

YOU'RE NOT CRAZY.

*Gospel Sanity for
Weary Churches*

RAY ORTLUND & SAM ALLBERRY

Foreword by Russell Moore

Afterword by Clark Lowenfield

“From the very first episode of the *You’re Not Crazy* podcast, I was hooked. The overarching theme of the podcast, and now the book, is this: gospel doctrine is meant to produce gospel culture through which the church shines forth the beauty of Christ. I have come to embrace that message wholeheartedly and am thankful that Ray Ortlund and Sam Allberry have made it accessible to all through this book. If you’re currently leading a church or ministry, or planning to do so in the future, this book is for you.”

Brian Brodersen, Pastor, Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa, California

“This is the most important book I’ve read this year. *You’re Not Crazy* is written for pastors, ministry leaders, and followers of Jesus who not only believe the gospel but also desire to experience good news in their everyday life and work. The grace of God should shape not merely our theology but also our experience within our churches. This is exactly what Ray Ortlund and Sam Allberry do through these biblically rich and deeply practical chapters. This book is refreshment for those who are weary, renewal for those who are disenchanted, clarity for those who are frustrated with the present state of the church, and rocket fuel for those who refuse to bow to the tribalism and outrage addiction of our times. Here you will find the kind of Christianity that every follower of Jesus longs deep down to experience. Read it slowly. Read it annually.”

Adam Ramsey, Lead Pastor, Liberti Church, Gold Coast, Australia; Director, Acts 29 Asia Pacific; author, *Truth on Fire* and *Faithfully Present*

“*You’re Not Crazy* contains an insightful, straightforward path toward seeing gospel culture established in your ministry—a path that travels through the very heart of Christ. Ray Ortlund and Sam Allberry’s writing is quintessentially moving, motivating, and practical, as one would expect from two men who have lived their message so wholeheartedly. I wish I had read this fifteen years ago, and I can’t recommend it highly enough.”

Simon Murphy, Lead Pastor, Redemption Hill Church, Singapore

“In this book, Ray Ortlund and Sam Allberry unfold a biblical and beautiful truth: sound doctrine ought to create compelling community for followers of Jesus. The local church is Christianity enfleshed, and our life together is integral to our witness. The authors show how gospel doctrine creates gospel culture in various areas of church life—from the pastoral welcome, to how we honor one another, to how we preach, and more. Here is a timely and inspirational reminder to turn afresh to the high calling of being part of—and helping foster—the body of Christ.”

Samuel D. Ferguson, Rector, The Falls Church Anglican, Metro Washington, DC

“A church that lacks gospel culture will undermine its gospel preaching. A gospel culture welcomes messed-up people to stumble toward glory together, knowing that God’s grace is their only hope. *You’re Not Crazy* is an invitation for Christians and churches to press past the confusion of our day and experience the beauty of Jesus’s grace together. I highly commend this work.”

J. Garrett Kell, Pastor, Del Ray Baptist Church, Alexandria, Virginia; author, *Pure in Heart: Sexual Sin and the Promises of God*

“Huge, if true! As I read this book, named after the authors’ hugely popular podcast, line after line hit me with life-giving gospel hope. In fact, I started sending quotes over to my wife but soon realized I was effectively texting her the whole book. What a tragedy that so many who declare or defend gospel doctrine have failed to develop gospel culture. What damage this has done to Christ’s body and witness. And what an incredible tonic this book will be for those committed afresh to moving truths from head to heart to life.”

Dave Gobbett, Lead Pastor, Highfields Church, Cardiff; author, *The Environment*; Trustee, Word Alive

“I love this book. I love it for exploring God’s vision in his word for gospel doctrine to create a gospel culture in our churches. I love how it applies precious gospel truths like grace, justification, and glorification to honesty, hospitality, and honoring in church life. I love how it explores God’s vision for the preaching, leadership, and relationships in our church families, which is so compelling to the communities we’re trying to reach. I love it because it encourages and challenges Western evangelical churches—rocked by leadership scandals, denominational revisionism, and class tribalism—to rediscover God’s inspiring vision for his churches in which the love of Christ truly shapes and fuels our ministries and lives.”

Richard Coekin, Senior Minister, Dundonald Church, London; Director, Co-Mission

You're Not Crazy

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*To the Rev. Dr. T. J. Tims,
Friend and Pastor*

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Foreword

IN A CRAZY TIME, sanity seems insane. In an irrational time, reasonableness seems disloyal. In an angry time, peaceability seems provocative. We've seen this over and over again throughout history. Sometimes in order to keep your mind and your soul, you will feel as though you are all alone. That's often necessary. Sometimes God's call for you is to be the only one to say to injustice, "No," or to say to the invisible, "I see you," or to say to the mistreated, "I believe you."

And yet, though that willingness to stand alone is necessary for the sanity of any society or any family or any church, we also know that no one can withstand craziness alone—at least not forever.

A generation ago, sociologist Peter Berger wrote about the way that "plausibility structures" work¹—the way that those taken-for-granted assumptions of the community around us can change not just what we believe but even what we *consider*:

To deny reality as it is has been socially defined is to risk falling into irreality, because it is well-nigh impossible in the long run

1 Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967; repr., New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1990), 39.

to keep up alone and without social support one's own counter-definitions of the world. When the socially defined reality has come to be identified with the ultimate reality of the universe, then its denial takes on the quality of evil as well as madness.²

Much of the craziness of our time is the effort to skew the plausibility structures, sometimes even to force a kind of irrationality as a way to prove one's loyalty to the tribe. If Berger is right, then our typical strategy—just waiting for the fever of that craziness to break—is dangerous not just to the individuals caught up in it but to future generations as well. After all, what is accepted as plausible in one generation—sometimes enforced by loyalty tests—becomes the default for generations to come.

That's why your ministry—whatever it is—is so important. You are not just serving the people in front of you at the moment. You are not just connecting isolated individuals to a community (although you are doing that). You are also connecting the community to reality, to a truth that is not “useful” but transcendent and personal. You are not just helping people to live their lives with flourishing and integrity (although you are doing that), but you are also pointing them to what they can't see, to what the anchor holds behind the veil (Heb. 6:19). When people face the ultimate moment of death, they do not need shibboleths that prove they are “one of us.” They need to know “Is it true?” They need to know “Is he there?”

That's why we need the word of God through which we hear the voice of Christ, through which we are conformed to that great

2 Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 39.

community of believers from Abel to whoever first told you about Jesus to people living now but whose village you will never see and whose language you will never learn.

When you start to wonder whether you're crazy, you are pulled in a couple of different directions. You might isolate and just start to live within your own mind. That, ultimately, leads to a seeking for sensations just to give some imitation of life. Or you might assimilate—taking on the untrue assertions of those around you because it's easier. If you practice the expected falsehoods long enough, you might even start to believe them. Both of those ways lead to despair, to exhaustion, and ultimately to collapse.

You are loved and valued, and we need you healthy and whole. The church needs you—whether or not you're in vocational ministry—not to be paralyzed by self-questioning and a failure of nerve. That's why this book is important.

Ray Ortlund and Sam Allberry are wise and respected leaders throughout the world, but some of us have been able to see them up close. We've seen them ministering in our local church—teaching the Bible, counseling the bewildered, serving the lonely. We've seen them take those who believed their ministries were over—very sane people who started to wonder whether they were “crazy”—and encourage them, pointing them to the sort of renewing of the mind and transfusing of hope that can come only from presence rooted in the word and enlivened by the Spirit.

This book will help you in your calling, steadying you for turbulent times, without hectoring you with preachy imperatives. This book is not “Do it more!” or “Do it better!” or “Do it like me!” This book is instead more like a couple of trusted friends who are saying, “You're not crazy; we see it too. You're not imagining how

hard it is. And you're not wrong about how overwhelming it is. But here's what we've found, and here's how you can find it too."

Ultimately, that's not about "experts" teaching you "technique." That's what led so many churches and leaders to insanity in the first place. This approach is much more like those in first-century Galilee who heard a man speak like they'd never heard before, and who said to their friends, "Come meet this Jesus, from Nazareth. I can't really describe to you what he's like. Just come along with me, come and see."

The end result of that is the sort of sanity that's not just the absence of craziness, the sort of ministry that's not just the presence of "effectiveness." The end result is a personal encounter that the old hymns tell us about:

Yes, 'tis sweet to trust in Jesus,
 Just from sin and self to cease;
 Just from Jesus simply taking
 Life and rest, and joy, and peace.³

You're not crazy. You're not forgotten. And you're not alone.

Russell Moore

EDITOR IN CHIEF

CHRISTIANITY TODAY

3 Louisa M. R. Stead, "'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus" (1882), Hymnary.org, accessed December 15, 2022, <https://hymnary.org/>.

Introduction

LIKE MANY PEOPLE, I (Sam) use an app to keep track of my health. I make notes of my sleep quality, weight, exercise, and (if I'm really being diligent) my caloric intake. I can see all this at a glance and measure which way things are trending from week to week. It's been useful. I live with Crohn's disease, and these metrics give me a basic sense of how I'm doing. The trouble is, of course, all those metrics that I need to track for Crohn's could be going well but I could still be seriously unwell. After all, there's more than one way to be sick.

The same is true of our churches. I've had the privilege (a great privilege it is) of being in theologically careful churches for the whole of my Christian life. I don't take this for granted. At each of these churches, the Scripture's authority drove all our ministries and teaching. We wanted to be biblical. In each case, the congregations were encouraged to listen to preaching with their Bibles open and to make sure what was being taught lined up with what was in the text. Teachers were always open to correction, and I continue to rejoice in the blessing of the many years I sat under their faithful and careful exposition.

But there's more than one way to be unhealthy. It's possible for any of us to be theologically careful and still be seriously sick. This first came home to me when I read through 1 Timothy and reflected on Paul's instructions for the care of widows:

If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (1 Tim. 5:4–8)

Did you spot it? I don't know how many times I read this text without noticing it myself. In that last line, Paul shows that not providing for relatives isn't merely a serious sin of omission; it's a denial of the faith. I'd always seen denying the faith as a *theological* failure: At some point, someone starts to believe what is false, or he begins to deny what is true. He goes off the rails doctrinally. But here we see it's also possible to deny the faith *by what we do* (or, in this case, by what we don't do). It's entirely possible for someone who has never strayed theologically to *deny the faith* practically. But it's also possible for a whole church to affirm or deny the faith by either embodying it or failing to do so. That's why we have written this book.

We humans are culture creators. How we are around each other will always take on a particular relational dynamic, a shared

personality, a noticeable tone. It can never be otherwise. We shape one another in many complex ways, and a resulting culture always emerges. It's true of friendship groups, of workplaces, of families, and of churches. There will always be a vibe, a feel, an intangible but powerful way the group tends to *be* when together.

Every church has its own culture. The question is, How fully does its culture align with its doctrine? Whatever the answer, a church's culture always reveals whatever the people most deeply believe. Not every truth that's preached is believed down at the level of felt, shared reality. Some truths are given lip service, while others become deeply defining. The sorting process isn't always visible, but the outcomes will show themselves in a church's observable culture.

A pastor friend once said that it may be safer to confess sin in the bars and clubs of his city than in its churches. This shouldn't be. If the members of a church are merely keeping up appearances, if they, for instance, fear opening up about their sins and failings, those gospel truths aren't yet believed down at the level where the church's culture is formed. A church may formally believe in the forgiveness of sins and in the freedom of confession—its sermons and liturgy may affirm that grace for sin is abundantly available—but while this church seems healthy at the level of doctrine, it may be seriously unhealthy at the level of culture. To use Paul's stark language, they may be denying the faith they profess to believe. That is how the people in a church can affirm glorious theology but be weary in their hearts and in their witness.

That's a negative way to frame what our book is about. And let's all face that stark reality. But there is a positive message here too. We're longing for the beauty of Christ to shape every aspect of

INTRODUCTION

our churches—not only the content of our teaching but also the quality and flavor of our relationships. We believe that the culture of our churches, empowered by the doctrine of our churches, can make the presence of the risen Jesus a felt reality in this generation.

So, our plan in this book is to establish what we mean by “gospel culture” in our churches and to make a biblical case for why this is essential (chapter 1). Then, in the remaining chapters, we will (broadly) follow an order of service and think together about how we might try to reflect the beautifying impact of the gospel from our opening welcome to the way we’re sent out at the service’s end. On the way, we’ll cover the vital ingredients of honesty, honor, preaching, leadership, and mission, and we’ll think through what it might look like to make all this more “Jesus-y.”

This is the ministry that Scripture itself is calling all of us to. We ourselves have been struck by how full the category of *faithfulness* really is. It’s not gospel doctrine alone, but gospel doctrine creating gospel culture. The truth of Christ must shape our creeds and our sermons *so that* the beauty of Christ also adorns our life together as churches. Then we will be a prophetic presence in the world today.

What Is Gospel Culture, and Why Does It Matter?

*To them we did not yield in submission
even for a moment, so that the truth of the
gospel might be preserved for you.*

GALATIANS 2:5

HOW GOSPEL DOCTRINE connects to gospel culture became clear for me (Sam) when I ran into a long-standing church member at the store.¹ We had one short conversation, but it was emblematic of a much wider concern. She'd been going through a crisis, and we hadn't seen her at church for a few weeks, which was unlike her. So when I ran into her, I told her how much we'd missed her

1 Some content in this chapter is adapted from Ray Ortlund, "Justification versus Self-Justification," a talk given at the TGC National Conference, April 13, 2011. Available online at <https://media.thegospelcoalition.org/static-blogs/ray-ortlund/files/2011/04/TGCLecture.pdf>.

and how lovely it would be to see her in church again. She told me she couldn't come until she was doing better. She didn't want people to see her while she was feeling life's mess: "I'm waiting until the storm passes and I've got things back together enough to be able to walk back into the church building."

Her words were heartbreaking to hear. In her mind, church was a place she could come only when she felt like her life was together. She didn't even identify this as a problem. It was just reality for her. I saw in that moment that there was something unhealthy going on. Church should be the place we sprint to when things are at their worst, not the place we avoid until we've got our Instagram-worthy Christianity back in place.

I began to realize that there was a mismatch between the beauty of the truth and the culture of my church. The more I thought about it, the more clearly I saw the difference between the social dynamics of grace-justification and the social dynamics of self-justification.

We all need to examine this so we can enlarge our understanding of what it means to be faithful to the gospel. Yes, even the social dynamics of the gospel matter because, as Luther taught us, justification by faith alone is not just one doctrine among others; it is "the article by which the church stands or falls."² Luther also teaches us that justification by faith alone is hard to accept and hard to hold on to. In his commentary on Galatians, he writes,

2 Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Schriften], 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 40/3.352.3. Literally, "Because if this article [of justification] stands, the church stands; if this article collapses, the church collapses." See Justin Taylor, "Luther's Saying: 'Justification Is the Article by Which the Church Stands and Falls,'" *Between Two Worlds* (blog), The Gospel Coalition (website), August 31, 2011, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org>. Translations by Carl Trueman, whom Taylor credits.

[This doctrine] cannot be beaten into our ears enough or too much. Yes, though we learn it and understand it well, yet there is no one that takes hold of it perfectly or believes it with all his heart, so frail a thing is our flesh and disobedient to the Spirit.³

Based on Galatians, then, the gospel—and justification in particular—calls for more than doctrinal subscription. It also calls for cultural incarnation. It's not necessarily easy to follow through at both levels. It's impossible without Christ himself. But we would be unfaithful to settle for doctrinal correctness without also establishing a culture of grace in our churches and denominations and movements. In other words, if justification by faith alone is the doctrine on which the church stands or falls, what does it look like to stand rather than fall? Is it possible to fall while we think we are standing?

The book of Galatians and my conversation at the store show us that such confusion is possible. A believer or a church can trumpet the doctrine of grace-justification while, at the same time, being crippled with the dysfunctions of self-justification. In Galatians, Paul is pressing the gospel forward at both levels simultaneously—the doctrine and the culture. He couldn't be satisfied if the Galatians' only response to his letter would be to reassert justification by faith alone as a doctrine; it's clear from this letter that he also expects them to establish a church culture consistent with that doctrine. That, in Paul's view, is what it means to be faithful to Christ.

3 Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians: Based on Lectures Delivered at the University of Wittenberg, in the Year 1531 and First Published in 1535* (London: James Clarke, 1953), 40. Compare pages 56, 61, and 101. Style updated.

And that's the appeal we're making in this book. We will clarify it in this chapter and then develop it further in the rest of the book. We believe that the New Testament expects and helps our churches to nurture healthy church cultures consistent with their life-giving gospel doctrine. To make this case, this chapter proposes three theological convictions and then briefly unpacks three biblical passages.

Three Convictions

First, the classical Protestant doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, apart from all our works, is the truth. Article 11 of the Thirty-Nine Articles declares it clearly:

We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine and very full of comfort.⁴

This articulation of the doctrine reminds us of the objectivity, the exteriority, the *out-there-ness*, the *Someone-Else-ness* of our justification, as John Bunyan also reminds us in his *Grace Abounding*:

One day as I was passing into the field, and that too with some dashes on my conscience, fearing lest all was still not right, suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul, "Thy righteousness is in

⁴ Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, in *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (1877; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 494.

heaven.” And I thought I saw, with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God’s right hand, there, I say, as my righteousness; so that wherever I was or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, “He lacks my righteousness,” for that [righteousness] was right before Him. I also saw that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ Himself, “the same yesterday and today and forever.” Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. . . . Now I went home rejoicing for the grace and love of God. . . . Here therefore I lived, for some time, very sweetly at peace with God through Christ. Oh, I thought, Christ! Christ! There was nothing but Christ before my eyes.⁵

Second, self-justification is the deepest impulse in the fallen human heart. We might sincerely agree with the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. But deep in our hearts, it isn’t that simple, is it? Gerhard Forde helps us see ourselves:

The problem lies in the fact that the Old Being will not and cannot *hear* gospel no matter what one says. The Old Being will only use whatever is said as part of the protection, solidification in the *causa sui* project [the self-justifications we build], and translate it into or see it as a ratification of the legal system. That is, the Old Being will turn *whatever one says* into law.⁶

- 5 John Bunyan, *The Complete Works of John Bunyan* (Philadelphia: Bradley, Garretson, 1873), 59; style updated.
- 6 Gerhard O. Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 92.

We deeply desire to save ourselves. Legalism is our native tongue. At the same time, our sin includes a hidden filter blocking out clarity about our sin. Martyn Lloyd-Jones describes our lack of self-awareness:

You will never make yourself feel that you are a sinner, because there is a mechanism in you as a result of sin that will always be defending you against every accusation. We are all on very good terms with ourselves, and we can always put up a good case for ourselves. Even if we try to make ourselves feel that we are sinners, we will never do it. There is only one way to know that we are sinners, and that is to have some dim, glimmering conception of God.⁷

Our mentality of blind self-justification makes Paul's letter to the Galatians endlessly relevant to us believers. The Puritan William Fenner teaches us to see justification by faith alone as a constant resource:

As we sin daily, so he justifies daily, and we must daily go to him for it. . . . Justification is an ever-running fountain, and therefore we cannot look to have all the water at once.⁸

Justification by our own righteousness is not a Galatian problem only, or a Catholic problem only; it is a human problem

7 Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Seeking the Face of God: Nine Reflections on the Psalms* (1991; repr., Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 34.

8 William Fenner, quoted in J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 115; spelling modernized.

universally. It's a *Christian* problem. It's our problem. You and I are always, at best, an inch away from its dark powers. Indeed, it is possible to preach and defend the doctrine of justification by grace alone but out of motives of self-justification—and to do so with its bitter fruit. This kind of disconnect leads to bad things, even in churches that sincerely love the Lord.

Third, gospel doctrine creates gospel culture. When the gospel is taught clearly, and when the people of a church believe it deeply, it does more than renew us personally. The doctrine of grace also creates a *culture* of grace. In such a church, the gospel is both articulated at the obvious level of doctrine and embodied at the subtle level of vibe, ethos, feel, relationships, and community. In a gospel-shaped church, for starters, people are honest in confession, bear one another's burdens, and seek to outdo one another in showing honor.

But because of our second conviction—the power of our self-justifying impulses—getting and keeping both gospel doctrine and gospel culture in a church is difficult. Without the doctrine, the culture is unsustainable. Without the culture, the doctrine appears pointless. But really believing the gospel together requires deep change. We can be like the Pharisee described in Luke 18:9–14: “Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (18:9). The evangelist then recounts Jesus's parable. In the Savior's story, a Pharisee went to the temple, the place of substitutionary atonement. Why? He believed in it. But his heart was more devious than his belief. The Pharisee's self-justifying heart spilled over in an attitude of contempt toward the tax collector. Self-justification creates an outlook of aloofness, superiority, negative scrutiny, and

“Gotcha!” Though we hold to the doctrine of grace-justification, our deeper thoughts and feelings can slip into functional self-justification, and it shows.

Trusting in ourselves that we’re righteous and viewing others with contempt always go together. When we notice ourselves drifting into dismissive contempt, there is always a reason: a gospel deficit in our heart, however sincere the gospel profession in our head. We look at our doctrinal statements and our mental beliefs, and they seem to line up. But a tip-off that the gospel doesn’t yet have as deep a hold on us as we wish is whenever, like this Pharisee, we start looking for someone to judge, someone onto whom we can project our own guilty anxiety. If we need a scapegoat to preserve our own okay-ness, we aren’t really trusting in the perfect scapegoat that God provided at the cross. And a blame-shifting heart creates a culture of ugliness toward others. Justification by faith alone, by contrast, creates a culture of acceptance, warmth, beauty, and safety. As Paul encouraged the Romans, “Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7). The more clearly the doctrine is taught, and the more beautifully that culture is nurtured, the more powerfully a church will bear prophetic witness to Jesus as the mighty friend of sinners.

Three Key Passages

In recent years here in the US, we’ve seen a wonderful resurgence of gospel doctrine. I (Ray) went through my own gospel renaissance about twenty years ago, while preaching through Romans at First Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia. I rediscovered justification by faith alone, imputed righteousness, and Jesus as

our substitute. These great doctrines are right at the center of the gospel, and I found them thrilling. Our church felt like we were going through the wardrobe into Narnia as we saw Jesus in his grace and glory with fresh eyes. Many of us have been enriched, strengthened, and helped in recent years as the truth of the gospel has been clarified among us. But I can't see that we TGC types have experienced a corresponding resurgence in relational beauty. I don't know anyone who's downright mean. But I am convinced that the time has come to attend carefully, reverently, and joyously to building the intangibles of gospel culture that the doctrines themselves call for.

Paul in Galatians guides us in this direction—away from self-justification and toward grace-justification. Let's briefly consider three passages that introduce gospel culture.

First, in Galatians 1:10, we see that serving Christ frees us from groveling. Paul writes,

For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. (Gal. 1:10)

Why does Paul say that? He has just heaped anathemas on anyone who teaches a false gospel. Apparently, some had accused Paul of being a cowardly people pleaser because of his message of grace. Now he counters that accusation, effectively saying, “My anathemas in verses 8–9: Would a compromiser make such statements?”

But what is the gospel doctrine he embeds in 1:10, and how does Paul himself demonstrate the way it works out in gospel

culture? The doctrine implicit in Paul's declaration—that his heart is set on God's approval—is the all-sufficiency of Christ, a doctrine necessary to justification by faith alone.

Paul's view of Christ is high, reverent, uncluttered. Christ is the only one whose judgment finally matters. All Christians believe that. We believe that our personal validation comes not from ourselves or from other sinners but only from Christ. His approval alone is enough for us. That gospel conviction creates a culture of boldly independent nobility of mind, such as we see in Paul.

Paul cares intensely about people. He cares sincerely about their feelings, and he wants to please them. He says in 1 Corinthians 10:33, "I try to please *everyone* in *everything* I do." What a sweetheart this man is! He's widely adaptable because he respects people and their various ways of seeing things. How does he reconcile his desire to please people, on the one hand, with his deeper desire to please God, on the other?

When Paul faces a choice between pleasing himself and pleasing others, he pleases others. When he faces a choice between pleasing others and pleasing God, he pleases God. In fact, he's so clear about this that he states his position as a stark either-or: "If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Gal 1:10). He will not depart from Christ for anyone. His justification is in Christ alone, and to Christ alone he therefore gives himself in complete surrender, whatever price he might pay in human disapproval. Paul wants to please people for the sake of Christ, but he wants to please Christ more, so he's willing to be unpopular, even controversial. He is willing to be misunderstood and misjudged. He doesn't relish it. But neither is he threatened by it. And by his example, he's calling the Galatians and us to

follow him into the kind of trust in Christ alone that frees us from craving human approval too much.

That's the first indicator of gospel doctrine getting traction in our hearts. It's us trusting in Christ alone, even when people misjudge us. The ultimacy of Christ does not position us to go with the crowd, not even the Christian crowd, as if we need Christ *plus human applause* to stand on our own two feet.

In his brilliant essay on justification by faith alone, J. Gresham Machen rightly calls this doctrine

an answer to the greatest personal question ever asked by a human soul—the question, “How shall I be right with God? How do I stand in God’s sight? With what favor does he look upon me?” There are those, I admit, who never raise that question; there are those who are concerned with the question of their standing before men but never with the question of their standing before God; there are those who are interested in what “people say” but not in the question of what God says. Such men, however, are not those who move the world; they are apt to go with the current; they are apt to do as others do; they are not the heroes who change the destinies of the race. *The beginning of true nobility comes when a man ceases to be interested in the judgment of men and becomes interested in the judgment of God.*⁹

It is so freeing to stop itching for human recognition. It is so freeing to get up and follow Christ, though inevitably some will find fault. It is so freeing to be that deeply bound to Jesus. If he

9 J. Gresham Machen, *God Transcendent* (1949; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 89–90; emphasis added.

is all our justification, all our okay-ness, then we can hold our heads high. The doctrine of justification creates a culture filled with noble servants of Christ who can think for themselves. Pastors like that can change the course of history.

Second, in Galatians 2:11–14, we see that trusting Christ emboldens us to fight oppression. Paul writes,

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. The rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

This passage alerts us to the danger of absolutizing mere tradition. Peter did that, and Paul calls him out for it. There is nothing wrong with holiness located in Jewish traditions. But there is something wrong with absolutizing and enforcing that tradition because Christ fulfills the ritual laws of Moses. When Peter distances himself from the unkosher Gentile believers, he is, in effect, throwing redemptive history into reverse gear. What is he saying by his behavior? He’s saying that Gentile believers must adapt to Jewish culture for them to be good enough for Jesus—and for Peter! What an insult to the finished work of Christ on the cross. How demeaning to those Gentile believers. What an abuse

of the book of Leviticus. What an arrogant exaltation of Peter's traditional sensitivities. What a violation of justification by faith alone. And what a pathetic church culture.

And Peter knew better. God had taught Peter, through the vision of the sheet coming down with the unclean animals, that "what God has made clean, do not call common" (Acts 10:15). So here in Antioch, what drives Peter is not ignorance, nor a deeper insight into the gospel, but fear—fear of church politics, fear of being disinvited to preach at future conferences in Jerusalem: "He drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party." When Peter denied Jesus back in the gospels, he was panicking for his physical self-preservation. Here in Antioch, he's denying Jesus again, this time by panicking for his social self-preservation. Under that primitive fear, Peter falsified the gospel—not at the level of doctrine but at the level of culture. He was forcing these Gentile believers to conform to Jewish customs in order to be acceptable to God as full members of his church (Gal. 2:14).

Paul twice calls it hypocrisy (2:13). It feeds posturing, posing, wanting to be perceived in a certain way, and wanting to be identified with certain people or on a certain bandwagon. What is this fear, but the empty drivenness of self-justification?

Hypocrisy can be a powerful force among us Christians. Peter's hypocrisy was so contagious that even Barnabas was swept away. Paul alone had the courage to stand up and oppose Peter openly. We can be glad he did, because the gospel was at stake—the gospel for Galatia and for all of us everywhere. If Paul had caved along with Peter, the spread of the gospel would have stalled because the gospel would have been accessible only to those few people who could embrace Jewish Christianity as the best Christianity.

Earlier in the chapter, Paul wrote how, at another moment of decision, he took a bold stand “so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” (Gal. 2:5). Both there and here in 2:14, Paul insists on the gospel as more than a bare theological datum. What does this tell us? It tells us faithfulness is more than saying, “Justification by faith alone is the truth.” Faithfulness also follows through on the relational implications. If we today allow ourselves to be less than faithful, we unsay with our actions what we confess with our mouths.

But we might not notice, if all we do is look at the doctrine and think, “Of course that’s what I believe.” Peter knew what he believed too. Paul says in 2:16, “We [you and I, Peter] have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith.” Peter never changed his doctrinal position. What he did was deconstruct the culture entailed in the doctrine. In 2:15–21, Paul goes on to show that Peter’s behavior rebuilt the culture of self-justification he’d torn down (2:18). Peter’s actions nullified the grace of God and desecrated Christ’s cross (2:21). And Peter was an apostle! In fact, everyone involved in this sorry episode was a Christian believer. As we’ve said before, self-justification is a Christian problem. In Antioch, it was even an apostolic problem. Preserving the truth of the gospel in each generation is no simple matter. Let us never think we’re above betraying the truth we love.

Galatians 2:11–14 pushes us to search ourselves with deeper questions. We must ask more than, Do we subscribe to the doctrine of justification by faith alone? We must also ask, Are we keeping in practical step with that doctrinal truth? Do we assess our faithfulness with *both* considerations? Paul included applying the gospel within his vision for faithfulness to the gospel: “I saw

that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel” (2:14). So now we know. The gospel is more than a place to stand. It’s also a path to follow.

John Stott calls Paul’s confrontation of Peter “without doubt one of the most tense and dramatic episodes in the New Testament.”¹⁰ Sometimes we can’t change any other way. Paul’s apostolic boldness helped Peter see the all-sufficient Christ with greater clarity, reconsider his behavior, and get back in step with how gracious God really is.

What, then, is the doctrine embedded in Galatians 2:11–14, and what kind of culture does that doctrine create? The doctrine is that everyone who simply trusts Jesus for their justification is clean before God, whatever their background. They don’t need to add another layer of acceptability to man in addition to Christ’s merit. If God declares us kosher through Christ alone, who can demand more? And the culture created by that doctrine is one of bold freedom and wide acceptability. Self-justification creates a culture of demanding oppression—though people passionately committed to Protestant doctrine can fall into it, as in fact Peter did. But Jesus said, “My yoke is easy” (Matt. 11:30).

What stands out to us about Galatians 2:11–14 is that Paul considers gospel culture just as sacred as gospel doctrine. He fought for that culture because the doctrine of grace-justification cannot be preserved in its integrity if it is surrounded by a culture of self-justification.

Finally, in Galatians 4:17, we see that sensitivity to Christ makes us alert to selfishness. Paul writes of the legalistic false teachers:

10 John R. W. Stott, *Only One Way: The Message of Galatians* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 49.

They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.

And then in 5:15, he warns the Galatians themselves,

But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

These verses clarify for us the negative dynamics unleashed into a church by the mentality of self-justification. What kind of dark church culture emerges when a gospel culture doesn't? One of *selfish ambition* and *savage destruction*.

Galatians 4:17 exposes the manipulative power of exclusion. "They make much of you" can be paraphrased, "They are zealous for you. They are eager to win you over. They take such an interest in you. They seem to care about you so deeply." The false teachers appeared loving and concerned. But they had an ulterior motive. It was like chapter 2 in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Tom wanted to go fishing. But Aunt Polly had told him to whitewash the back fence. So Tom tricked a pal of his into doing the job for him by the clever power of exclusion. Mark Twain wrote, "In order to make a man or boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain."¹¹ But full inclusion in the church of Christ is easy to attain! All we need is Christ. And he gives himself away freely, on terms of grace. Our only part is to lift the empty hands of faith.

To accomplish their hidden purpose, the false teachers had to get Paul out of the way. They therefore encouraged a sense

¹¹ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876; repr., New York: Harper and Brothers, 1903), 33.

of grievance against Paul, making him an enemy (4:16). If the legalists could blur the people's hyperfocus on Christ—and Paul was a barrier to that purpose—then they could take control. So, they redefined acceptability within Galatian Christianity on their own fraudulent terms. The people, in their weakness, were falling for their false doctrine and conforming to their oppressive culture. Without a return to the good news of Christ crucified for unwashed sinners like us all, the heretics would own those churches as their own religious sandboxes to play in, their reign unchallenged. John Calvin comments,

This stratagem is common to all the ministers of Satan, of alienating the people from their pastor, to draw them [the people] to themselves [the false teachers] and having, so to say, disposed of the rival, to take his place.¹²

Paul is so disturbed by what the Galatians themselves cannot see that when he takes pen in hand at the end of the letter, he adds this:

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised. . . . They desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. (Gal. 6:12–13)

In other words, the heretics wanted to use the Galatians to enhance their own professional big-deal-ness. It was self-justification

¹² John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 82.

by numbers of conversions—and not conversions to Christ for his true glory but to their group for their own smug glory. Their behavior was the *opposite* of what Paul required of himself back in Galatians 1, when he refused to compromise the gospel for the sake of human approval. He was a servant of Christ. The false teachers were promoters of self.

That self-devotion could lead only to savage destruction: “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.” How does an animal bite and devour its victims? With its mouth. The sins of the tongue can destroy a church’s worship, fellowship, and witness.

The Galatian churches were unstable to begin with. The reassuring finality of “It is finished” had been eroded away by the acids of legalism. And self-justification creates only a howling demand that nothing outside Christ can satisfy. No matter how well a person has been raised to be courteous, legalism must generate finger-pointing, accusing, slandering, and dividing. Whatever the outcome, no one wins.

When savagery erupts in any church, whether from the congregation or from the leadership, the problem is not a lack of niceness. The problem is a lack of gospel. But wherever Jesus reigns by his truth, love reigns as “a mutual protection and kindness.”¹³ Paul was a man of courageous, apolitical independence. He was also a man of love, humility, and warmth:

You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve

¹³ Calvin, *Galatians*, 102.

one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Gal. 5:13–14)

Strong principles and humane relationships *together* mark a church as truly faithful to the gospel.

What, then, does it look like for a church to stand, rather than fall, by the gospel of justification by faith alone? It means that a church teaches the doctrine of grace-justification while that church also builds—and inevitably protects—a culture of grace-justification. In that kind of truly faithful church, no one is cornered or pressured to conform to a mere human demand. Everyone is freed to grow in grace, in gentle harmony with the other members. If confrontation is ever required, it is only “so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” (Gal. 2:5). That cannot be a personal smackdown; it may only be the defense and confirmation of the gospel in both doctrine and culture.

For some churches, this larger understanding of gospel faithfulness might require repentance and reformation. We might not be as gospel-centered as we thought. Sadly, given human nature, nothing is easier for even a Protestant church than to enshrine the doctrines of Christ within a culture of ego. That is how we, in effect, de-gospel the gospel. And we end up dividing what the gospel unites. The gospel unites pastoral manliness with pastoral tenderness, and all other biblical polarities, as we see strikingly in Paul and perfectly in Jesus. How, then, with our destructive hearts, can we bear faithful witness to the gospel today? Is it even possible? Yes, if we will follow Paul’s instruction: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16).

Walking by the Spirit is not mechanical or formulaic. It's costly at a deeply personal level. But there is no other way. It means more than theological alertness. It means real-time dependence on God. It means putting ourselves under the judgment of his word. It means being forgiven constantly, making endless midcourse corrections, and following Christ with daily crucifixions of our pride.

In the flesh, we Bible-believing people shape our churches into doctrinally correct cultures of ugliness. But in the Spirit, and only in the Spirit, our churches become imperfect but visible proof of Jesus's truth and beauty. This is the faithfulness our generation must see.

Discussion Questions

1. As you read chapter 1, what was the one insight that stood out to you most, and why?
2. What could your church's culture more and more look like as the doctrine of justification by faith alone exerts its intended authority?
3. By God's grace, what new steps can your church take toward gospel doctrine creating gospel culture?

From Mere Knowledge to Shared Beauty

We don't believe what we've written in each chapter to be the final word, but we hope it will be the catalyst for constructive conversations in all our leadership teams and churches. So, at the end of each chapter, we've included a short dialogue between us that reflects the ongoing way we're working on these important themes. We hope you'll take these dialogues and continue them with your own teams and friends.

Sam: There can be a danger when we are rightly captivated by truth. As you found teaching through Romans, Ray, you want to get doctrine right? It matters. But particularly if you're predisposed to being a thinking type of person, it's easy for you to be focused there on getting doctrine right, getting your beliefs correct. It's easy, then, to have a natural blind spot to what it means to have an experience of what the doctrine is producing through you in the lives of other people.

Ray: For years, Sam, as a pastor, I didn't even realize that in emphasizing doctrine, I was feeding my pride. I don't think it's possible to be overly intellectual, but it is possible to be underrelational. The intellectual-only ministry sustained my preaching but only the preaching. In just bearing down on the correctness of the doctrine, I didn't realize how overbearing I was toward the people without realizing it.

Sam: I spent a few years doing campus ministry in Oxford with all these bright, young students. All of them had a huge capacity for thinking, reading, studying, and articulation. They wanted to be stretched, and they wanted to be fed. It was a wonderful context in which to teach. But the danger comes when you don't go beyond just teaching. There were things I wanted to get into a student's head. And once I'd gotten them into the student's head, I felt my job (and the student's job) was done. But while imparting knowledge is a glorious thing, it's woefully incomplete.

Ray: And it can even be a betrayal of the gospel. Because what exploded across the Mediterranean world in the first century was not brilliant ideas. What exploded and captivated the Roman Empire was a new kind of community, a new experience of community.

Sam: Yes, and that raises another dimension of what we're doing in this book: What is at stake in having gospel culture isn't just the internal health of a church, though that is crucial, but also our capacity to compel the world with it in our message of Jesus. It seems to me that, particularly in the cultural moment we now find ourselves, there's so much anger, polarization, and anxiety that relational beauty—more than any other time in my lifetime—will be so magnetic, so needed, so unusual, and so attractive to people who might not like what we believe but who find that kind of relational beauty hard to resist.