

“In an age of ambiguity and apathy for the church, *Total Church* accurately and insightfully identifies the local church as a gospel community on mission with Jesus.”

—MARK DRISCOLL, Founding Pastor,
Mars Hill Church, Seattle

“Challenging, passionate and insightful. Here is a vision of a whole-life, whole-mission ‘Total Church’ that embraces both gospel and community—I suspect rather like it was all meant to be!”

—CHRIS STODDART, Director,
Reaching the Unchurched Network

“Here is radical, punchy teaching that provokes, stimulates, challenges and inspires. Its call for a dual fidelity to the gospel word and the gospel community is urgently needed for the health of our churches and the integrity of our mission.”

—VAUGHAN ROBERTS, Rector, St Ebbe’s Church, Oxford

“I have to confess to reading *Total Church* in one sitting! I found it very relevant to our situation in particular, and to the wider scene in general. *Total Church* digs deep and provides a solid biblical foundation for what it advocates. The argument of the book is very compelling and at the same time very practical. It has confirmed for me the need to multiply churches and has further convinced me of the need to downsize church and to think local. I am looking forward to seeing this book in print so that we can use it with our leaders as a training tool.”

—DAVID JONES, Senior Minister,
Cornerstone Church, Hobart, Tasmania

“Reformed theology and new ways of being church are often regarded as incompatible notions. In this book, Tim Chester and Steve Timmis aim to bring the two together in a way that they believe will help church leaders identify ways of relating a conservative theology to the culture, without compromising dearly held principles.”

—JOHN DRANE, freelance consultant to churches in the UK
and Professor of Practical Theology at Fuller Seminary,
California

“There is an old joke about a visitor to Ireland who, on stopping to ask a local the way to Dublin, was told, ‘If I was going to Dublin, I wouldn’t start here!’ I often feel like this hapless visitor when I read books offering panaceas for the problems of the local church. But here is a book which starts where you are—and wherever you are—whether it be in a handful of people meeting in a home, or (as in my case) a congregation of a thousand people meeting in a traditional building, and offers directions for (in the words of the subtitle), ‘A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community.’ Written not by armchair experts but by (‘dirty!’) hands-on practitioners Tim Chester and Stephen Timmis, *Total Church* explores what it means in practice to be both gospel-centered and community-centered. Not everyone will agree with everything that is written, but every thoughtful reader and church leader will be stimulated to rethink and maybe reshape their ‘default’ practices and convictions. In my own setting, it reinforced a growing conviction that the only way in which you can be a meaningful part of a large church is to transition from being a church with small groups to a church of small groups, for (to quote from the book), ‘People need to encounter the church as a network of relationships rather than a meeting you attend or a place you enter.’ This would be an excellent book to give to your leaders, and to the wider church membership, to provoke discussion and prompt change. It will certainly set you in the right direction ‘to Dublin’—from wherever you are!”

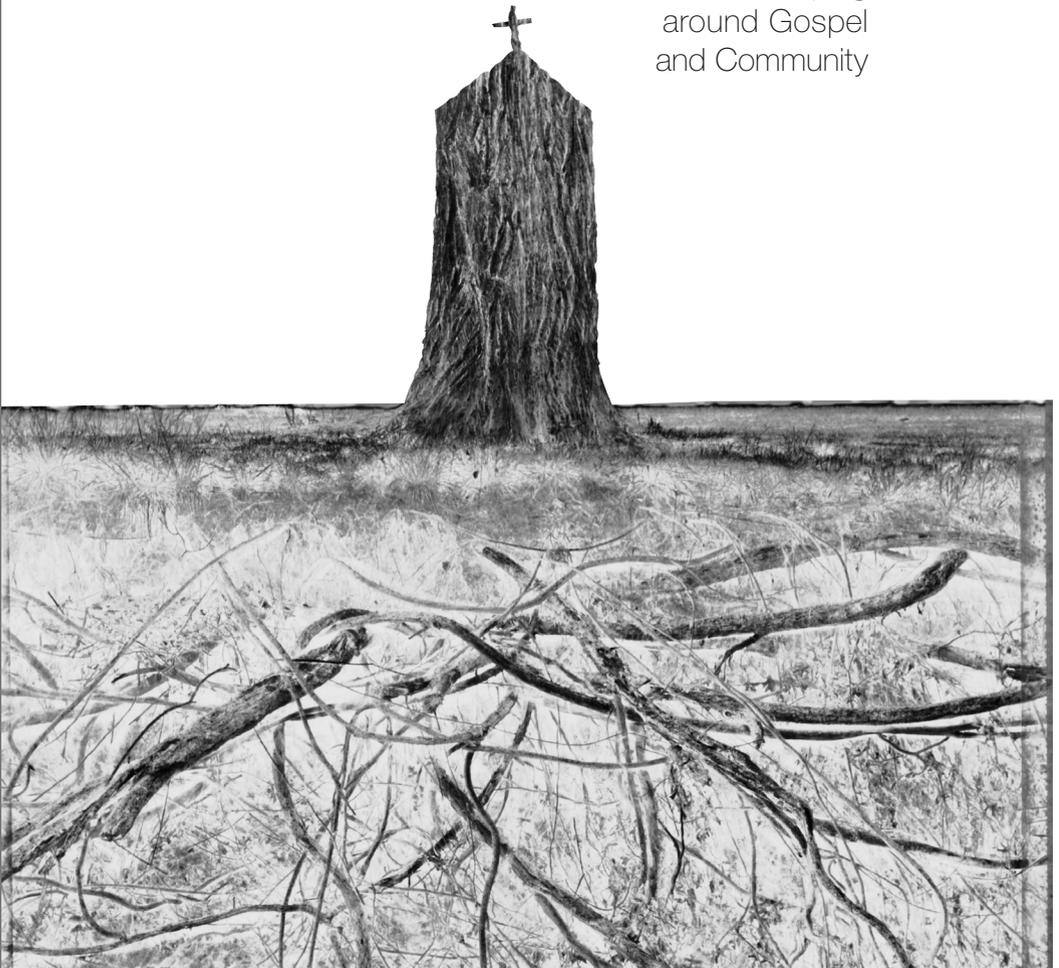
—PETER J. GRAINGER, Senior Minister,
Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh



RE:LIT

total CHURCH

A Radical Reshaping
around Gospel
and Community



Tim Chester and Steve Timmis

CROSSWAY BOOKS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Total Church

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North American edition published by Crossway Books
a publishing ministry of
Good News Publishers
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jessica Dennis

Cover photo: Veer

First printing, 2008

Printed in the United States of America

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PDF ISBN 978-1-4335-0482-2

Mobipocket ISBN 978-1-4335-0483-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chester, Tim.

Total church : a radical reshaping around gospel and community /
Tim Chester and Steve Timmis.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-0208-8 (tpb)

I. Church. I. Timmis, Steve, 1957– . II. Title

BV600.3.C44 2008

262.0017—dc22

2008019147

VP	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	09	08				
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

To
all our brothers and sisters
in The Crowded House
“You are our glory and joy”
1 THESSALONIANS 2:20

And to
Maurice Withington
one of God’s true gentle men

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A BIG THANK-YOU TO Katy Jones Parry and Jen Baxter for their faithful assistance throughout, and the students of the Northern Training Institute for additional research. Thanks also to Steve McAlpine for the case studies. A number of people within The Crowded House network commented on the manuscript and suggested additional material. Thank you also to everyone at IVP: Brian Wilson who first suggested we write on this theme and Eleanor Trotter who guided us through the process with her usual skill. And a particular thank-you to our wives, Janet and Helen, for their unfailing help and companionship, and to our families for allowing us the time to write.

So much of this material has been developed in conversations and discussions within The Crowded House and beyond. It is truly the product of a community rather than two people, an example of the community hermeneutic we describe in Chapter 10. And so it seems appropriate to dedicate it to our community of communities. It is a privilege beyond telling to strive “side by side [with you] for the faith of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27 *ESV*).

INTRODUCTION

ALAN IS THE LEADER OF A small Baptist church. He moved to lead his suburban congregation five years ago after several years working in industry and three years studying in a theological college. He has seen a number of people join the church, but not as many as he had hoped. They have a thriving mothers-and-toddlers' group, a solid youth work program, and an accomplished music group. And yet Alan can't help feeling that the church is only scratching the surface. Truth be told, it feels as if ministry has become a production line: churning out sermons, putting on events, trying to generate another wave of enthusiasm for evangelism. If only there were a different way of doing church.

Bob was converted as a teenager in a lively Anglican church, then became a youth group leader. Now he no longer goes to church. It had just become a burden, a set of responsibilities. He was always being asked to do things. If he didn't show up at meetings, questions were asked and eyebrows raised. Conflict among church members was the last straw. "I don't need this," he told his wife the day he stopped going. He still reads his Bible, still prays, still tells unbelievers about Jesus if it comes up in conversation. "I'm just taking a break from church," he says. He can sense the disapproval when he runs into other Christians. He feels it himself. He knows Christians should be part of a church. But he can't face going back. If only there were a different way of doing church.

Cathy became a Christian in her first year at university. It was great. She spent hours hanging out with her Christian friends, talking through their faith, praying together, sharing the gospel with other students. But two years after graduation she feels spiritually flat. She goes to church each Sunday and attends a home group on Wednesday evenings. But she misses the intimacy of the rela-

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tionships she had at university. She misses the discussions, the enthusiasm, and the late-night prayers. She laughs to herself at how immature they were sometimes. But she can't help wondering whether "grown-up" Christianity is any better. If only there were a different way of doing church.

Denzel was one of the founders of Elevate. Elevate grew out of a common desire to explore new ways of doing church. They were inspired by the alternative worship scene and some people within the emerging church movement. It started as a monthly gathering with images, incense, and meditations. From that came a weekly meeting in a pub. It was all very exciting at first. It still is. Denzel enjoys the energy that comes from doing something different. But he has some concerns. He suspects the Bible is not as central as it should be. Plus, although a number of other disaffected Christians have joined them, they don't seem to be impacting unbelievers. And then last week several members questioned whether adherents of other religions really need evangelizing. They talked about a safe place to ask questions, but Denzel felt uneasy. He thinks they're really on to something, and he certainly doesn't want to go back to a hymn sandwich and a sermon. But increasingly he worries about what is being sacrificed. If only there were a different way of doing church.

These people are fictional, but their stories are all based on real conversations and real experiences.

THE AUTHORS' STORIES

Maybe you can relate to Steve's story. Steve was the minister of a church in a working-class community in northern England. It was his first "charge," and it was something of a baptism by fire! The church was welcoming and caring, small and intimate. Looking back, despite all the early difficulties, it is hard to imagine a better place for a young man to be nurtured in ministry. The people loved the Lord and showed it in their love for his word and his people. Over time, the church grew as lives were changed by grace.

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But for all that was good, Steve had a nagging sense of unease. The building was nearly full, but there were thousands outside. It was difficult to put his finger on it, but somehow so much of their life together as a church was inaccessible and irrelevant to those around. They loved each other, and the Bible was being taught, but he was growing increasingly aware of the almost impenetrable wall between the church and the world. It impacted traffic in both directions.

As Steve reflected, he saw two issues. First, for all the attempts at preaching God's word in a faithful and contemporary way, there was little opportunity for non-Christians to hear it. Second, although Steve was convinced that theirs was a believing community loving one another, there was little opportunity for non-Christians to be exposed to it. If only there were a different way of doing church.

Tim's story is different. He was brought up as a "pastor's kid." In his late teens his father was asking big questions about what it meant to be the church. Tim remembers long conversations as people shared their dreams about what church could be. At university he got the chance to make something of those dreams. He lived in a house with other Christians—eating together, worshipping together, offering hospitality, sharing lives. He has vivid memories of sitting around a large, battered, old table with the remnants of a meal and celebrating Communion together.

But life was very different after graduation when Tim and his wife, Helen, moved to north London. Tim still remembers the first time they were invited out for a meal. They assumed it would be that evening or maybe the next day. But a date three weeks away was suggested. It turned out to be their first experience of a "dinner party." It certainly wasn't sharing lives. If only there were a different way of doing church.

KEY PRINCIPLES

This book argues that two key principles should shape the way we "do church": gospel and community. Christians are called to a dual

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fidelity: fidelity to the core content of the gospel and fidelity to the primary context of a believing community. Whether we are thinking about evangelism, social involvement, pastoral care, apologetics, discipleship, or teaching, the content is consistently the Christian gospel, and the context is consistently the Christian community. What we do is always defined by the gospel, and the context is always our belonging in the church. Our identity as Christians is defined by the gospel and the community.

Being gospel-centered actually involves two things. First, it means being word-centered because the gospel is a word—the gospel is news, a message. Second, it means being mission-centered because the gospel is a word to be proclaimed—the gospel is good news, a missionary message.

So maybe we really have three principles. Christian practice must be (1) gospel-centered in the sense of being word-centered, (2) gospel-centered in the sense of being mission-centered, and (3) community-centered.

- 1. gospel-centered $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} 1a. \text{ word-centered} \\ 1b. \text{ mission-centered} \end{array} \right.$
- 2. community-centered

You may think this sounds like a statement of the obvious. We hope you do. But let us make two points by way of introduction.

1. In practice, conservative evangelicals place a proper emphasis on the gospel or on the word. Meanwhile others, like those who belong to the so-called emerging church, emphasize the importance of community. The emerging church is a loose movement of people who are exploring new forms of church. Each group suspects the other is weak where it is strong. Conservatives worry that the emerging church is soft on truth, too influenced by postmodernism. The emerging church accuses traditional churches of being too institutional, too program-oriented, often loveless and sometimes harsh.

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Let us as authors nail our colors to the mast from the outset. We agree with the conservatives that the emerging church is too often soft on truth. But we do not think the answer is to be suspicious of community. Indeed, we think that conservatives often do not “do truth” well because they neglect community. Because people are not sharing their lives, truth is not applied and lived out.

We also agree with the emerging church movement that conservative evangelicals are often bad at community. The emerging church is a broad category and an “emerging” one at that, with no agreed-upon theology or methodology. This means that generalizations about the emerging church are far from straightforward. But many within the movement seem to downplay the central importance of objective, divinely revealed, absolute truth. This may not be a hard conviction, but it is a trajectory. Others argue that more visual media (images, symbols, alternative worship) should complement or replace an emphasis on the word. We do not think this is the answer. Indeed, we think emerging church can sometimes be bad at community because it neglects the truth. If Christian community is not governed by truth as it should be, it can be whimsical or indulgent. There is a danger of community becoming me and my acquaintances talking about God—church for the *Friends* generation—middle-class twenty- and thirty-somethings’ church. This certainly is not true of all that calls itself emerging church, but it is a danger. Only the truth of the gospel reaches across barriers of age, race, and class.

We often meet people reacting against an experience of conservative churches that has been institutional, inauthentic, and rigidly programmed. For them the emerging church appears to be the only other option. We meet people within more traditional churches who recognize the need for change but fear the relativism they see in the emerging church. For them existing models seem to be the only option. We also meet people within the emerging church movement who want to “do church” in a different way but do not want to buy into postmodern or post-evangelical notions of truth.

Introduction

We believe there is an alternative. We need to be enthusiastic about truth and mission *and* we need to be enthusiastic about relationships and community.

2. Rigorously applying these principles has the potential to lead to some fundamental and thoroughgoing changes in the way we do church. The theology that matters is not the theology we profess but the theology we practice. As John Stott says, “Our static, inflexible, self-centered structures are ‘heretical structures’ because they embody a heretical doctrine of the church.” If “our structure has become an end in itself, not a means of saving the world,” it is “a heretical structure.”¹

Being both gospel-centered and community-centered might mean:

- seeing church as an identity instead of a responsibility to be juggled alongside other commitments
- celebrating ordinary life as the context in which the word of God is proclaimed with “God-talk” as a normal feature of everyday conversation
- running fewer evangelistic events, youth clubs, and social projects and spending more time sharing our lives with unbelievers
- starting new congregations instead of growing existing ones
- preparing Bible talks with other people instead of just studying alone at a desk
- adopting a 24-7 approach to mission and pastoral care instead of starting ministry programs
- switching the emphasis from Bible teaching to Bible learning and action
- spending more time with people on the margins of society
- learning to disciple one another—and to be disciplined—day by day
- having churches that are messy instead of churches that pretend

We have called this book *Total Church*. Church is not a meeting you attend or a place you enter. It is an identity that is ours in Christ. It is an identity that shapes the whole of life so that life and mission become “total church.”

Is this “gospel plus” (requiring something—in this case, Christian community—in addition to the gospel, which thereby

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robs the gospel of its saving power)? The answer is, it depends how you tell the gospel story. It depends whether you see the gospel simply as the story of God saving individuals or as the story of God creating a new humanity.

Part 1, “Gospel and Community in Principle,” outlines the biblical case for making gospel and community central principles for Christian life and mission. Part 2, “Gospel and Community in Practice,” applies this double focus to various areas of church life. Activists may be tempted to skip Part 1 and go straight to Part 2, but the applications in Part 2 are integrally linked to the convictions outlined in Part 1. We are trying to do more than assemble a collection of “good ideas” for church life. We have tried to explore the contemporary implications of the preoccupation with the gospel word and gospel community in the Bible story.

WHO WE ARE

It might be helpful to include a brief word about the ministry in which we, Steve and Tim, are involved. The Crowded House is a network of missionary congregations, most of which meet in homes. We are trying to “do church” in a way that is welcoming for unchurched people. We place a big emphasis on sharing our lives with one another and welcoming unbelievers into the network of relationships that make up the church. It also means we grow by planting new congregations rather than acquiring bigger premises.

This book, however, is not an argument for household church. Not all our congregations meet in homes. It is our conviction that the principles we outline can and should be applied to all congregations. Nor is this book an account of The Crowded House. We do not think the way we do mission and church is the “right way” or the “only way.” It is not an off-the-shelf model that people can fit to their context without alterations. Most of what we say in the book is what we aspire to, but sadly not yet what we do! It is a book of principles, vision, and hopes, not a description of practice.

Where we have included stories, we are seeking to encour-

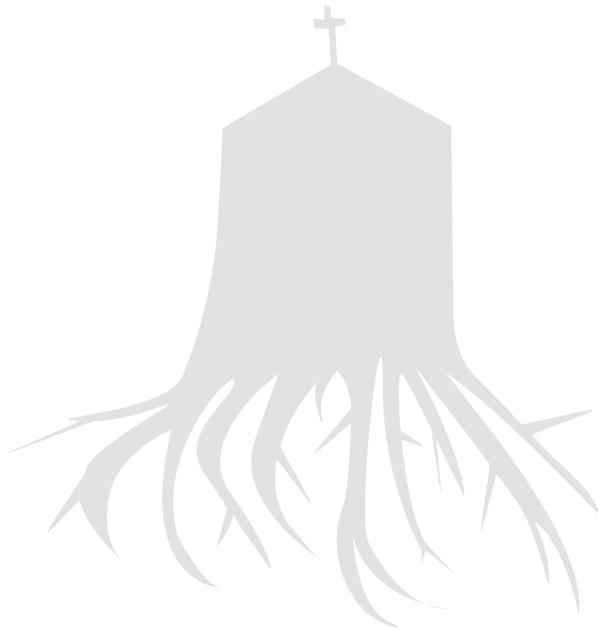
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age readers to respond imaginatively. We often find that people conceive principles simply in terms of their current practice. At the other extreme, some people see such a vast gulf between principles and current practice that they think the pursuit of principles is futile. This failure of imagination can prevent us from applying the Bible as we should. We hear it speak to us but either find it too far removed from current experience to feel it possible or squeeze it into our current experience. We need Spirit-inspired imagination to reconfigure church and mission around the gospel word and the gospel community.

We have written this book together and so generally used plural pronouns (we, us). But where we describe an experience or story particular to one of us, we have used a singular pronoun (I, me).

part ONE

Gospel and Community
in Principle





WHY GOSPEL?

“PROVE THERE’S A GOD—that’s all we ask,” we might say. Philip said to Jesus, “Show us the Father and that will be enough for us” (John 14:8). Philip wanted a vision of God, a spiritual experience, a display of glory, an act of power. What he got was a man talking, for Jesus said in response, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” God is revealed in the person of Jesus and “the words I say to you” (vv. 9–10).

People today want a vision of the divine or proof that God exists or to know the meaning of life or just a sense of purpose. Some want spiritual experiences or acts of power. Some Christians think rational apologetic arguments are the way to persuade people. Others believe the church needs to perform miraculous signs. But today God is still known through “the words I say to you.”

Jesus continued, “The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work” (v. 10). We expect Jesus to say, “Through the words I say, the Father is speaking his words.” But he goes further. Through the words of Jesus, the Father is doing his work. And God is at work today through the proclamation of the gospel. The works of Jesus can be done by every Christian: “Whoever believes in me will also do the *works* that I do; and greater *works* than these will he do, because I am going to the Father” (v. 12 ESV). God will do his work as we proclaim the

GOSPEL AND COMMUNITY IN PRINCIPLE

word of Jesus. The “greater works” are not flashier miracles as if we regularly ought to be outperforming the raising of Lazarus from the dead! John has already defined those “greater works”: “. . . greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. . . . Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life” (John 5:20–24 ESV; see also 6:29–30). The greater work is to bring people to eternal life through our proclamation of the gospel.

Imagine you are teaching the Bible to a group of young teenagers. Most of them are not taking a bit of notice. You have worked hard to be both true to the text and relevant to the youngsters. But they are just flicking bits of paper at each other. It might be tempting to play some games to show that Christians can have fun too or to sing more songs so they will encounter God in the music. It is in moments like these that we need to hold on to the conviction that God is known and God works through the words of Jesus. Christian ministry must be gospel-centered.

As we stick at the task of proclaiming the gospel, Jesus gives us a lovely promise: “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father” (John 14:13). In John’s Gospel the Father is glorified as the Son gives eternal life (John 17:1–5)—the “greater work” Jesus promises to do through our words (John 5:20–24). When we pray, Jesus promises to do the greater work of giving life in his name—the name we proclaim in the gospel.

GOD RULES THROUGH HIS WORD

Christianity is word-centered because God rules through his gospel word. When Jesus taught in John 14 that God does his work through his word, he was reflecting the common principle of the story of salvation.

In the beginning, when the earth was formless and empty, God *said*, “Let there be light” and there was light (Genesis 1:1–3).

Why Gospel?

Through his word he brought order out of chaos and light out of darkness (John 1:1–3). Where God’s word is not heard, chaos and darkness close in again. When Jeremiah is given a vision of God’s coming judgment, he says, “I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty; and at the heavens, and their light was gone” (Jeremiah 4:23). “Formless and empty” is the same Hebrew expression used in Genesis 1:2 for the chaos and darkness before God’s creative word.

Adam and Eve were to express their commitment to God’s reign by trusting his word of command not to eat the fruit of the tree. That is why the rejection of God’s rule begins with a rejection of God’s word. The serpent encourages the woman to doubt God’s word (Genesis 3:1) and then to deny God’s word (v. 4). Instead the woman is governed by what seems “pleasing to the eye” (v. 6). God rules as his word is trusted and obeyed. God is rejected when his word is not trusted and not obeyed.

When he calls Abraham, God begins his plan to restore his rule and create a new humanity. He speaks a word of promise. He promises Abraham a people who know God, a land of blessing, and blessing to all nations. This is the promise that drives the story of the Bible. When God liberates his people from Egypt, he does so because of his promise to Abraham (Exodus 2:23–25; 3:15; 6:8). Paul calls it the gospel announced in advance (Galatians 3:6–9). A promise is a word about the future, and this future orientation gives God’s promise its redemptive character. It is not a statement of what is, but a statement of what will be. The word of promise governs Abraham’s action, sending him out from Ur to a life of hopeful pilgrimage. God is reestablishing his rule through his word.

When God liberates his people from Egypt, his word is expressed in the Law given at Mount Sinai. The Law of Moses is given as the word by which God rules his people as they wait for the coming Savior. It is a liberating law, given to bless God’s people. It was the lie of the serpent to portray God’s rule as harsh and tyrannical. The reality is that the rule of God is a rule of life, blessing, peace, and justice. God rules through his word, and his rule brings freedom and

GOSPEL AND COMMUNITY IN PRINCIPLE

joy. Hence the psalmist's delight in God's Law (Psalm 119:77, 97). Israel had been liberated from the oppressive rule of Pharaoh. God's liberating Law protected from oppression and ensured provision for all. The story of Ruth is a lovely portrait of God's liberating word in action. When people live under God's reign through commitment to his word, Gentile widows are welcomed, protected, and blessed. As God's people lived under his reign through obedience to his word, they would attract the nations to God.

But time and again God's people reject his word. The people ask for a king because they want to be ruled like the nations rather than by God through his word (1 Samuel 8:7). God gives them a king but at the same time raises up prophets to call the people back to his word. The king is to rule under God's rule expressed through his word (Deuteronomy 17:14–20). The prophet is to guide the king so that the king rules under God's authority. That is the ideal. More often, however, the prophet keeps the king in check, calling him back to God's word. Often the word of the prophet and the rule of the king are in conflict.

In the Hebrew canon the history books of the Old Testament (Joshua to 2 Kings) are called the Former Prophets. The main force in these books is not the kings or the international powers, but the word of the Lord that comes by his prophets. God's word is sovereign (see, for example, 1 Kings 13). The book of Deuteronomy promises blessings if the people are faithful to the covenant and curses if they are unfaithful (Deuteronomy 28–30). This is the principle by which the writer of Kings interprets history. What happens to Israel happens because those curses come into play. God's word is sovereign, and so there is something inexorable about the story. The disaster that falls on Israel is a result of the judging and destroying power of God's Law. God's word sets in motion events that cannot be altered.

But the unfaithfulness of God's people cannot sabotage God's gospel word. God does not give up on his promise to Abraham. The prophets not only speak the word of judgment that brings down

Why Gospel?

Jerusalem by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar—they also speak a word of hope. God promises to send a new king who will reestablish God’s liberating rule. That king is Jesus. With a word Jesus heals the sick, and with a word he expels demons (Matthew 8:8, 16). He speaks a word, and people leave all to follow him (Mark 1:14–20). Indeed Jesus is the living Word of God (John 1:1–3). He is both the promised messianic king and the Word by which God rules.

In the life of the believer and in the life of the church God still rules through his word. People become Christians when they respond in faith to the message of the gospel. “I tell you the truth,” says Jesus, “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24; Romans 10:17; Ephesians 1:13; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23). The true disciples of Jesus are those who “abide in [his] word” (John 8:31 ESV; Matthew 4:4). It is the holy Scriptures that make Christians “wise for salvation”; that are sufficient for “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” and make us “thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:15–17). “The word of God is living and active,” says the writer of Hebrews. “Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). It is as if the word of God does laser surgery on our souls. It exposes our thinking and motives. It is the only mirror in which we truly see ourselves, for it is the mirror that reflects our hearts (James 1:22–25).

In John 2 the disciples put their faith in Jesus when they see his first miraculous sign—turning water into wine at the wedding of Cana (v. 11). This story is followed by the cleansing of the temple and Jesus’ declaration that *he* is the temple. John comments, “After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken” (v. 22). There is a kind of faith that comes from seeing miraculous signs, but true faith comes through the words of Scripture and the words of Jesus. John goes on, “Now while he was in Jerusalem

GOSPEL AND COMMUNITY IN PRINCIPLE

at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men” (vv. 23–24). Jesus does not trust the kind of faith that comes from seeing miraculous signs. It is not difficult to imagine why. Such faith is likely to be fair-weather faith. It will believe when signs are performed, prayers are answered, things are going well. But it is not the sort of faith that will survive the loss of a child, a period of illness, or some other trauma. Persevering faith comes through the word of God.

In the church the risen Christ rules through his word. This is why the only skill required of church leaders is that they can teach, rightly handling and applying the word of God. Their authority is a mediated authority. They have no authority in and of themselves. Instead they exercise Christ’s authority on his behalf as they teach and apply the word. This defines the amazing extent of their authority: when they apply the word they are exercising the authority of God himself. But it also defines the limit of their authority: they have authority only as they teach God’s word. They should not exercise an authority that comes because of the position they hold or the force of their personality. It is through their teaching that leaders exercise the authority of Christ, the Head of the church.

GOD EXTENDS HIS RULE THROUGH HIS WORD

Christianity is mission-centered because God extends his rule through his gospel word. The sower in the parable of the sower sows the word (Mark 4:14). The growth of the kingdom comes when people “hear the word” of God and “accept it” (v. 20). Christ’s new family is built around those who do God’s will (3:35). The new Israel is constituted by the preaching of the gospel (3:14). The kingdom grows when people hear and accept the word of God. For Mark’s readers Jesus is gone, ascended into heaven. But Mark reassures them that their king continues to be present through his word.

It is because all authority has been given to him that Jesus sends us to teach all nations (Matthew 28:18–20). It is through the preach-

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ing of the gospel that Jesus wields his scepter in the world. To tell people the gospel is to announce the kingdom or kingship of God and his Christ. Through the gospel, we command people to submit to Jesus. Through the gospel, judgment is passed on those who reject him. We are ambassadors of the coming King, going ahead to warn of his coming. If people acknowledge his lordship, they will experience his coming rule as blessing, life, and salvation. If they reject him, they will experience his coming as conquest and judgment.

The book of Acts is structured around summary statements that describe the growth of the church. Often the word of God is the agent of the sentence. “So the word of God spread” (Acts 6:7). “But the word of God continued to increase and spread” (Acts 12:24; 13:49; 19:20). The growth of God’s kingdom is synonymous with the spread of God’s word. The kingdom grows through the word as it elicits faith.

THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

We often divide into word-centered and Spirit-centered churches. For some the key event on Sunday mornings is the sermon; for others it is the “time of worship” or “ministry.”

We reject this polarization. Our concern to be word-centered does not conflict with a concern to be Spirit-centered. Churches must be Spirit-centered. The church is the community of the Holy Spirit. It is a living community where things happen because God is at work. When our hearts are moved in worship, when people are changed by God’s word, when we turn to God in prayer, when we care for one another, when we act in selfless ways, and supremely when people are saved—all these are signs of the Spirit at work. Paul says that “in [Christ] you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). This is not some theoretical entity, nor the perfected church. This is a real, local congregation with all sorts of problems. The community formed by the gospel for the gospel is the community in which God dwells by his Spirit.

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Churches can also polarize between intellectualism (what you think is what matters) or emotionalism (what you feel is what matters). In some churches issues of the heart and emotions have become functionally absent. We acknowledge their importance, but they feature little in our lives. Some of us just do not like to talk about our relationship with the Lord in emotive terms. But we need look no further than the Psalms to see how important emotion is in true faith. The Psalms are God's revelation of how we should respond to God's revelation, and they express the full range of emotions: frustration (Psalm 6), passionate praise (Psalm 9:1–2), anger (Psalm 129), sorrow (Psalm 130), quiet serenity (Psalm 131), and so on. We are to love God with our hearts as well as our heads (Matthew 22:36–37). This is what previous generations called “experiential faith.” Churches should be emotional communities—communities in which our faith is felt as well as understood.

It is tempting to stress the need for balance as if what we need is a bit of word and a bit of the Spirit or a bit of intellectualism and a bit of emotion. But this is unhelpful. The truth is that in the Bible word and Spirit always go together.

Both word and Spirit were involved in creation. The world was made by God's word (Hebrews 1:1–3), but the Spirit was also present, brooding over the waters (Genesis 1:2). “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth” (Psalm 33:6). It is by his Spirit that God breathes his creative word, and it is by his Spirit that God breathes life into humanity (Genesis 2:7; Job 33:4).

It is the same in the experience of Christians. When Jesus promises to send the Spirit, he says the Spirit “will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you . . . when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come” (John 14:26; 16:13). Notice the emphasis on saying, words, truth, and teaching. It is the Spirit who makes Christ's words known to us, applying them to

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our lives and making them live. They are not dead words, ancient history, a static set of instructions, or an encyclopedia of belief. Through the Spirit they are the living, life-giving words of God (Ezekiel 37:1–14). The Spirit is the Spirit of truth. “All Scripture is God-breathed,” says Paul (2 Timothy 3:16). In both Hebrew and Greek *spirit* and *breath* are the same word. The word of God comes on the breath of God. The word of God is “the sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17).

Spiritual experience that does not arise from God’s word is not Christian experience. Other religions offer spiritual experiences. Concerts and therapy sessions can affect our emotions. Not all that passes for Christian experience is genuine. An authentic experience of the Spirit is an experience in response to the gospel. Through the Spirit the truth touches our hearts, and that truth moves our emotions and affects our wills.

This also means that Bible study and theology that do not lead to love for God and a desire to do his will—to worship, tears, laughter, excitement, or sorrow—have gone terribly wrong. True theology leads to love, mission, and doxology (1 Timothy 1:5, 7, 17). We should not expect an adrenaline rush every time we study God’s word. We all express our emotions in different ways. But when we study God’s word we should pray that the Spirit of God will not only inform our heads but also inspire our hearts.

Part of our problem is that we often assume an experience of God will be some kind of revelation—a dream, an inner voice, a guiding sense of peace, an encounter, a word. This assumption is reinforced by mysticism and existentialism. But we have no reason to need or expect a revelation from God. God has revealed himself in his Son and in his word. And God’s word is wholly adequate and sufficient. But the Bible does lead us to expect other experiences of God through the Holy Spirit—love for God, love for others, assurance, joy, confidence, peace, and so on. Word and Spirit give us a new desire for God (Romans 8:5–9; 14:17; Galatians 5:17).

True Christian experience is experience that arises through the

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Spirit from the revelation of God in Jesus contained in the Bible. God rules through his word, and the Spirit applies that word to our lives. The Spirit opens blind eyes to see the truth and melts cold hearts to respond to God's word. The word of God comes in the power of the Spirit (Acts 10:44; 1 Corinthians 2:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:5–6). If we want to see the Spirit of God at work, we must proclaim the word of God.

We might even say that being word-centered is synonymous with being Spirit-centered. The difference is that we cannot control the Spirit. We cannot determine or even predict when and how he will work (John 3:8). Our role is to read, hear, proclaim, teach, and obey the word. The Spirit's role is to do the work of God through that word. Through the Spirit our words become the living word of God (2 Samuel 23:2). And so we center our lives and ministries on the word of God while praying that God's Spirit will do the work of God through that word.

TO SUM UP

The gospel is a word; so the church must be word-centered.

Being gospel-centered has two dimensions. First, it means being word-centered because the gospel is a word. The gospel is good news. It is a message. It is a message that can be summarized in simple gospel outlines or even the three-word confession, "Jesus is Lord." Yet it is also a message that fills the entire Bible. It is the story of salvation from creation to new creation. It is a word that has become incarnate in Jesus Christ. It is this word that brings new life to people and shapes the life of the church.

The gospel is a missionary word; so the church must be mission-centered.

Second, being gospel-centered means being mission-centered, for the gospel is a missionary word. The gospel is *good* news. It is a word to be proclaimed. You cannot be committed to the gospel without being committed to proclaiming that gospel.

IMPLICATIONS

So being gospel-centered means being word-centered and being mission-centered. The church exists both *through* the gospel and *for* the gospel. At one level this is a motherhood-and-apple-pie declaration. Few Christians are going to object to being gospel-centered, just as no one is against mothers or apple pie. The problem is the gap between our rhetoric and the reality of our practice. The continual challenge for us is to apply this principle to church life and ministry without compromise.

A woman once told me about the difficulties she faced as a Brit fitting into American culture. One of her struggles was with people who said, “Let’s do lunch.” She expected them to phone and arrange a date. They never did. “Let’s do lunch” was just an idiomatic way of saying farewell. We all say, “Let’s do mission,” but does it carry any more intent than “Let’s do lunch”?

We sometimes ask people to imagine they are part of a church-planting team in a cross-cultural situation in some other part of the world:

- What criteria would you use to decide where to live?
- How would you approach secular employment?
- What standard of living would you expect as pioneer missionaries?
- What would you spend your time doing?
- What opportunities would you be looking for?
- What would your prayers be like?
- What would you be trying to do with your new friends?
- What kind of team would you want around you?
- How would you conduct your meetings together?

We find it easier to be radical in our thinking when we transplant ourselves outside our current situation. But we are as much missionaries here and now as we would be if we were part of a cross-cultural team in another part of the world. Mission is central to us wherever we are. These are the kind of questions we should be asking wherever we are.

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Name: Beth

Occupation: Overseas law student

Church: The Crowded House, Crookes, England

“The Crowded House has made me tear up the script of my life and start again.” While she can laugh saying it, Beth’s experience of church since arriving in Sheffield from Kenya to study law has been confronting and quite revealing. “When I was asked if I wanted to go to The Crowded House, I went ‘The crowded what?’ But it’s made me go back to square one and start things again with a different motivation.”

Beth had her career path pretty much mapped out: study law in the UK before trying her luck as a lawyer in the city, hopefully with a big pay packet at the end of it. That she now sees her future in an advocacy role, or working with a private organization, is testament to the way in which the Christian community she is a part of has challenged her. “When one of our leaders left his job at the bank so he could teach English as a second language, I said, ‘What on earth are you doing that for?’ Before joining The Crowded House I’d never dreamt someone would do that.”

The early times were difficult, as Beth’s experience in Kenya was a big church—several thousand people and multiple services. “At first I’d squirm,” she says. “When we were so close together my sins seemed so much more apparent to others. Back home if you fell out with someone you could always sit on the other side of the auditorium and never have to see them again.” What convinced Beth to stay despite these differences? “It was the friendships,” she says. “Eventually I couldn’t find a reason to leave.”

The ripples from the waves in Beth’s life have reached as far as her homeland. Her father, who is not a Christian, is astounded at how caring the Crookes community is to his daughter. Once, when returning to Sheffield late at night following a trip back to Kenya, her father was worried about her getting home safely. When a couple of the leaders offered to pick her up from the station, her dad couldn’t believe it. “Now whenever he is on the phone he says to say hello to Pastor Rob and his wife,” she laughs. “It’s really made him think.”

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In his book *The Mission of God*, Chris Wright shows that the Bible story is “all about mission”—God’s mission to save a people for himself through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the focus of the story, but his identity has missionary implications (Luke 24:45–48). This radical, God-centered perspective, Wright suggests, “turns inside out and upside down some of the common ways in which we are accustomed to think about the Christian life. . . . It constantly forces us to open our eyes to the big picture, rather than shelter in the cosy narcissism of our own small worlds.”

- We ask, “Where does God fit into the story of my life?,” when the real question is “Where does my little life fit into this great story of God’s mission?”
- We want to be driven by a purpose that has been tailored just right for our own individual lives, when we should be seeing the purpose of all life, including our own, wrapped up in the great mission of God for the whole of creation.
- We talk about “applying the Bible to our lives.” What would it mean to apply our lives to the Bible instead, assuming the Bible to be the reality—the real story—to which we are called to conform ourselves?
- We wrestle with “making the gospel relevant to the world.” But in this story, God is about the business of transforming the world to fit the shape of the gospel.
- We argue about what can legitimately be included in the mission that God expects from the church, when we should ask what kind of church God wants for the whole range of his mission.
- I may wonder what kind of mission God has for me, when I should be asking what kind of me God wants for his mission.¹

In March 2003, the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity in association with the Evangelical Alliance published a report entitled “Imagine How We Can Reach the UK.” It was the result of a major research project involving hundreds of questionnaires and consultations with church leaders. The report concluded: “The reason the UK church is not effective in mission is because we are not making disciples who can live well for Christ in today’s culture and engage compellingly with the people they meet. . . . Jesus

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has a ‘train and release’ strategy, while overall we have a ‘convert and retain’ strategy.”² In the last twenty years, it claimed, we have produced plenty of creative evangelistic materials, but little to help Christians connect their faith to the whole of life. The report blames this on a sacred-secular divide: “the pervasive belief that some things are important to God—such as church, prayer meetings, social action, Alpha—but that other human activities are at best neutral—work, school, college, sport, the arts, leisure, rest, sleep.” As a result:

The vast majority of Christians have not been helped to see that who they are and what they do every day in schools, workplaces or clubs is significant to God, nor that the people they spend time with in those everyday contexts are the people God is calling them to pray for, bless and witness to. So we pray for our Sunday school teachers but not, for example, for schoolteachers working 40 hours a week in schools among children and adults who on the whole don’t know Jesus. We pray for overseas missionaries but not for Christian electricians, builders, shop assistants and managers in our towns. . . . We have simply not been envisioned, resourced and supported to share the Good News of Jesus in our everyday contexts.³

This is how one of the leaders of The Crowded House put it:

If someone was being sent as a missionary to a hostile context overseas, our attitude would be something like this: We would expect to pray often for them. We would expect progress in building relationships and sharing the gospel to be slow. We would be excited by small steps—a gospel conversation here, an opportunity to get to know someone there. We would thrive on regular updates from the front line. But the truth is that the lives of many Christians in work, and play, are just like the life of that far-flung missionary! They are lived out in tough environments where progress is often slow and many factors make evangelism extremely difficult. The challenge is to make news from the staff canteen as valued as news from the overseas mission field.

We have a ghetto mentality. We think of church as the faithful few, backs against the wall. But in fact during the week we are dis-

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persed throughout the world. We are already infiltrating the kingdom of Satan. Day by day the people in our churches are rubbing shoulders with unbelievers in their workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and clubs. We are yeast in the dough (Matthew 13:33). The “Imagine” report concluded: “The UK will never be reached until we create open, authentic, learning and praying communities that are focused on making whole-life disciples who live and share the Gospel wherever they relate to people in their daily lives.”⁴

The challenge for us is to make the gospel the center of our lives not just on Sunday mornings but on Monday mornings. This means ending distinctions between “full-timers,” “part-timers,” and people with secular employment in our team and leadership structures. We need non-full-time leaders who can model whole-life, gospel-centered, missional living. It means thinking of our workplaces, homes, and neighborhoods as the location of mission. We need to plan and pray for gospel relationships. This means creating church cultures in which we see normal, celebrating day-to-day gospel living in the secular world and discussions of how we can use our daily routines for the gospel.