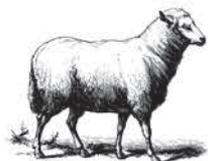


# Christians *at* Our Best



A 6-WEEK GUIDE  
TO LIVING IN  
THE AGE OF OUTRAGE

ED STETZER  
ANDREW MACDONALD

**CHRISTIANS AT OUR BEST**



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## INTRODUCTION

# Bringing Our Best to a World Engulfed in Outrage

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, Andrew, my coauthor on *Christians at Our Best*, served in a young church that suddenly found itself engulfed in outrage. It had quickly grown from a small church plant meeting in the basement of another church to an established fellowship owning its own property after merging with an older church. As the church continued to grow, the parking lot overflowed each weekend, and many people had to park in the streets of the surrounding neighborhood. To meet the growing need for parking and space, the elders began planning for a building addition.

The first dark clouds warning of an impending storm of outrage were a few handwritten notes local residents left on some members' cars after services. Upset at the vehicles parked outside their houses, the community slowly became more vocal in their anger toward the church. Within a few months, the elders began to hear stories of confrontations between church members and neighbors before and after services.

What had been a minor disagreement erupted into a full-scale war once construction on a building addition was set to begin. On the day the construction equipment was scheduled to arrive so workers could break ground, someone from city hall called to tell the church to halt construction. They had been flooded with calls

from the neighbors and were putting a hold on work until they could sort out the problem. Suddenly what had been a small issue affecting a handful of people began to consume every meeting and conversation in the church.

Even more disheartening than the stubborn and mounting hostility from area residents was the reaction of some people in the church. During meetings about the church's future, several people recommended that members respond in kind: to match outrage for outrage. This small but vocal group tried to paint their neighbors as evil—tools Satan was using to stop God's church. Constantly talking about their "rights," they tried to push the church into using every legal and social option to defeat and silence those "opponents of the gospel." As the intensity of the conflict increased, quite a few people simply tried to check out. Their strategy was to ignore the problem, committing to "make do" with their current situation and hoping that the storm would blow over.

Neither attitude proved effective. The conflict dragged on for months as both Christians and non-Christians fed into one another's anger, suspicion, and division. At one point, the level of hostility was so high that an area resident confronted the senior pastor and elders with the threat that the church would expand "over my dead body."

Welcome to the age of outrage.

Perhaps you've had a similar experience within your church or in your local community. Sadly, Andrew's experience is hardly unique. In working to revitalize churches, I frequently sit through meetings in which elders and pastors recount similar stories of outrage. Even in my own writing I am targeted by vitriol and hate for helping Christians make sense of current events. Our world is filled with unprecedented outrage against Christians, by Christians, and most disturbing, by Christians against Christians. In every corner of the Internet, on every cable news program, and even around many family dinner tables, we see people spewing anger and discord. Of course, political and cultural divisions are hardly new. Yet the combination of rapid advances in technology

and the shift of Western society into a post-Christian culture seems to have unleashed a wave of outrage.

Certainly problems like terrorism, sex trafficking, abortion, systemic racism, child poverty, political corruption, and opioid addiction rightly capture our attention. Worse yet are those who profess to know Christ but become the center of scandal and controversy, seemingly unaware of how their actions and words are damaging the witness of the church. These issues deserve a measure of outrage, don't they? They certainly deserve our anger.

In moments like these, it is easy to simply join the chorus of angry voices or shrink back into isolation. To become agents of outrage ourselves or to refuse to engage at all.

For many of us, the constant yelling and finger-pointing gets our blood boiling. Without thinking twice, we jump recklessly into the fray, trading shot for shot with others on social media or in the line at Starbucks.

Most of us, however, retreat from the anger around us. We see people torn apart in the news, online, or in real life for having views and beliefs similar to our own, so we shy away. Or we ourselves have been burned by an outraged culture and vow "never again." Not wanting to be branded as intolerant by some or as heretics by others, we choose simply not to engage.

There is a better way. At this critical time, we need to remember Christ's encouragement and exhortation that he has "overcome the world" (John 16:33). No matter how chaotic and angry our culture becomes, God continues to reign through the redemptive work of Christ, and he is establishing his Kingdom. This insight informed the apostle Paul's simple question in Romans 8:31: "If God is for us, who can ever be against us?"

As Christians, we need to consider what it means to be salt and light in our age. Whether we face outrage *toward* Christians, outrage *by* Christians, or simply outrage *at* the outrage, how can we show and share the love of Jesus in a world whose brokenness and pride so often lead to division, self-interest, and offense? This discussion guide is designed to help you answer such questions. I address

these themes further in *Christians in the Age of Outrage*. You do not have to read that book to complete this study, but it will give you a firmer grasp of the material covered.

Each of this guide's six sessions is organized around a question related to the way we engage our world with the gospel. The study is designed to move us from the "what" questions of our beliefs and purpose to the "how" questions related to the way we should live out our faith. In other words, we move from questions of understanding to questions of application:

**Session 1:** *What do we believe?* Understanding how and why we forge our worldviews

**Session 2:** *What is our purpose?* Embracing our identity as Kingdom ambassadors

**Session 3:** *How do we see others?* Developing a winsome love for people

**Session 4:** *How do we respond to wrongs?* Separating righteous anger from worldly outrage

**Session 5:** *How do we engage the world?* Aligning our online life with gospel mission

**Session 6:** *How do we engage our community?* Recognizing the power of thinking locally

A brief video introduces each of these sessions. (The videos are available for purchase at <https://edstetzer.com/christians-at-our-best>.) After watching it, your group will work through three categories of questions designed to help you engage with our culture. First, you will *reflect* on the video and relevant Scripture passages, discussing their meaning as a group. Second, you will *dig deeper* into the theme of the chapter, developing the central

idea as you draw upon your own experiences. Third, you will *respond* by examining your own spiritual walk, considering ways to apply that session's teaching to your life and to better *engage* the world with the gospel. (If you are leading a group through this study, I encourage you to turn to the Facilitator's Guide on page 81 for more information and ideas.)

The age of outrage doesn't benefit from either our hostility or our retreat. It needs Christians to be at our best—courageously and thoughtfully bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ into the midst of the brokenness and pain. This can be both difficult and frustrating, yet that is the calling we have been given by God.

As Andrew's church discovered when many of its neighbors opposed the building's expansion, outrage can lead us to lose sight of our gospel mission. Its neighbors were the church's primary mission field, the people they had initially been so passionate about bringing into their community. By casting them as enemies or simply ignoring them, many in the church had forgotten what they once believed to be God's call to *this* community. Thankfully, even in the midst of that storm of outrage, the church leaders endured in faithful ministry. In rejecting the anger and apathy that the expansion provoked, the elders patiently won over members of city hall, several of the neighbors, and even workers on the construction crew who had a front-row seat to the conflict. As a result, the church continued to grow until eventually they bought property on the edge of town, where they minister to a new community today.

In the same way, God has called us to endure in the mission of engaging our world, even when it has given itself over to outrage. It is a high calling that deserves our utmost. No matter how much we may want to, we cannot cede the public square to the voices of outrage. We cannot give up, and we cannot give in.



## SESSION 1

# What Do We Believe?

## Understanding How and Why We Forge Our Worldviews

- For a deeper understanding of living with a biblical worldview, read chapter 7 of *Christians in the Age of Outrage*.
- The teaching video for this week's session is available for purchase at <https://edstetzer.com/christians-at-our-best>.

EVERY CHRISTIAN IS CALLED to live in the tension of being in the world yet not of it (John 17:14-16). We are to resist the temptation to believe and live as those who do not know God while also engaging culture rather than isolating ourselves or retreating from it. We are called to be both set apart (1 Peter 2:9) and lights in the darkness (Matthew 5:13-16). The primary way we live out this calling is by ensuring that our worldview is shaped by the gospel even as we speak into a hostile and selfish world.

In this session, we will examine how our habits, our daily routines, and the voices we allow to influence us shape our worldviews for either godliness or worldliness. These same forces also prepare us to either engage with or succumb to the age of outrage.

## RECAP AND RESTATE

Use the space below for notes on the key takeaways from the teaching video.

A worldview is a set of \_\_\_\_\_  
that inform the way we \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_  
the world. It is the \_\_\_\_\_ through which we interpret  
\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

A worldview can be deformed or worldly if it is influenced by . . .

Four categories of gospel-tempered voices that can shape our thinking according to God's truth are

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

The three “ancient paths” or spiritual disciplines that help forge a gospel worldview are

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

## CONSIDER

What is one practice you have adopted over the past few years that has affected your daily routine or outlook on life?

## REFLECT

In his letter to the Romans, Paul encourages believers to present their bodies as living sacrifices to God. One practical way we do this is by ensuring that our worldview, the lens through which we see and interpret the world, is shaped by God rather than the culture around us.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

*ROMANS 12:1-2, ESV*

1. Paul mentions two qualities of our living sacrifice: “holy and acceptable to God.” How can we ensure that our worldview is holy and acceptable?
  
2. Paul calls this act of living sacrifice our “spiritual worship.” In what ways does shaping our worldview constitute worship? How can seeing it as worship motivate us to be obedient and faithful?
  
3. Why is Paul’s contrast between *conformed to* and *transformed by* important in understanding the difference between worldly and gospel-shaped worldviews?

One way we conform to the world rather than being transformed by God’s Spirit is by following worldly leaders. Scripture repeatedly warns against emulating leaders who serve some other agenda or purpose than God’s Kingdom. These voices hold immense power in influencing our worldview, distracting us from the mission God has given to us. This is one of the major themes of the Old Testament prophets, who rebuked Israel for listening to foolish and worldly leaders:



6. This passage tells us the false teachers *claimed* to speak for God. How can Christians discern whether a leader is honestly speaking for God? What role can family, church, and small groups play in helping believers navigate this challenge?
  
7. In Luke 6:26, Jesus points back to these Old Testament rebukes to judge the Pharisees: “What sorrow awaits you who are praised by the crowds, for their ancestors also praised false prophets.” Why does Jesus focus on the popularity of false teachers? Why are we tempted to listen to popular leaders?

Our habits also influence our thinking and perspective. Where we spend our time and energy will either lead us deeper into a knowledge and love for God or conform our minds and behavior to the culture around us. In the video, I single out Scripture reading, prayer, and fasting as three crucial spiritual disciplines needed to combat the encroaching influence of outrage today. These help Christians ensure that their inputs and outputs are oriented toward God rather than this world, while also reminding us that we truly *need* God’s presence and provision. Read through the following verses to discover more about each spiritual discipline. Then answer the two questions that follow:

***Scripture:*** Joshua 1:8; Jeremiah 15:16; Romans 10:17

***Prayer:*** Ephesians 3:14-17; Philippians 4:6-7; 1 John 5:14-15

***Fasting:*** Joel 2:12-14; Matthew 6:16-18

8. What do these passages teach us about the disciplines and how God uses them in our lives?

## DIG DEEPER

The apostle Paul exhorts believers “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life . . . and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self” (Ephesians 4:22-24, ESV). In other words, more than simply removing the voices of outrage from our lives, we who are believers need to replace them with leaders who are mature in their faith and devoted to building God’s Kingdom. I call these “gospel-tempered” voices, leaders in our lives who have chosen to refine their thinking and behavior by the gospel, just as fire tempers metal. In the video, I suggest that Christians need to find four kinds of leaders to follow: *cultural*, *pastoral*, *theological*, and *local*. Such leaders help us understand the world, respond to the challenges of life, deepen our faith, and pursue life-on-life discipleship with others.

1. Who are these gospel-tempered voices in your life? Share examples of the ways God has used these leaders (whether through their writing or speaking, or in real-life interactions) to help shape your worldview.
  - a. *Cultural*: How have they challenged you to see and engage the world in ways that are in line with the gospel?

b. *Pastoral*: How have they encouraged you to respond to specific trials and challenges in your spiritual walk?

c. *Theological*: How have they deepened your knowledge of God and his Word?

d. *Local*: How have they walked through seasons of life with you and your family? What lessons have you learned from their discipleship?

2. If listening to false teachers is easy and appealing, how can listening to gospel-tempered voices be difficult? What are some ways we can persist in listening to convicting teaching?

In *Christians in the Age of Outrage*, I explore how our daily habits and routines have been profoundly reshaped by technological advances. Most startling, we often don't notice how much of our lives we give to these new habits.

The entertainment industry is always studying ways to hold our attention for the longest stretch of time. Whether companies are trying to entice us to go from one show to the next, one article to the next, or one blog post to the next, they will not let our attention go without a fight. The root of the issue is this: *They are fighting for our discipleship, for our love. . . .*

In a new reality where there is more content than we can possibly consume, we need to develop the necessary discipline to recognize the danger in drinking from a bottomless mug. There is *always* another podcast, *always* another Instagram post, *always* another television series.

*Pages 142–143*

In his well-known 1978 book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster noted, “Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem.”<sup>1</sup> If anything, the “doctrine of instant satisfaction” has become more of an idol than it was when Foster penned those words. Christians need to consider how our media habits are discipling us and shaping our thinking and engagement with the world in ways we may not even notice.

3. Why is it important to think critically about our habits? How can being ambivalent or uncritical hurt our worldview in the long run?

4. What does it mean that everyone is “fighting for our discipleship, for our love”? How can we form habits and behaviors that protect us from adopting unhealthy thoughts and actions?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What are some ways that Christians can use technology and media (shows, podcasts, social media) to help shape a gospel worldview? What practices and resources do you use that contribute to this worldview?

## RESPOND AND ENGAGE

One of the most frustrating realities of ministry is how Christians treat spiritual disciplines. When pastors talk about the value of prayer, Bible study, and fasting, the majority of believers agree. Yet when we look at how frequently these are practiced by people *within the church*, we see that only a fraction of believers engage in them. A recent study found that just 45 percent of people who attend church regularly read the Bible more than once a week. More than 40 percent of church attenders read their Bibles occasionally, about once or twice a month. Almost one in five churchgoers say they *never* read the Bible, which is about the same number as those who read it every day.<sup>2</sup>



3. Take a moment to think through the habits, disciplines, and influences in your life right now. Then answer the questions below.

a. What worldly or unthinking habits have you developed? What spiritual disciplines have you developed? How do you think these have shaped or continue to shape your worldview?

b. Who are some of the *voices of outrage* that you've followed? How have the gospel-tempered voices you identified on pages 7–8 helped counteract these voices of outrage?

## PRAYER PROMPT

*Before ending, spend time praying about your worldview as well as the habits and influences that have shaped the way you see and engage the world. Ask God to bring conviction about areas that need to change and for his Spirit to bless your efforts to incorporate new spiritual disciplines and gospel-tempered voices into your life.*