” Over the next several years, my objective became clear: keep as many people as possible out of the fires of hell, but without getting smoky in the rescue effort. We called this “hating the sin but loving the sinner,” but what it really meant, in practice, was that we distanced ourselves from any meaningful contact with non-Christians apart from our evangelistic campaigns.

The evangelical stream I began swimming in emphasized the importance of “avoiding friendship with the world,” meaning anyone who was caught up in the “secular world system.” In other words, your friends should only be Christians and only Christians should be your friends.

Something about this began to marinate in my heart. It was our duty to “love sinners,” but we didn’t have to actually like them, and we certainly didn’t want to get too close to them, for fear that something bad might rub off or someone from church might see us. In fact, if we had too much affinity for non-Christians, it was indicative that something was amiss in our hearts. We were only to lower our guard and befriend people *after* they accepted Jesus.

With that mind-set, it’s no surprise that, before long, I was like the average believer, who has no non-Christian friends other than coworkers or casual acquaintances.

During my first year in Bible college, an expert on personal evangelism came to campus and offered to spend an afternoon with students who wanted to learn his techniques. I showed up for the training at the appointed time and place, along with a half-dozen other students, and for the next three hours, we learned door-to-door evangelism strategies and how to jump on city buses to give one-minute evangelistic pitches leading to a ten-second countdown that concluded with a recital of the “sinner’s prayer.” We were instructed to end these brief gospel presentations by telling the new “converts” to find a Bible-believing church to attend. There was no relationship established—not even close, because

relationship was not the goal. We would never see any of these people again. All that really mattered was being able to tally up “the day’s catch,” as the evangelist called it.

In the summer of 1986, fresh out of Bible college and newly married, I set off with my wife to serve as youth pastors at a West Texas church in a small junior college town. The church was known for leading protests and petition drives on a variety of moral issues.

Shortly after I arrived, the pastor took me for a ride around town, during which he gave me an orientation on which businesses to avoid and which restaurants were forbidden for staff members to patronize. For the next six months, we didn’t eat pizza because the only pizza place in town served alcohol. I was well on my way to a worldview based on opposing categories—Christian vs. non-Christian, *us* vs. *them*. *They* could become *us* if only they would repent and believe. But unless and until they did so, it would be very hard not to look at them as the enemy. At the very least, they were in cahoots with the enemy.

By the 1990s, the issue of homosexuality had joined abortion, creationism, and public school prayer as the major focus points of evangelicalism. American society no longer treated Christianity with favored status, and the most noticeable response by evangelical Christians was to hunker down into political strategies and standoffs. “Restore America to Its Christian Foundation” and “Take Back Our Nation” became common themes.

By this point, I had been a practicing evangelical and

full-time ministry worker for long enough that, along with the leading voices of evangelicalism, I was galvanized into “us vs. them” thinking, attitudes, and postures. “They” were sending our great nation to hell in a handbasket. “They” were ruining our schools. “They” were killing innocent babies. This paradigm effectively paralyzed any Christlike love in my heart and dictated the way I interacted with, spoke of, and treated those outside of the evangelical Christian camp. Political or philosophical differences branded other people as the enemy, and they were treated and spoken of as such. Their outrageous views of life and society were not deserving of respect, and therefore they would find none from me and my tribe. I had become a fine young Pharisee.

During a sermon for a sizable number of college and high school students one evening, I made an extremely derogatory statement about homosexuals. It elicited widespread laughter from the gathering of evangelical young people.

Following the sermon, a young man named Jeff came straight toward me. I was certain he was going to congratulate me on the great message I had just delivered, but I was in for a shock. Instead, he loudly and summarily informed me that my comment about gays had been completely out-of-line and that I had the intelligence of a mentally disabled grasshopper.

I responded that I was in charge of the meeting and he was welcome to leave the premises as soon as he could locate an exit. As Jeff walked out, several people gathered around me in admiration for my “boldness in the name of truth.”

Despite a steady diet of Bible study and considerable

chunks of time spent reading the four Gospels, it had somehow escaped me that the way I viewed and treated anyone I categorized as a non-Jesus follower was nothing like the way Jesus treated people who had not yet begun to follow him. Stop for a second and consider that when Jesus began his ministry, there were no Christians and no Christianity. Sure, there were people who feared God, devout Jews who sought to uphold the law of God. But by the same token, there was more than enough immorality to go around. While the Pharisees, scribes, chief priests, and leaders of the synagogues perspired over every last jot and tittle of the law and conspired against the enemies of righteousness and of Israel, Jesus consorted with, served, and befriended scores of “unrighteous” people—scamps, scalawags, and sinners.

The Gospels are a compendium of Jesus’ encounters with the most egregious people, as to their immorality, corruption, and bad reputation. But somehow it seems that many evangelicals today have chosen to overlook or ignore how Jesus responded to “those people”—the *thems* of his day. In case after case—in fact, without exception—he approached them with kindness, mercy, and an invitation to a banquet in his Kingdom. The people he got upset with were never the *thems*; it was always *us*, the “good church folks” who condemned “sinners” or created barriers between them and their heavenly Father.

Jesus never condemned sinners. His issue was with people who thought they were not sinners themselves. His gospel eliminated the categories of *us* vs. *them* because it eliminated

fear—fear of others and fear of death. Jesus was confident that the God-life inside of him would swallow up any disease or corruption he might encounter and would overcome any death-bearing element he might touch. But this didn't set well with the evangelicals of his day. His attitude and actions toward the nonreligious elicited the wrath of the religious elite to the point that they eventually arranged for his execution. It's sobering to contemplate the way many evangelicals might treat Jesus if he were walking among us today.

Revangelicaled

When Jeff challenged me that night following my sermon, his response had nothing to do with whether homosexuality was a sin. The issue was my *attitude*, which was reflected in my words, which revealed my *heart*. There was no hiding it. None of that “my heart was in the right place” business. No, my heart *wasn't* right. My heart was dead wrong. Dreadfully wrong. Jeff confronted me with the truth that if the love of Jesus for others was alive or even existed in my heart, it had been buried under so much self-righteous rubble and a lack of understanding of Jesus' ways and means (as clearly revealed in the Gospels) that I couldn't reach it. For all practical purposes, I was untouched by the very gospel I claimed to be offering to others.

Something was amiss, and deep down I knew it. I wasn't at all like the Jesus I claimed to love. I began to ask myself some tough questions about how I—along with the majority of fervent evangelicals I knew—had gotten to the point where

I didn't actually love non-Christians at all. I loved the *idea* of their becoming converts (and was drawn to high-profile conversions), and in an abstract way I loved their "souls." But I would continue to view them as the enemy—rather than as sheep in need of a shepherd—until they became Christians. And I knew I was not alone. All I needed to do was turn on any of the leading evangelical radio talk shows or listen to any of the leading evangelical voices during election season. The prevailing message was to "protect yourself and your family" from the ungodly *others* in society.

Almost a decade after my encounter with Jeff, he and I unexpectedly found ourselves only a few feet apart at a conference in St. Louis. Glancing across the crowded room, we caught each other's eyes, but this time, *I* was the one who made a beeline straight to *him*. As Jeff steeled himself for what would surely be an awkward or confrontational moment, I took him completely off guard with my first words.

"I was wrong," I said emphatically.

Jeff was stunned. This was not what he was expecting. "Youuuu were?" he said. "I mean . . . I *know* you were. But *you* know you were?"

Over the next few minutes, I did my best to briefly explain to Jeff that I had been on a journey of *relearning* the gospel. I had come to realize that I needed to be evangelized all over again, not by the gospel of "you can avoid hell," but by the gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven—the gospel that Jesus preached and practiced.

Since the day I became a Christian, I had considered

myself an evangelical. But truth be told, I *wasn't*. Not in any biblical sense of the word. Sure, I was a prototypical American evangelical, but I was not practicing an evangelical lifestyle that Jesus would have recognized. I agreed with and preached according to the criteria by which most theologians and contemporary scholars defined evangelicalism, but that was merely a technicality.[†] From any practical or functional perspective, I was at best a pseudo-evangelical. I had bought into the deception that being an evangelical Christian meant I would vote for a certain political party and would get behind a set of ideologies and definitions that categorized people as “for God” or “against God” in correlation to their religious scruples and politics.

An authentic evangelical should be a “good news” person. And not just any old good news. This is about the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven—the good news that Jesus brought, lived, and taught. Somewhere along the line, I had lost track of the most important part of being evangelical. Over the years since then, I’ve found that I’m not alone.

Re-evangelizing Ourselves

Not long ago, I spoke at a conference for some wonderful pastors and leaders whose group name includes the word *evangelical*. Beginning the talk with a quick survey, I asked, “What does the term *evangelical* mean to you?” In response,

[†] Evangelical Christianity values the importance of the Bible as ultimate truth and authority, the need for conversion via a born-again experience of belief in Jesus Christ as the only way to eternal life, and the commissioning of all followers of Jesus to express and demonstrate the gospel through missionary activity and social reform.³

I heard a few scattered chuckles, but no one answered the question. They all just stared at me inquisitively, as if to say, “Huh? Everyone knows what that means.”

Intrigued by this unanticipated stalemate, I smiled and pressed the point further. “Come on, you guys. You go by the name *evangelical*. What does the word mean when you trace it to its roots?”

With a bit of prodding, we were finally able to agree that the word *evangelical* comes from the same word as *gospel*

“Okay,” I said, “what is the gospel?” Again, an awkward hush filled the auditorium. Only a bit of nervous seat-shifting could be heard. Finally, after some coaxing, a few folks began to call out familiar phrases such as, “To receive Jesus as your savior” and “To be assured of eternity in heaven.” Someone even shouted, “John 3:16!”

“Is that it?” I asked. “Are you sure? That’s all you’ve got? *That* is the gospel?”

This was as dedicated and sincere a group of ministers as you could hope to meet. They were men and women who had staked their careers and dedicated their lives for the sake of something very specific. They just weren’t exactly sure what that specific something was. That was a telling moment.

Since that day, I have conducted the same experiment with dozens of similar groups, and the results are always the same. Each time, the scenario plays out like *déjà vu*. It’s a sobering situation that we evangelicals must face head-on. Is it possible that we have somehow missed the crux of the gospel? Has our gospel gotten too small?

Having grown up in a conservative evangelical home, having married into a conservative evangelical family, and having pastored conservative evangelicals since I was nineteen, I'm fairly certain I would qualify for the Certified Evangelical seal of approval. I point this out to emphasize that I am writing from *inside* the camp. I haven't abandoned the tribe, nor do I intend or expect to. But I am convinced that we evangelicals—we bringers of good news—need to be *re*-evangelized. We need it for our own well-being, not to mention its necessity if we have any hope of reaching our neighbors and the broader world to which we've been sent. Before we evangelize anyone else, we need to re-evangelize ourselves.

On several occasions, I have heard my friend Mark Labberton, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, repeat a statement that his father often made: "Religion takes great things and makes them small." I'm afraid this statement applies to us as evangelicals, as well. We have reduced the gospel to a "plan of salvation" that has more to do with the afterlife than with our actual lives—our *right-here-right-now* lives. One of the most troubling aspects of this reduction of the gospel is that evangelicals have come to be seen as a people who care only about eternity, while not showing the same concern for people's lives—which calls into question how much we truly care about their eternal souls. The way we treat people here and now says we don't really care about their lives here and now. It reminds me of a story told by the great Methodist missionary and theologian E. Stanley Jones:

The evangelism of Jesus was an evangelism to the total man. He did not love people's souls alone—he loved people. A Hindu student came back from the West and said, “If those people had loved me a little bit more and my soul a little bit less, I might have become a Christian.” Jesus did not go around loving people's souls—he loved people, and would lift everything that cramped body, soul, or mind.⁴

Sadly, for many evangelicals, the gospel has been shriveled and shrunken to the point that we have made the great Good News small. Like so many of my friends and family, I had come to believe and preach a gospel that focuses on our sinful separation from God, who wants to restore us to a right relationship with himself so that he won't have to destroy us with his unstinting holiness and we can be with him in heaven. That's certainly true, and it's an important part of the gospel message, but it's not the complete message. Focusing only on the “sin” question is like serving someone a plate of shelled pecans after promising a slice of pecan pie. The pecans are an essential part of the pie, but they are not the whole pie.

I came to realize that I needed to be truly “converted”—that is, genuinely and deeply changed—by the *entire* gospel, a gospel that goes well beyond mere mental assent to a list of propositional truths about Jesus that will save me from the ultimate consequences of my sinful nature and ensure that I go to heaven when I die. My understanding of the word

evangelical needed to be restored to a more well-rounded and complete definition that includes belief in all the truth statements about Jesus, but also means committing to *live my life* according to Jesus' example in the most literal sense possible—as crazy as that may sound.

In the remainder of this book, I will explain the key points that have helped me in my continuing journey of reconversion to biblical evangelicalism, and I will share stories and examples of other Christians on this same journey, whom I have come to refer to as “revangelicals.”

Revangelicals are followers of Jesus who have moved beyond merely favoring Jesus with their *belief* in him and have committed themselves to actually *following* him with the substance of their day-to-day lives. They take Jesus' words very personally, and often quite literally, and are convinced that his example is indeed a *livable* model and standard for us to emulate. Revangelicals are those who seek to live their lives as *Good News people* of the Kingdom of Heaven, even if it costs them the American Dream.

Revangelicals don't necessarily fit into political boxes. They refuse to let the Good News that Jesus proclaimed become co-opted and distilled by ideologies that conflict with the life and practice that Jesus taught and modeled. The gospel they believe in is too big and too awe-inspiring to fit perfectly into a political camp, platform, or agenda—whether liberal, conservative, Republican, Democrat, Independent, Tea Party, or whatever.

Revangelicals have come to the conclusion that if what

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Jesus taught and commanded is too impractical for the real world, then the real world must be false. I have found in my own efforts to live out the principles in this book that my heart needs to be continually recalibrated to the Good News of the gospel of Jesus each and every day. My hope is that you can use the following pages to fine-tune your heart as well. May we all be *revangelical*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is or has been your definition of the term *evangelical Christian*?
2. What is your definition of *the gospel*?
3. In what ways has your concept of the gospel opened or closed your life to others?
4. In what ways do you need a reconversion to the gospel of Jesus Christ?