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# COUNTER CULTURE

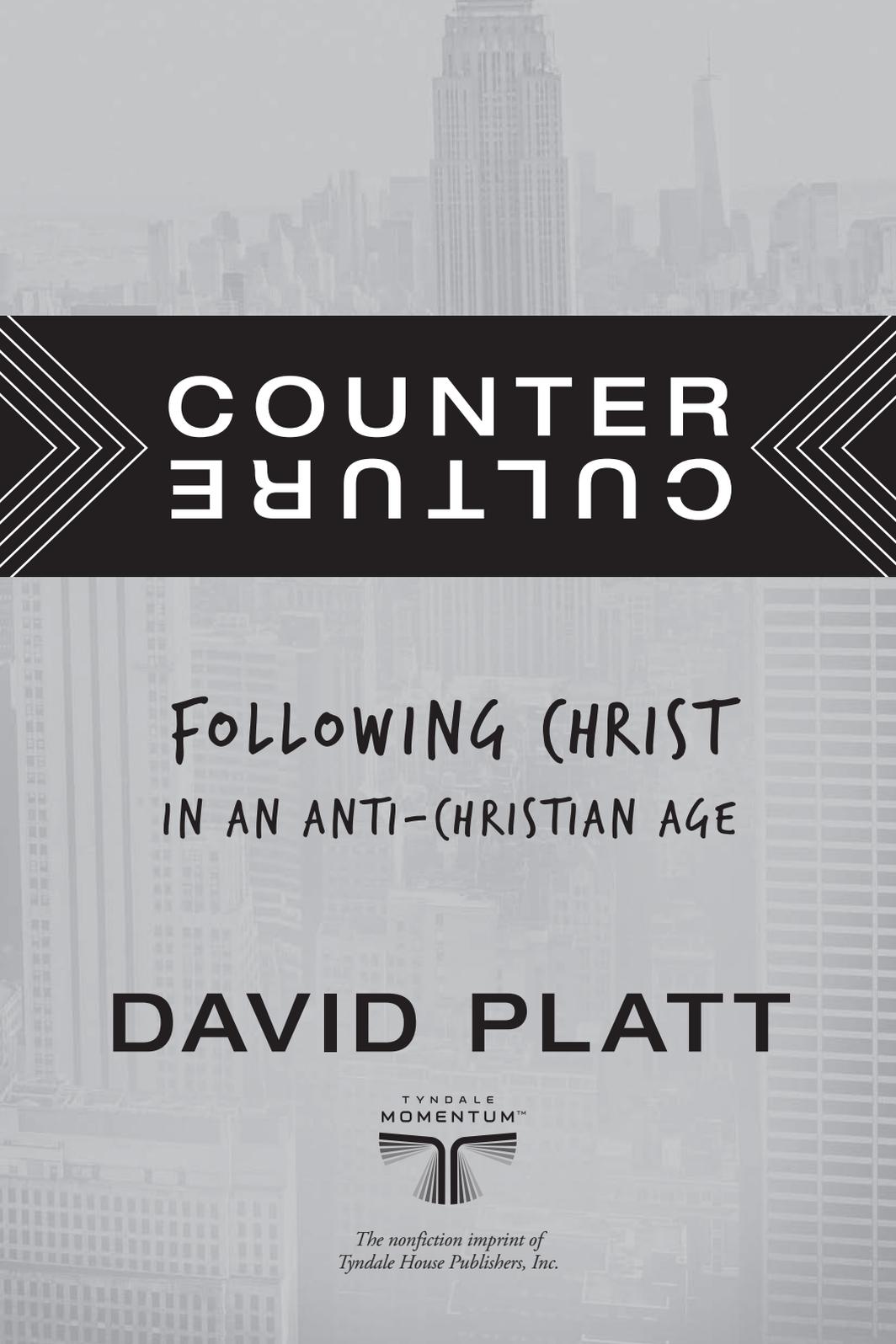
FOLLOWING CHRIST  
IN AN ANTI-CHRISTIAN AGE

**DAVID PLATT**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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*Counter Culture: Following Christ in an Anti-Christian Age*

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THE  
GOSPEL

THE GOOD NEWS THAT THE JUST AND GRACIOUS CREATOR OF THE UNIVERSE HAS LOOKED UPON HOPELESSLY SINFUL MEN AND WOMEN AND HAS SENT HIS SON, JESUS CHRIST, GOD IN THE FLESH, TO BEAR HIS WRATH AGAINST SIN ON THE CROSS AND TO SHOW HIS POWER OVER SIN IN THE RESURRECTION, SO THAT EVERYONE WHO TURNS FROM THEIR SIN AND THEMSELVES AND TRUSTS IN JESUS AS SAVIOR AND LORD WILL BE RECONCILED TO GOD FOREVER.



## RETREAT OR RISK?

Consciously countercultural. This is the only possible posture for individuals, families, and churches who have any hope of following Christ in contemporary America.

I make the statement above without hesitation or reservation. In 2014, I wrote the first edition of this book to encourage Christians in America to live out their faith amid the significant social issues that surround us. At that time, the Supreme Court was about to consider arguments concerning so-called same-sex marriage, and transgender sexuality was rarely even discussed. Two short years later, so-called same-sex marriage has become law across the country, and the federal government now threatens to withhold children's education money from states who do not allow men who wish they were women to use public bathrooms alongside young girls. The rate of social and moral change in contemporary America is both staggeringly swift and historically

unprecedented. Indeed, only God knows where we will be by the time you're reading this book.

So how should Christians respond to such a rapidly changing American culture? Do we resign ourselves to pessimism, convinced that many of the moral foundations upon which our society once stood have collapsed and are now irrecoverable? Or do we reassure ourselves with optimism, confident that we can still win the culture war if we'll just unite together spiritually, personally, politically, and philosophically? I propose that neither pessimism nor optimism is the answer. Instead, realism is.

Followers of Christ need to face the reality that contemporary American culture is increasingly anti-Christian. As we will see in the pages ahead, the Supreme Court of the United States has called Christians who believe what the Bible teaches about marriage “bigots” and “enemies of the human race.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in a recent ruling on religious liberty, a state supreme court declared that Christians should be “compelled by law to compromise the very religious beliefs that inspire their lives.”<sup>2</sup> These legal statements merely reflect the anti-Christian sentiments that the media, business, and entertainment industries are aggressively promoting in the minds and hearts of American individuals, families, and institutions every single day.

Such anti-Christian sentiments are obviously not limited to America. Across the world, followers of Christ live in settings that are hostile to Christianity (many of them far more hostile than the United States). After all, Christianity was born into a culture of opposition two thousand years ago. Across the centuries, Christians in countless cultures have lived out their faith in settings where belief in the Bible has been viewed as offensive and commitment to Christ has proved to be costly.

So how should followers of Christ today live in an American or any other culture that is intentionally and increasingly

anti-Christian? I am convinced that every professing Christian in any such culture has two clear options: retreat or risk.

On the one hand, we can retreat. We can retreat from Christ altogether, although I'm guessing that for most professing Christians, we won't reject Christ outright and all at once. Instead, our retreat can be far more slow and subtle. In the name of "progressive" faith, "inclusive" belief, and "open" minds, we can begin trading in the timeless truths of God's Word for the changing opinions of the world. The ruins of such retreat are already evident across contemporary Christianity, as many professing "Christians" deny that God is the Author of Scripture or that Christ is necessary for salvation. In efforts to accommodate the culture, scores of individuals and churches have already abandoned Christ. Most dangerous of all is that they've done so under the semblance of supposed Christianity.

Even if we don't retreat from Christ, we might retreat from culture. In the face of anti-Christian sentiments and social challenges, many Christians who hold to a belief in the Bible may choose to hide in the comfortable confines of privatized faith. We might stand up and speak with Christian conviction in the privacy of our homes and churches yet sit back and stay silent about Christian conviction in more public settings. When the conversation at the café switches to the topic of homosexuality, for example, we might sheepishly, almost apologetically, stumble through a vague notion of what the Bible teaches, or probably more likely, we might say nothing at all. Or when our boss at work asks us what we believe and we realize that our job may be in jeopardy based on how we answer, we might find ourselves masking, or at least minimizing, the parts of our faith that could be most offensive to him or her. Or maybe our retreat will simply involve scrolling through headlines on social media each day where we see news of rampant poverty, refugee crises, racist

violence, and regulated abortions (if abortion ever even shows up in the news we receive), and instead of deciding to do something in response to these realities, we might sympathetically shake our heads and move on as if there's nothing we can (or should) do.

One of the reasons I've written this book is because I see temptation to retreat in the above ways all around me. I see it in Christian students who don't want to be labeled narrow-minded or intolerant and who are slowly (or sometimes swiftly) concluding that Christianity is outdated and irrelevant. I see it in Christian singles who think the Bible's teaching on sex is overly restrictive and Christian couples who believe the Bible's teaching on marriage is offensively chauvinistic. I see it in Christian parents who either isolate their children from cultural challenges or send their children into the culture ill-equipped to face those challenges. I see it in Christian leaders who are proud to stand up and speak out on social issues like poverty and slavery when they will be commended by the culture but prone to sit back and stay silent on social issues like abortion and sexuality when they will be criticized by the culture. I see it in churches who have practically given up the battle with materialism and others who have fundamentally contributed to the problem of racism. Ultimately, I see temptation in my own life to retreat from following Christ in the culture around me. I see a tendency in me, my family, and my church to prioritize my comforts over Christ's commands and to elevate my thoughts over his truth, and I know that retreat on any of the above levels isn't right.

But if we don't retreat, only one option remains: risk. Neutrality is not a possibility. Either we retreat from Christ or from the culture, or we risk following Christ by countering the culture. And *risk* is the right word. As followers of Christ, we are fooling ourselves if we don't face the reality that belief in and obedience to the Bible in an anti-Christian age will inevitably lead to

risk in one's family, future, relationships, reputation, career, and comfort in this world.

That risk is what this book is all about. This book is about encouraging and equipping followers of Christ to counter the culture around us, even when that inevitably and inescapably means cost in the culture around us. The first chapter of this book is about helping you and me begin by loving the gospel in the church even when it's hated in the culture. Then subsequent chapters are about helping us think through how to live out that gospel in our lives, families, and churches in an age of sexual confusion, legal abortion, rampant materialism, violent racism, escalating refugee crises, diminishing religious liberties, and a number of other significant social issues. This book is about refusing to retreat from these realities, instead choosing to face them with a fearless faith that is full of hope in Christ and free to love even those who would belittle Christian belief.

To be sure, I don't claim to be the expert on how to live Christlike in an anti-Christian age. Nor do I claim to know all the ways my culture (or other cultures, for that matter) will continue to change in the days, months, and years ahead. Yet I do know timeless truth that is guaranteed to stand the test of cultural trends. And I am on a journey to discover how to humbly, lovingly, faithfully, and fearlessly put that truth into practice in a way that exalts Christ in the age and place in which God has put me. I invite you to join the journey with me in the pages ahead.



# THE GREATEST OFFENSE: THE GOSPEL AND CULTURE

The gospel is the lifeblood of Christianity, and it provides the foundation for countering culture. For when we truly believe the gospel, we begin to realize that the gospel not only *compels* Christians to confront social issues in the culture around us. The gospel actually *creates* confrontation with the culture around—and within—us.

It is increasingly common for biblical views on social issues to be labeled insulting. We know that it's offensive to an ever-expanding number of people to say that a woman who has feelings for another woman should not express love for her in marriage. It doesn't take long for a Christian to be backed into a corner on this issue, not wanting to be offensive yet wondering how to respond.

But this is where we must recognize that a biblical view of homosexuality is not the greatest offense in Christianity. In fact,

it's nowhere close to the greatest offense in Christianity. The gospel itself is a much, much greater offense. We need to start, then, with exploring what the gospel is, and we need to ask ourselves, Do we actually believe it? Our answer to this question fundamentally determines how we live in our culture.

## IN THE BEGINNING, GOD

The gospel's offense begins with the very first words of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> "In the beginning, God . . ." (Genesis 1:1). The initial affront of the gospel is that there is a God by, through, and for whom all things begin. "The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 40:28). Because all things begin with God and ultimately exist for God, nothing in all creation is irrelevant to him.

What is this Creator like? "I am the LORD, your Holy One," God says in Isaiah 43:15. In other words, he is wholly unique—unlike us and incomparable to us. He is of another kind. God is absolutely pure, and there is nothing wrong in him. Nothing. Everything God is and everything God does is right. He is without error and without equal.

This holy God is also good. "The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made" (Psalm 145:9). God's goodness is evident from the start of Scripture, where everything he creates is called "good," culminating in man and woman, who are called "very good" (see Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). The universal grandeur of creation testifies to the undeniable goodness of the Creator.

God's goodness is expressed in his justice. "The LORD judges the peoples" (Psalm 7:8), and he judges them perfectly. God justifies the innocent and condemns the guilty. Consequently, "he who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are

both alike an abomination to the LORD” (Proverbs 17:15). As a good Judge, God is outraged by injustice. He detests those who say to the wicked, “You are good,” and those who say to the good, “You are wicked.” God is a perfect Judge.

God’s goodness is also expressed in his grace. He shows free and unmerited favor to those who could never deserve it. He is compassionate and patient, desiring all people everywhere to know and enjoy his kindness, mercy, and love (see 2 Peter 3:9).

Consider, then, the confrontation created by the reality of God in each of our lives. Because God is our Creator, we belong to him. The one who created us owns us. We are not, as the poem “Invictus” describes, the masters of our own fate or the captains of our own souls. The Author of all creation possesses authority over all creation, including you and me. And we are accountable to him as our Judge. One of the core truths of the gospel is that God will judge every person, and he will be just. This puts us in a position where we desperately need his grace.

Now we see the offense of the gospel coming to the forefront. Tell any modern person that there is a God who sustains, owns, defines, rules, and one day will judge him or her, and that person will balk in offense. Any person would—and every person has. This is our natural reaction to God.

## **OUR NATURAL REACTION TO GOD**

Look at the opening pages of human history, and you will see the ultimate problem of the human heart. When God creates man, God puts him in the Garden of Eden and says, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17, NIV). Here we see God’s holiness, goodness, justice, and grace on display. God has authority

to define what is right and wrong, good and evil, based upon his pure and holy character. God makes clear to man that he will be judged based upon his obedience to the command God has given. God's grace is evident, for he does not hide his law. In love, God tells man the way to life and exhorts him to walk in it.

So how does the created respond to the Creator? Within a matter of only a few verses, temptation to sin sits on the table. The serpent asks the first woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'? . . . You will not surely die. . . . For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:1, 4-5, NIV).

Do you see the role reversal here? It all begins when the command of God is reduced to questions about God. Is God really holy? Does he really know what is right? Is God really good? Does he really want what is best for me? Amid such questions, man and woman subtly assert themselves not as the ones to be judged by God but as the ones who sit in judgment of him.

The serpent's question revolves around the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We may read the tree's name and think, *What's so wrong with knowing the difference between good and evil?* But the meaning of Scripture here goes beyond *information* about good and evil to the *determination* of good and evil. In other words, for the man and woman to eat from this tree was to reject God as the one who determines good and evil and to assume this responsibility themselves. The temptation in the Garden was to rebel against God's authority and in the process make humans the arbiters of morality.

When we understand this first sin, we realize that the moral relativism of the twenty-first century is nothing new. When we attempt to usurp (or even eliminate) God, we lose objectivity for determining what is good and evil, right and wrong, moral and

immoral. Noted agnostic philosopher of science Michael Ruse echoes this when he says, “The position of the modern evolutionist, therefore, is that . . . morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth. . . . Considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, it is illusory.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, noted atheist Richard Dawkins writes:

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, and no other good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.<sup>3</sup>

Godless worldviews thus leave us with a hopeless subjectivity concerning good and evil that is wholly dependent on social constructs. Whatever a culture deems right is right, and whatever a culture deems wrong is wrong. This is precisely the worldview that prevails in American culture today, where rapid shifts in the moral landscape clearly communicate that we no longer believe certain things are inherently right or wrong. Instead, rightness and wrongness is determined by social developments around us.

But aren't the implications of this approach to morality frightening? Consider sex trafficking around the world. Are we willing to conclude that as long as a society approves of this industry, it is no longer immoral? Are we willing to tell young girls sold into sex slavery that they and the men who take advantage of them are merely dancing to their DNA, that what is happening to them is not inherently evil, and that they are just products of a blind,

pitiless indifference that's left them unlucky in the world? Surely this is not what you would say to one of these girls. But this is the fruit of the worldview that many people increasingly profess.

“Doing no harm to others, be true to yourself,” a friend and self-identified pagan suggested to me as a philosophy of life one day in the French Quarter of New Orleans. This supposedly simple philosophy was sufficient, so my friend thought, to make value judgments and moral decisions in all of life. The glaring problem behind his worldview, though, is who defines *harm* and to what extent we should be true to ourselves. Wouldn't a pimp in northern Nepal claim that he's creating a better life for a young girl whose chance of living was slim to begin with? Might he also claim that she has a job that he believes she enjoys? And what's to keep the pimp from arguing that he and this girl are helping scores of men be true to the sexual cravings they have within themselves?

Such a godless perspective on morality proves utterly hollow when faced with the harsh realities of evil in this world. Thankfully, the gospel is completely countercultural in this respect. For God's Word tells us that God has beautifully and wonderfully made each precious girl in his personal image, and he loves her. He has uniquely and biologically formed her not for forced sexual violation from countless random men but for joyful sexual union with a husband who cherishes, serves, and loves her. This is the good design of a gracious God, yet it has been grossly debauched by sinful humanity. Sin is real rebellion against the good Creator of all things and the final Judge of all people. Sex trafficking is unjust because God is just, and he will call sinners to account before him.

Such an understanding of sin helps inform why Christians and churches must work to end sex trafficking. Yet a quick perusal through the previous paragraph reveals why these same Christians and churches must also work to oppose abortion and

defend marriage. Isn't the God who personally creates every precious girl in his image also the God who personally forms every precious baby in the womb? Isn't the design of God that makes sexual violation wrong in prostitution also the design of God that makes sexual union right in marriage? And isn't sin in all its forms—whether selling a young girl into slavery, ripping a baby's body from the womb, or disregarding God's prescribed pattern for marriage—real rebellion against the good Creator and final Judge of all people?

## THE SIN OF SELF

Here again we're confronted with the countercultural offense of the gospel. For even as the gospel grounds the definition of good and evil in the character of God, it also claims that evil is not limited to certain types of sin and select groups of sinners. Evil is unfortunately inherent in all of us and therefore unavoidably a part of any culture we create.<sup>4</sup>

Though we have all been created by God, we have also been corrupted by sin. As much as we would like to deny this, our nature constantly demonstrates it. We possess both dignity and depravity; we are prone to both good and evil. This is the irony of the human condition. John Stott expresses this well in his summary of basic Christianity:

We are able to think, choose, create, love and worship; but we are also able to hate, covet, fight and kill. Human beings are the inventors of hospitals for the care of the sick, of universities for the acquisition of wisdom, and of churches for the worship of God. But they have also invented torture chambers, concentration camps, and nuclear arsenals.

This is the paradox of our humanness. We are both noble and ignoble, both rational and irrational, both moral and immoral, both creative and destructive, both loving and selfish, both Godlike and bestial.<sup>5</sup>

Why is this so? The gospel answers that although God created us in his image, we have rebelled against him in our independence. Though it looks different in each of our lives, we all are just like the man and woman in the Garden. We think, *Even if God says not to do something, I'm going to do it anyway*. In essence we're saying, "God's not Lord over me, and God doesn't know what's best for me. I define what's right and wrong, good and evil." The foundation of our morality thus shifts from the objective truth God has given us in his Word to the subjective notions we create in our minds. Even when we don't realize the implications of our ideas, we inescapably come to one conclusion: whatever *seems* right to me or *feels* right to me *is* right for me.

In the end, for each of us, it's ultimately about *me*.

This is why the Bible diagnoses the human condition simply by saying that we "all have turned aside" to ourselves (Romans 3:12). The essence of what the Bible calls sin is the exaltation of self. God has designed us to put him first in our lives, others next, and ourselves last. Yet sin reverses that order: we put ourselves first, others next (many times in an attempt to use them for ourselves), and God somewhere (if anywhere) in the distant background. We turn from worshiping God to worshiping self.

Now, we probably wouldn't put it that way. Most people don't publicly profess, "I worship myself." But, as John Stott points out, it doesn't take long as we look at our lives and listen to our language for the truth to become evident. Our dictionary contains hundreds of words that start with self: self-esteem, self-confidence, self-advertisement, self-gratification, self-glorification, self-motivation,

self-pity, self-applause, self-centeredness, self-indulgence, self-righteousness—on and on. We have created a host of terms to express the extent of our preoccupation with ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

The tragedy in all this is that in our constant quest to satisfy ourselves, we actually become slaves to sin. This is why Jesus teaches, “I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). We know this to be true. This is easy to see in the alcoholic, for example. He becomes drunk, believing it is the path to personal satisfaction, only to find himself enslaved to an addiction that leads to his ruin.

But sin works similarly in each of our lives—in small ways and in big ways. We tell ourselves, no matter what God says, that a lustful thought, a harsh word, or a selfish action will satisfy us. We persuade ourselves, no matter what God says, that the money we have (regardless of what it takes to get it) and the sex we experience (with whomever we want to enjoy it) will gratify us. We convince ourselves, no matter what God says, that we will be pleased with this person or that possession, this pleasure or that pursuit. We chase all these things, thinking that we’re free. But we’re blind to our own bondage. For in all our running to serve ourselves, we’re actually rebelling against the only One who can satisfy our souls.

In the end, we are all guilty of rebellion against God. Not just the pimp in northern Nepal, but you and me. All of us have turned from God, all of us are guilty before God, and all of us know it. We feel this guilt, and although we inevitably deny it, we instinctively experience it.

Some deny guilt altogether, saying there is no such thing as right or wrong, that all ethics are illusory and arbitrary and only personal preferences remain. However, people who believe this often turn around and argue that it’s right for you to agree with them and wrong for you to disagree with them. Ironic, isn’t it?

Others try to remove guilt by shifting the standards of right and wrong in the name of cultural progression. One of the easiest ways to assuage guilt is to convince ourselves that our moral standards are impractical or outdated. Greed is not wrong; it's necessary in the good of ambition. Promoting ourselves is the only way to be successful. Lust is natural for contemporary men and women, and sex is expected regardless of marriage or gender. We attempt to remove our guilt by redefining right and wrong according to cultural fads.

Yet guilt remains. No matter how hard we try, we can't successfully erase the sense of "ought" that God has written on the human soul. One need only look in the eyes of a little girl being sold into sex slavery to know that this "ought" not to be, for right and wrong do exist as objective standards for all people in all places at all times. We cannot remove the reality of guilt before God, and this is why we need Jesus. Yet this is where the gospel counters culture in an even more offensive way.

## IS JESUS UNIQUE?

Almost all people in the world who know anything about Jesus, including the most secular of scholars, would say that Jesus was a good man. People find Jesus easy to identify with—a man familiar with sorrow, struggle, and suffering. Moreover, people *like* Jesus. He was loving and kind. He championed the cause of the poor and needy. He made friends with the neglected, the weak, and the downtrodden. He hung out with the despised and rejected. He loved his enemies, and he taught others to do the same.<sup>7</sup>

Yet alongside Jesus' remarkably humble character, we also see wildly egocentric claims. You don't have to read very far through the stories of Jesus' life before you start to conclude that he sure

does talk a lot about himself. “I am this, I am that,” he says over and over again. “Follow me, come to me,” he calls to everyone around him. Stott describes this best:

One of the most extraordinary things Jesus did in his teaching (and did it so unobtrusively that many people read the Gospels without even noticing it) was to set himself apart from everybody else. For example, by claiming to be the good shepherd who went out into the desert to seek his lost sheep, he was implying that the world was lost, that he wasn't, and that he could seek and save it.

In other words, he put himself in a moral category in which he was alone. Everybody else was in darkness; he was the light of the world. Everybody else was hungry; he was the bread of life. Everybody else was thirsty; he could quench their thirst. Everybody else was sinful; he could forgive their sins. Indeed, on two separate occasions he did so, and both times observers were scandalized. They asked, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:5-7; Luke 7:48-49).

If Jesus claimed authority to forgive the penitent, he also claimed authority to judge the impenitent. Several of his parables implied that he expected to return at the end of history. On that day, he said, he would sit on his glorious throne. All nations would stand before him, and he would separate them from one another as a shepherd separates his sheep from his goats. In other words, he would settle their eternal destiny. Thus he made himself the central figure on the day of judgment.<sup>8</sup>

Even if no one else did, Jesus certainly believed he was unique. He makes maybe his most extravagant claim in John 14:6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

What a statement. As if the gospel were not already offensive enough with the announcement of who God is and who we are, now we hear that Jesus is the only person who is able to reconcile us to God. No other leader is supreme, and no other path is sufficient. If you want to know God, you must come through Jesus.

How can this be? How can a man in his right mind two thousand years ago make this claim? And how can people in their right minds two thousand years later believe it?

It makes sense only if everything we’ve already seen in the Bible is true.

We have seen that God is completely holy and infinitely good, perfectly just and lovingly gracious. We have also seen that we are each created by God, but we are all corrupted by sin. We have all turned away from God and stand guilty before him. These twin realities set up the ultimate question: How can a holy God reconcile rebellious sinners to himself when they deserve his judgment?

Remember Proverbs 17:15: “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD.” In other words, God detests those who call the guilty “innocent” and the innocent “guilty.” God detests them because he is a good Judge; he calls the guilty and the innocent what they are.

So when God comes to us as a good Judge, what will he say to us? “Guilty.” If he were to say, “Innocent,” he would be an abomination to himself. Now we begin to sense the underlying tension of the Bible. Every man and woman is guilty before God. How, then, can God express his perfect justice without condemning every sinner in the world?

Many people answer, “Well, God is loving. He can simply forgive our sins.” But as soon as we say this, we must realize that God’s forgiveness of sinners is a potential threat to his perfect character. If God simply overlooks sin, then he would be neither holy nor just. If there were a courtroom judge today who knowingly acquitted guilty criminals, we would have that judge off the bench in a heartbeat. Why? Because he is not just. Once we grasp the holy justice of God and the sinful nature of humanity, in the words of Stott, “no longer do we ask *why* God finds it difficult to forgive sins but *how* he finds it possible.”<sup>9</sup>

This tension leads us to ask, “How then can God love us when his justice requires condemning us?” This is the fundamental problem in the universe. Now to be sure, it’s not the problem most people identify. Most people in our culture are not losing sleep over how it’s possible for God to be just and loving toward sinners at the same time. Instead, most people are accusing God, asking, “How can you punish sinners? How can you let good people go to hell?” But the question the Bible asks is exactly the opposite: “God, how can you be just and still let guilty sinners into heaven?”

And the only answer to that question is Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ life is truly unique. He is God in the flesh—fully human and fully God. As perfect man, he alone is able to stand in the place of guilty men and women. As perfect God, he alone is able to satisfy divine justice.

That makes Jesus’ death unique, which is why his crucifixion is the climax of the gospel. It’s strange when you think about it. For all other religious leaders, death was the tragic end of the story. The focus in other religions is always on their leaders’ lives. With Jesus, though, it is completely the opposite. He was constantly anticipating his death, and the accounts of his life put a disproportionate emphasis on it. Ever since his death two

thousand years ago, the central symbol of Christianity has been the cross, and the church's central celebration revolves around bread and wine, commemorating the body and blood of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Why is the death of Christ on the cross so significant?

Because the cross is where Jesus, God in the flesh, took the just punishment due sinners upon himself. At the cross of Christ, God fully expressed his holy judgment upon sin. At the same time, God in Christ fully endured his holy judgment against sin. In the process, God through Christ made salvation possible for all sinners—the penalty for sin was paid. We know this to be true because God raised Jesus from the dead. This is the greatest news in all the world, and it's why we call it the gospel (which means “good news”). The holy, just, and gracious Creator of the universe has made a way in Christ for anyone anywhere to be reconciled to him.

But again, we cannot escape the offense of this gospel. “Are you really saying there's *only one way* to God?” people immediately ask. Yet even as we ask the question, we reveal the problem. If there were 1,000 ways to God, we would want 1,001. The issue is not how many ways lead to God; the issue is our autonomy before God. We want to make our *own* way. This is the essence of sin in the first place—trusting our ways more than God's way. But we will not be rescued from our sin by turning to ourselves and trusting our ways even more. Instead, we will only be rescued by turning from ourselves and trusting God's way evermore.

## THE ETERNAL OFFENSE

All that we've seen so far in the gospel is not particularly popular. Just the idea that God became a man is outlandish to multitudes around the world. Over a billion Muslims believe that God would

never debase himself by becoming a man. Hundreds of millions of others think it repugnant that a man could be divine.

But the gospel's offense goes further. The gospel asserts that not only has God become a man but that this God-man has been crucified. This is foolishness to contemporary men and women. Imagine taking a successful, well-dressed American man with a nice job, big house, and cool car and a free-thinking American woman who thrives on her independence and leading them to a garbage dump, where a naked man hangs by nails on a tree, covered in blood, and telling them, "This is your God." They will laugh at you, may possibly feel sorry for the man, and almost certainly will move on with their lives.

Yet the offense of the gospel reaches its peak when you tell them that their eternal destiny is dependent on whether they believe the man hanging there is their God—the Lord, Judge, Savior, and King of all creation. As soon as you say, "If you follow him, you will experience eternal life; if not, you will experience everlasting hell," you will find yourself across a line of utmost contention in contemporary culture (and in the contemporary church).

The gospel claims that eternity is at stake in how you and I respond to Jesus.

According to the Bible, heaven is a glorious reality for those who trust in Jesus. It is a place of full reconciliation and complete restoration where sin, suffering, pain, and sorrow will finally cease, and men and women who have trusted in Christ will live in perfect harmony with God and each other forever and ever.

The Bible also teaches that hell is a dreadful reality for those who turn from Jesus. It's a reality about which Jesus spoke much. Tim Keller observes, "If Jesus, the Lord of Love and Author of Grace spoke about hell more often, and in a more vivid, blood-curdling manner than anyone else, it must be a crucial truth."<sup>11</sup>

This “crucial truth” flows directly from all we’ve discovered to this point.

Every man and woman has turned from God to self, and if nothing changes before they die, hell will be the God-given punishment for this sinful, self-exalting choice. Those who rebel against God on earth will receive the just penalty for the path they have chosen. Now of course no one, no matter how evil, would choose hell knowing the horror it entails. Scripture describes hell as a place where people will weep and gnash their teeth in a smoke of torment that rises without rest for all who reside there (see Matthew 8:12; Revelation 14:11). No one knowingly wills to experience this. Yet by ultimately willing against God on earth, sinners’ de facto destination is damnation in eternity.

When you put all these truths in the gospel together, you realize that the most offensive and countercultural claim in Christianity is not what Christians believe about homosexuality or abortion, marriage or religious liberty. Instead, the most offensive claim in Christianity is that God is the Creator, Owner, and Judge of every person on the planet. Every one of us stands before him guilty of sin, and the only way to be reconciled to him is through faith in Jesus, the crucified Savior and risen King. All who trust in his love will experience everlasting life while all who turn from his lordship will suffer everlasting death.

## **DO YOU BELIEVE THE GOSPEL?**

So we return to the fundamental question from the beginning of this chapter: Do you believe the gospel?

I envision three categories of readers for this book. The first category includes readers who don’t believe the gospel. You don’t currently profess to be a Christian, yet for any number of reasons you’re reading this book. I’m very thankful you are, and I hope

you will get a helpful perspective on the most pressing social issues of our culture and world. As you'll read in the chapter on religious liberty, I deeply respect differing religions, and I believe there are healthy ways not only to coexist but also to cooperate in genuine friendship and valuable partnership in society and culture. At the same time, I'd be less than honest if I didn't say I'm praying that in the process of reading this book, you might come to know God's mysterious, unfathomable, unexplainable, and personal love for you in Jesus. I'm hoping that, maybe even unbeknownst to you, one of the reasons you're reading this book is that God is sovereignly drawing you to faith in him.

The second category of reader is similar to the first in that you don't believe the gospel. The difference, however, is that you currently profess to be a Christian. As I referenced in the introduction, maybe you label yourself a "progressive Christian" or an "open-minded Christian" or a "churchgoing Christian" or any number of other modifiers you might put before your status as a Christian. With all due respect—and I'm not sure how to write this without being blunt—my hope is that you will stop calling yourself a Christian until you believe the gospel.

Some "Christians" don't believe God is the Creator of the universe or the Author of the Bible, other "Christians" don't believe sin is a serious problem before God, many "Christians" believe Jesus is only one of many ways to God, and a host of "Christians" totally reject what Jesus says about hell (while conveniently keeping what Jesus says about heaven). I put "Christians" in quotation marks simply because such "Christians" are not Christians. It is impossible to be a follower of Christ while denying, disregarding, discrediting, and disbelieving the words of Christ.

So if this is you, my aim is similar to what I shared with the first category of reader. I sincerely hope that you will come to know God's mysterious, unfathomable, unexplainable, and

personal love for you in Jesus; that you will believe the gospel despite all of its offense; and that you will follow Jesus for who he is, not for who we might prefer him to be. Until this happens, my hope is that you will not blaspheme his name by claiming to be in Christ (Christian) when you do not believe Christ.

The final category of reader includes those who *do* believe the gospel. I assume this comprises many of those reading this book, and this is certainly the main audience for whom I am writing. In the pages that follow, my goal is to bring the gospel to bear on many social issues in our culture, ranging from poverty, slavery, abortion, and sexual immorality to the degradation of marriage and the denial of civil rights. In the process, I want to demonstrate how a full-orbed understanding of the gospel doesn't allow us to sit on the sidelines of our culture.

Moreover, the gospel doesn't allow us as Christians to be selective regarding different social issues. When I look at the church today, I see much emphasis on social justice, but our social stances seem strangely subjective. On popular issues like poverty and slavery, where Christians are likely to be applauded for our social action, we are quick to stand up and speak out. Yet on controversial issues like sexuality and abortion, where Christians are likely to be criticized for our involvement, we are content to sit down and stay quiet. It's as if we've decided to pick and choose which social issues we'll counter and which we'll concede, and our choice normally revolves around what is most comfortable—and least costly—for us in our culture.

But the gospel doesn't give us this option. The same heart of God that moves us to counter sex trafficking moves us to counter sexual immorality, and the same gospel that compels us to combat poverty compels us to defend marriage. We need to see how the gospel moves Christians to consistently counter

not some but all of these issues in our culture with conviction, compassion, and courage.

## **A CALL TO CONVICTION, COMPASSION, AND COURAGE**

As you and I consider these issues, I want to call us to conviction. As we've already established, we live in a unique time in Western culture as the moral landscape around us is rapidly changing. As a result, we have many opportunities to stand upon and speak about divine truth, and we can't let this moment pass. Elizabeth Rundle Charles, commenting on Martin Luther's confrontation of key issues in his day, says:

It is the truth which is assailed in any age which tests our fidelity. . . . If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christianity. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proven, and to be steady on all the battle fronts besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, battles are raging over a number of social issues in our culture today. Just decades ago, Francis Schaeffer wrote:

We as Bible-believing evangelical Christians are locked in a battle. This is not a friendly gentleman's discussion. It is a life and death conflict between the spiritual hosts of wickedness and those who claim the name of Christ. . . . But do we really believe that we are in a life and

death battle? Do we really believe that the part we play in the battle has consequences for whether or not men and women will spend eternity in hell? Or whether or not those who do live will live in a climate of moral perversion and degradation? Sadly, we must say that very few in the evangelical world have acted as if these things are true. . . . Where is the clear voice speaking to the crucial issues of the day with distinctively biblical, Christian answers? With tears we must say it is not there and that a large segment of the evangelical world has become seduced by the world spirit of this present age. And more than this, we can expect the future to be a further disaster if the evangelical world does not take a stand for biblical truth and morality in the full spectrum of life.<sup>13</sup>

May this not be said of you and me today. May we not sin through silence. May we realize that not to speak is to speak. Ultimately, may it be said of us that we not only held firm *to* the gospel, but that we spoke clearly *with* the gospel to the most pressing issues of our day.

In addition to calling us to conviction, I want to call us to compassion. Matthew 9 tells us that “when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). One of my hopes in this book is that God would give us grace to see what he sees. To see the poor, the hungry, and the neglected as he sees them. To perceive those crushed by political, economic, or ethnic oppression from his perspective. To care for the baby in the womb as well as the baby’s mother as God cares for them. To love the orphan and the widow, the immigrant and the immoral,

the heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and transsexual person as God loves them.

Based upon his love, I want to call us to action. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” Jesus commands (Matthew 22:39). John writes, “Let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). The last thing I want to do is to divorce biblical, theological, and ethical principles from individual, family, and church practice. The goal of this book is not information about the gospel and social issues; it is application of the gospel to social issues. We need to explore all of these issues not with a self-righteous complacency that is content to wring our hands in pious concern, but with a self-sacrificing commitment to do whatever God tells us to do.

Inevitably, God will lead us to act in different ways. Not every one of us will respond in the same way to all of these issues. No one person can fight sex trafficking while fostering and adopting children in the middle of starting a ministry to widows and counseling unwed mothers while traveling around the world to support the persecuted church—and so on. Nor *should* any one of us do all of these things, for God sovereignly puts us in unique positions and places with unique privileges and opportunities to influence the culture around us. But what is necessary for *all* of us is to view each of these cultural issues through the lens of biblical truth and to speak such truth with conviction whenever we have the chance to do so. Then, based on consistent conviction, we seek how individually as Christians and collectively in our churches the Spirit of Christ is leading us to compassionate action in our culture.

In order to help us in this, each chapter in this book concludes by offering some initial suggestions for practical requests you and I can pray in light of these issues, potential ways you or I might engage culture with the gospel, and biblical truths we must

proclaim regarding every one of these issues. These suggestions will also direct you to a website (CounterCultureBook.com) where you can explore more specific steps you might take. There you will also find information about the *Counter Culture Scripture and Prayer Guide* that will help you dive deeper into countercultural living as an individual, family, or church. In all of this, I want to exhort you to humbly, boldly, seriously, and prayerfully consider how God is directing you to pray, speak, and live in light of each of these issues. Let's not merely contemplate the Word of God in the world around us; let's do what it says (see James 1:22-25).

Acting with conviction and compassion will require courage, to be sure. As we have seen, the cost of biblical conviction in contemporary culture is growing steeper every day, and we are not far removed from sharing more soberly in the sufferings of Christ. Doubtless this is why more and more "Christians" today are stepping away from the gospel. Fear is a powerful force, leading more and more "churches" today to accommodation and adaptation instead of confrontation with the surrounding culture. Consequently, I believe Schaeffer's words are appropriate:

We need a young generation and others who will be willing to stand in loving confrontation, but real confrontation, in contrast to the mentality of constant accommodation with the current forms of the world spirit as they surround us today, and in contrast to the way in which so much of *evangelicalism* has developed the automatic mentality to accommodate at each successive point.<sup>14</sup>

My hope is that we would heed this challenge. For it is not ultimately a challenge from Schaeffer; it is a challenge from Christ:

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. . . . Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. . . . Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. MATTHEW 10:28, 32-33, 39

The gospel of Christ is not a call to cultural compromise in the face of fear. It is a call to countercultural crucifixion—death to self in the face of earthly opposition for the sake of eternal reward.

My hope is that we would believe the gospel of Christ and that our belief would move us to counter our culture. My prayer is that in this journey we are on, God might open our eyes to the needs of people in our culture and around the world, bring us to our knees in tears and prayers on their behalf, and cause us to rise with conviction, compassion, and courage to humbly spread the truth of God while selflessly showing the love of God, all in hopeful anticipation of the day when sin, suffering, immorality, and injustice will finally be no more.

