

# DON'T HOLD BACK

LEAVING BEHIND THE AMERICAN GOSPEL  
TO FOLLOW JESUS FULLY

# DAVID PLATT

SNEAK  
PEEK



SAMPLE  
ONLY

UNCORRECTED  
PROOF

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF RADICAL

**DON'T**

**HOLD**

**BACK**



Leaving Behind the American Gospel  
to Follow Jesus Fully

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MULTNOMAH

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For discouraged, disillusioned, damaged,  
doubting, and divided Christians . . .

and, most importantly, for the next generation who longs to  
see more of Christ.



## THE GOSPEL

The gospel is the good news that the one and only true God, the loving Creator, sovereign King, and holy Judge of all, has looked on men and women wonderfully, equally, and uniquely made in his image who have rebelled against him, are separated from him, and deserve death before him, and he has sent his Son, Jesus, God in the flesh, to live a perfect and powerful life, to die a sacrificial and substitutionary death, and to rise from the grave in victory over sin, Satan, and death. The gospel is a gracious invitation from God for sinners from every nation, tribe, people, and language to repent and believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins, turning from all idols to declare allegiance to Jesus alone as King and trust in Jesus alone as Lord. The gospel is a guarantee that Jesus will come again in glory to consummate his kingdom for the redeemed from every nation, tribe, people, and language in a new heaven and a new earth where all things will be made new in the light of his holy presence and where his perfect rule and reign will have no end. According to the gospel, all people who do not trust in Jesus will experience everlasting judgment from God, and all people who do trust in Jesus will experience everlasting joy with God.

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# INTRODUCTION

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## The Risk Before Us

“Are you willing to risk it all for this?”

Harry stared straight into my eyes as he asked the question. A follower of Jesus for decades longer than I have been alive, he wasn't wasting time on small talk. We sat at a small table in a reception room atop the Museum of the Bible in downtown Washington, D.C. Over Harry's shoulder, I could see the U.S. Capitol looming just blocks away.

My family and I had moved to metro Washington a few years prior, and I was walking through some of the most challenging and discouraging days I have ever experienced. Sure, criticism and opposition had come when I wrote a book a decade ago on the cost of following Jesus and taking back your faith from the American dream. But so had accolades and opportunities. Lots of them. The church I pastored at that time was growing, and I was invited to speak at all kinds of events in all kinds of places. In a strange twist, writing about spurning the American dream actually brought me

many things we associate with that dream.

But the scene was different now. Our church, like so many others, was struggling through the effects of a global pandemic. Our city and country had experienced tumultuous days of elections, protests, and riots. Tension over politics and race was causing deep divisions, leaving torn and tattered families and churches in its wake. I was still preaching about what it means to follow Jesus, but this time, I wasn't receiving accolades. Instead, my character was being attacked, my name was being slandered, my love for God and devotion to his Word were being questioned, and our church was being sued as part of an effort by a few members to oust our pastors (including me). I was weary and at the end of my rope.

Harry knew all this. He'd heard the rumors and seen the headlines. And after many conversations with pastors in similar situations around the country, he also knew our church family wasn't alone.

"You've had a good reputation with a comfortable job in a large church," he said. "Are you willing to risk it all for this?"

Silence sat at our table for a moment.

Harry looked to the side and began telling a story about a pastor friend of his who, many years before, walked through significant challenges in his church. Many in his congregation had accused him of being too "this" or not enough "that," and eventually the pastor made a fateful decision. In Harry's words, "He decided that the applause of people was more important to him than faithfulness to God." So the pastor changed course. To avert criticism, he gave in. He bent over backward to appease people, protect his reputa-



tion, and keep his position in the church.

“And it worked,” Harry said. “The pastor was able to stay, and the people were pleased.” But in the end,” Harry continued, “he lost something irreplaceable from his ministry and, more importantly, his life. Deep down, he knew he wasn’t willing to pay the price that conviction requires.”

Harry fixed his gaze on me and said gently, “Pastor, press on, and don’t hold back.”

After a pause, he asked if he could pray for me.

“I would appreciate that,” I said quietly.

We bowed our heads as Harry prayed for courage to press on, for grace to love the church and lead people to Jesus, and for God’s help in it all.

—

I’m writing this book because I don’t believe Harry’s words were just for me. I know I’m not alone when it comes to discouragement, frustration, and weariness as a follower of Jesus during these days. From my point of view at the epicenter of my country, I see carnage on all sides among Christians. Individuals who’ve experienced spiritual, emotional, relational, and even physical hurt in the church. Families strained and friends no longer on speaking terms. Elder boards split into enemy camps. Denominations being hijacked by one heated faction or another. Longtime church members walking away in disgust. Scores of young adults, college students, and teenagers disengaging from the church altogether. And so much of this, mind you, has so little to do with the message of Jesus or God’s saving grace for our world.

The effects in the church have been devastating. I know and hear from so many Christians who feel disillusioned or damaged by the church. Many are experiencing doubts about the church and in some cases about Jesus himself. In my darker moments, I am one of those Christians.

Each of our journeys to this moment is unique. Yet we find ourselves together in a historic struggle that is social, political, spiritual, and personal all at the same time. We've been turned off by the politics of the church or turned away by a lack of compassion in the church. We've witnessed scandals among church leaders or even endured sexual abuse by them. We've watched the preservation of long-standing institutions and the promotion of high-profile personalities trump compassion for hurting people. We've scrolled through endless slander on social media and become addicted to attacks between supposed Christian brothers and sisters. In it all, we've seen the viruses of pride, self-promotion, and lust for power infect not just our country but our church.

Add to these dynamics the apathy and complacency that already existed in cultural Christianity, and we find ourselves looking around on a Sunday morning and wondering, *Isn't there more to Jesus than this? Isn't there more to the church than this?*

And I'm writing this book to say, *There is.*

There is so much more to Jesus and so much more to the church than what you and I see in the world around us right now. And we can experience it. Better put, we can experience *him*. We can experience the awe-filled wonder of Jesus and the otherworldly beauty of his church. But to do so, some things are going to have to be different. Starting not in "those

people,” but in you and me.

That leads to the title of this book. I mentioned how a decade ago I wrote about the need for Christians to take back our faith from the American dream. But years later, having moved to the capital of my country and having experienced up close and personal the unhealth of the American church, I’ve come to a clear conclusion: *The problem is not just an American dream that has consumed our lives but an American gospel that has hijacked our hearts.*

What do I mean by an *American* gospel?

For far too long, we have traded in the biblical gospel that exalts Jesus above everything in this world for an American gospel that prostitutes Jesus for the sake of comfort, power, politics, and prosperity in our country. The evidence is all around us. Instead of being eager to unite around the glory of Jesus, Christians are quick to divide over the idolatry of personal and political convictions. Instead of enjoying the multiethnic beauty Jesus has made possible for us in the church, Christians are still segregating by the color of our skin. Instead of sharing God’s Word like it’s water for thirsty friends in a spiritual desert, we’re wielding it like it’s a weapon against our enemies in a culture war. As followers of the just Ruler of the universe, we’re ignoring rampant injustice around us, and we’re so caught up in calls to promote the greatness of our nation that we’re essentially disregarding Jesus’s command to take the gospel to all nations.

In other words, so much of what we’re experiencing in the church today—the discouragement, disillusionment, damage, doubt, and division—is a direct outcome of accepting a false gospel in our hearts. And if we would have the humility and courage to rediscover the true gospel, we could follow

Jesus's lead into a different future.

A future of fighting for—not with—one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, realizing that the true gospel transforms walls of hostility into otherworldly unity.

A future that turns the tide on centuries of racial division in the church so that who we are reflects the beauty of who Jesus is.

A future in which we trust all of God's Word (including the hardest parts) with conviction while loving everyone around us (including those with whom we disagree) with compassion.

A future of doing justice instead of merely debating it.

A future in which we all play our part in bringing every nation of the world to enjoy and exalt Jesus.

Ultimately, a future in which we realize, either in a fresh way or for the first time, that the goal, gift, and prize of the true gospel is God himself—a future in which you and I find in him everything our souls desire.

To be clear, finding the American gospel wanting does *not* mean being ungrateful for God's grace in the United States of America. I pastor a church that includes women and men—some in uniform—who have made untold sacrifices to protect and promote the freedoms and opportunities we enjoy. Our church also includes individuals and families who have happily immigrated from countries where these freedoms and opportunities don't exist. You'll hear stories about several of these people in the pages ahead, and I'm profoundly grateful for all of them. More to the point, I'm profoundly grateful for the United States, a country in which we're allowed the freedom to practice, preach, and promote the gospel of Jesus Christ. This book is simply about chart-

ing a way forward that holds loosely to the ideals of a country that, however blessed, is destined to one day fall and holds tightly to the gospel of a King who will never ever fail.

I don't presume to have all the answers. Nor do I presume that my own heart is totally disentangled from the faulty gospel I'm describing. I also don't promise that the road ahead will be easy for you or for me. From my own journey, I realize that enough destructive slander, frivolous lawsuits, and personal attacks will make anyone consider exiting the road altogether or at least slowing to a more safe and comfortable pace.

But in the end, I don't want to quit, and I don't want to coast. No matter what it costs, I don't want to compromise—not with the gospel of God. In other words, I don't want to hold back. Because I'm convinced that there is so much more to Jesus and his church than the American gospel could ever offer, and with you and countless others, I want to experience and enjoy him to the full.



# 1

## FAMILY REIMAGINED

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### Coming Together Around Our Father's Table

I never could have dreamed how God would make me a father.

I have shared in different settings how my wife, Heather, and I struggled with infertility for many painful years. Believing that we couldn't have children biologically and that we were called to raise a family, we adopted our first son, Caleb, from Kazakhstan. Two weeks after returning home with Caleb and still adjusting to being a parent, we found out, to our shock and surprise, that Heather was pregnant. Apparently what happens in Kazakhstan *doesn't* stay in Kazakhstan. Within nine months, Joshua was born, and we were a family of four.

The dream expanded when, three years later, we adopted our first daughter, Mara, from China. Three months after

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that adoption, again much to our astonishment, Heather was pregnant again. Our third son, Isaiah, came along soon thereafter, and we became a family of six.

Years later, Heather and I were joyfully content until a dinner date one night when the subject of adoption came up in conversation. We hadn't even planned on talking about adoption that night, but by the time we gave our waiter the check, we were in tears and smiling, believing God was leading us to adopt again. About a year later, we were matched with a child in an orphanage overseas whom we've named J.D., and for a number of reasons I won't go into here, we are still waiting to bring him home.

In the meantime, Heather and I were both reading Psalm 127 one day in our alone time with God, and we each sensed God calling us to bring another child, specifically a baby, into our home. So we started another adoption process, and months later we received information about a mom who was soon to give birth to a baby girl and desired to place her with a family for adoption. We were told that this birth mom already had a name picked out for her daughter, which was slightly disappointing because Heather and I had always said that if God gave us another girl, we would love to name her Mercy. But this obviously wasn't going to keep us from moving forward in this process, so we got to know this birth mom, and do you know what name she had chosen for her child?

Mercy.

This beautiful baby girl was two days old when she came into our care, and she officially became Mercy Platt as I was finishing writing this book.

When I sit down with my family for dinner, I think back

to the times when Heather and I begged God for children and wondered if he would ever answer. Then I look around the table in awe and think, *I didn't even know to ask for this*. I never could have pictured this family portrait that God has painted.

Yet here at the outset of this book, I want to give you a glimpse of a family that is much larger, far more beautiful, and infinitely more unimaginable than my own. It's a family of sisters and brothers with different facial features and skin colors. They think differently. They live by different social norms. They come from different backgrounds and nations. If you were to see the people in this family assembled anywhere in the world—say on that field of dreams in Iowa or out on the Serengeti Plain—you'd think, *What on earth could such a wildly different bunch of people have in common?*

Imagine yourself around the dinner table with them in my country. See the faces of two Christian teenagers from wildly different church and cultural backgrounds, enjoying each other's company. See the believer from a predominantly Muslim country who recently became a U.S. citizen, talking to a Baptist war veteran who serves in law enforcement. Keep going around the table to a twenty-six-year-old Pentecostal social activist living in shared housing, laughing with a retired conservative Presbyterian lawyer. Sitting next to them is a Christian immigrant from Central America, just arrived with no documentation, who's passing the potatoes to a MAGA Facebook group leader who became a Christian in central Florida. What in the world could have drawn all these people together?

The answer to that question is the most important thing



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they could ever have in common. Each of them has the same heavenly Father. Each of them has been adopted by God through the gospel, and they've all been welcomed into his family as his sons and daughters. And out of the overflow of his surprising love for them, they possess a supernatural capacity to show surprising love to one another.

This family is called the church, and if you're a follower of Jesus, you're part of it. You're seated around the same table. And you're not just part of this family in the here and now. You and I will be part of God's family forever.

But today, before we reach eternity, we need to have an important family conversation. It's going to be difficult, but it needs to happen.

Are you ready?

Our church family is sick. Particularly the part of the family that makes its home in America.

Instead of enjoying one another's company at the table, encouraging one another, and loving one another in word and deed, we're caught up in a cultural climate that makes us quick to accuse, belittle, cancel, and distrust one another. Even more than being divided, so many sisters and brothers (i.e., so many of *us*) are hurting and feeling hurt by one another. So hurt, in fact, that many are leaving the table, while multitudes of outsiders see our table and want to get as far away as possible from it.

But, brothers and sisters, shouldn't we want to be made well? Shouldn't we long to experience what it means to be part of an unexplainably glad family before an unimaginably good Father?

**“THAT THEY MAY BECOME PERFECTLY ONE”**

Jesus is the master of unity, and he brought together a band of very different personalities to prove the point. In addition to calling uneducated fishermen—blue-collar types kept out of socially elite circles—he called Matthew, a wealthy tax collector who cared so little about political allegiance to his own country that he collected taxes for their Roman oppressors. On the other end of the spectrum, Jesus called Simon, a Zealot from an occasionally militant anti-government movement. Can you fathom it? Members of the extreme right and the extreme left—essentially political enemies—spending every waking moment with one another?

I’m sure it wasn’t always easy, but it worked. They learned to put up with one another. They learned to lay down their lives for one another. This kind of togetherness is what Jesus wanted for them. Unity was his vision for their future. In fact, in his final prayer for them before dying on their behalf, he prayed that they would stick together and show the world a supernatural picture of his love (see John 17:20–26).

Ultimately, they did just that. They started the church, where the differences among new disciples only multiplied. They were women and men, rich and poor, young and old, slave and free, Hebrew and Hellenist. Gentiles started joining in droves, and Jews hated Gentiles. Yet once Jewish disciples truly met Jesus, everything changed. Paul, an ethnic Jew and by his own admission a Pharisee of Pharisees, spent his life loving and sacrificing for people he once abhorred.

In the end, ethnic Jews, wealthy Romans, and impoverished Gentiles from all kinds of pagan backgrounds were joined together in the family of God. Jesus had prayed that they would stick together, and they did. As a result, the mes-

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sage of the gospel spread throughout the world. That's why you and I are here today. And if we can model the way of those who've gone before us, if we can embody Jesus's prayer for unity today, then we'll play our part in passing on the gospel for generations to come.

Despite Jesus's prayer for unity, we've discovered all kinds of reasons to divide his family into opposing camps, and the emotional and spiritual fallout is proving ruinous. We'll talk more in the next chapter about how we divide into different churches based on the color of our skin. But we divide over more than skin color. We divide politically. Research shows that a majority of churchgoers prefer attending church with people who share their political views, and few attend services alongside people with different political opinions.<sup>1</sup> We divide theologically over differing views on spiritual gifts, the end times, modes of baptism, and leadership in the church. We divide stylistically over different perspectives on music, service length, church décor, and a plethora of other preferences.

To be clear, it's not necessarily bad to hold different views on these things. After all, I don't expect every Christian in metro Washington, D.C., to attend the church I pastor, a church where we do things in a particular way based on particular convictions. I praise God for gospel-proclaiming, Bible-believing pastors and churches across our city (and around the country, for that matter) who do things differently based on different convictions, and I want them all to reach more people for Jesus. But just because we don't all attend the same church doesn't mean we can't all walk together in Christian unity.

So is there a way to be in genuine, caring, deep fellowship

with people who are very different from us, just like we see in the Bible? I believe there is. Even when we have differing (and even opposing) opinions, preferences, and political views, there is a way to show supernatural love for Christians who might be quite different from us. There is a way to cultivate this kind of loving unity in our local congregations, in the broader church in our country, and in the body of Christ around the world.

And it starts with understanding who unites us, what's worth dividing over, and what's not.

### **Three Buckets**

Picture three buckets with me. In the first bucket are clear, biblical beliefs and practices that unite all followers of Jesus. This bucket contains the gospel. To summarize, the gospel is

the good news that the just and gracious Creator of the universe has looked on hopelessly sinful men and women and has sent his Son, Jesus, God in the flesh, to bear his judgment against sin on the cross and to show his power over sin in his resurrection so that anyone in any nation who turns from their sin and themselves and trusts in Jesus as Savior and Lord can be forgiven of their sin and reconciled to God for all of eternity.

The first bucket also contains the authority, inerrancy, and sufficiency of God's Word and includes the clear and direct truths and commands found therein. As we'll explore in an upcoming chapter, the Bible is the supreme and sufficient foundation for what we believe and how we live as followers

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of Jesus.

Christians divide from non-Christians over beliefs and practices that fall into this first bucket. For example, if someone says that Jesus isn't God, that salvation isn't by grace, or that Jesus didn't die on a cross and rise from the grave, then we should love and care for that person, but we can't worship with them, because they simply don't worship the same God or believe the same gospel. Likewise, if someone denies the authority and sufficiency of the Bible, then they aren't a follower of Jesus, and we don't unite with them in our faith. Instead, we love them as a non-Christian, and we give our lives to lead them to Jesus.

The second of our three buckets contains beliefs and practices that unite followers of Jesus who join together in a local church. This bucket includes things Christians might disagree about from one local church to another.<sup>2</sup> For example, one church might believe that they should baptize babies, and another church might believe that they should baptize only believers in Christ. One church might believe that women and men should both be biblically affirmed as pastors, while another church might believe that only men should be biblically affirmed as pastors. One church might believe that God still gives the spiritual gifts of prophecy, tongues, and healing today, while another might believe that those gifts aren't active in the church now as they were in the past. While Christians often divide into different churches and denominations based on beliefs and practices in this second bucket, they still celebrate one another as followers of Jesus and work together for the spread of the gospel in the world.

The third bucket contains beliefs and practices about

which even Christians in the same local church disagree. Members of a local church might agree about baptism, spiritual gifts, and leadership in the church, but they might disagree about how the end times are going to unfold. They might disagree about political choices and a variety of other personal convictions. Even though these Christians might hold their convictions strongly, they choose not to divide into different churches based on those convictions.

### **Confusing the Buckets**

Problems for unity in the church begin when we confuse these buckets and forget how to love people whose beliefs in any bucket are different from ours. Let me illustrate.

During recent elections in the United States, I heard many Christians and even church leaders say, “You cannot be a Christian and vote for \_\_\_\_\_,” and they would put a candidate’s name in the blank. Interestingly, I heard Christians from different sides of the aisle inserting different names into that sentence. This language catapulted a voting choice into the first bucket, inevitably leading Christians to question one another’s faith because of the way they chose to vote. But surely opinions about who should be president of the United States aren’t of the same importance as convictions about the essence of the gospel or the authority of God’s Word.

One Sunday morning, I made an unintentionally provocative and surprisingly (at least to me) controversial statement during the 2020 election cycle. I told our church family, “We are not going to divide over [how you] vote here.” I explained that if people thought we should divide over this issue, then this may not be the best church for them and perhaps they should be in a church that shares their conviction. I commu-

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nicated that we would sincerely bless them as our brother or sister in Christ if they made that decision: “As long as that church is preaching the gospel, we don’t begrudge you in any way. . . . We’re not in competition with other Bible-believing, gospel-preaching churches in this city. We want to see all kinds of churches thriving for the spread of the gospel to people who need Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, we decided to put the issue of how people vote in a presidential election in the third bucket—identifying it as an issue about which Christians in our church might disagree but over which we wouldn’t divide. And just in case you’re wondering, many of our members *passionately* disagreed on how to vote and still made the choice to remain united as a church.

Take a moment to picture the church family I was speaking to that Sunday morning. See a diverse and multiethnic gathering of people from more than one hundred countries. Looking out across their faces, I knew I had no hope of uniting them around third-bucket issues. And I was okay with that. Actually, I love that. Sure, it would be a lot easier if everybody believed everything I believe and preferred everything I prefer, but I don’t have everything right, and my preferences aren’t primary. I thank God for sisters and brothers in my life who love Jesus, believe the Bible, and sometimes come to different conclusions or have different desires than I do. These people stretch me, sharpen me, humble me, and challenge me to be more like Jesus.

The same is true in the wider church. I love being with sisters and brothers in Christ from other churches who differ on second-bucket issues. I get criticized for speaking at conferences or being in relationships with people who hold different theological views on second-bucket issues. But I can’t

imagine my life without friendship and partnership in the gospel with the broader body of Christ. I learn so much from other sisters and brothers, even (or especially) when some of our convictions differ.

In fact, just before writing this chapter, I returned from spending time with and speaking at events alongside two brothers in Christ who hold very different opinions on second-bucket issues. Still, I loved sitting around the table, enjoying meals, worshipping, praying, studying the Bible, and serving people in the name of Jesus with them. I came away from that time deeply challenged, uncomfortably stretched, and ultimately encouraged in Christ.

I'm convinced we're missing out on the countercultural wonder of what it means to be in the body of Christ if we aren't willing to kindly and respectfully disagree on third-bucket issues in our local churches and second-bucket issues in the broader church. It's time to learn how to hold firm to our personal convictions without compromising the unique and otherworldly unity Jesus has made possible for us in the gospel.

### **Carnivores and Vegetarians**

Thankfully, this isn't the first time in history that followers of Jesus have struggled for unity, and God has given us guidance for the kind of conflict we're experiencing today. In the book of Romans, Paul wrote to a cosmopolitan church where followers of Jesus disagreed about everything from the food they ate to the holidays they celebrated. Specifically regarding food, some said, "It's okay to eat meat," while others said, "We should all be vegetarian." Division threatened to hobble the church, in part because different groups



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thought everyone should hold the same beliefs about second- and third-bucket issues.

How could they preserve their unity? Paul didn't tell them to create different churches, one for carnivores and one for vegetarians. That probably would have been easier, just as it might be easier for our church in metro D.C. to separate according to political perspectives or a number of other personal convictions. Instead, Paul called the church to build unity around Jesus. He called them to live "in such harmony with one another, in accord with *Christ Jesus*, that together you may with *one voice* glorify the God and Father of our *Lord Jesus Christ*" (15:5–6, emphasis added).

How do we do that? We focus on Jesus, and we clarify which buckets we're dealing with.

Paul told the church at Rome that these issues were important, particularly at the individual level, but they didn't determine whether someone was a Christian or whether people could be in the church together. It was possible to be a carnivore Christian, just as it was possible to be a vegetarian Christian, and it was possible (or, better put, it was *good*) for them both to be in the same church. Paul encouraged every person to follow their conscience—doing what they believed best honored Jesus according to his Word—and to love those who held different convictions on these kinds of issues. Read Paul's admonition in Romans 14:5–8 carefully:

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of

the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

In other words, in matters where Christians are free to differ, individual believers are free to do whatever we believe best honors Jesus.

Look a little closer, though. Do you know what's really interesting in this passage? Paul wrote that it's good to have *strong* convictions about what we believe best honors Jesus, even in situations where we disagree with other Christians. This sounds counterintuitive, right? Since the aim in the church at Rome was unity around Jesus, we might expect Paul to have commanded, "Don't have strong convictions on issues of disagreement." Instead, he wrote the exact opposite: "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind."

*Fully convinced*—a high standard.

God commands us to be convinced in our own minds that what we're doing best honors him. If that's abstaining from certain food, so be it. If that's eating certain food, so be it. Now, we might think that makes the problem worse, but it doesn't, so long as we follow the rest of God's Word.

When we're dealing with issues about which we're free to disagree as followers of Jesus, God our Father tells us to love one another as if we're family—"with brotherly affection" (Romans 12:10). We should welcome one another and refuse to despise or pass unbiblical judgment on one another sim-

ply because we might disagree on some non-essential issue (14:1–3). Why? Because we're "walking in love" for one another (verse 15).

What does walking in love look like? At the very least, it starts with actively listening to and seeking to understand one another. In the words of James 1:19, we should be "quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." This command is particularly appropriate for us in a culture that entices us to share our thoughts and opinions through a screen instead of looking into the eyes of our brother or sister and listening in a spirit of love. A modern-day rendering of James 1:19 might say, "Be slow to snap, post, or tweet."

And just because we truly listen to one another doesn't mean we'll ultimately agree. But that's part of the beauty of Romans 14–15, because our Christian forebearers didn't agree either. After acknowledging differences of conviction, God tells his children that they have an "obligation to bear with" one another and to "please [our] neighbor for his good, to build him up" (15:1–2). What a worthy aim amid disagreements with brothers and sisters in Christ: to please and build up one another.

Let's be honest: There's a lot of attacking and tearing down these days, and it's coming from all sides. We demonize those who disagree with us, and we make reckless generalizations about and deliver sweeping condemnations of *those* people who *all* believe *that* craziness. Instead of having thoughtful discussions focused on listening first, we lob accusations like grenades. Instead of engaging in meaningful dialogue, we resort to personal ridicule. We have mastered the art of turning healthy disagreement into hateful disgust, and it leaves us damaged and divided. But this isn't the way

of Jesus, and it doesn't honor our Father.

## **WHAT (OR WHO) MAKES US A FAMILY**

In light of challenges to maintaining unity, some Christians conclude that we shouldn't discuss issues about which we disagree, believing such conversations only lead to further division.

But how can an issue divide us if it's not what unites us?

As part of an illustration I used one night during our family worship time, my wife, our kids, and I were sharing our favorite ice cream flavors. Of course, we're passionate about our flavors of choice. But would it make sense for us to avoid the topic of favorite ice cream flavors because it might lead to division? No, because having the same favorite ice cream flavor isn't what makes us a family.

In a similar way, it's possible for followers of Jesus to have different views on different issues—and discuss those differences—but still be a united church. Without question, our opinions or even convictions beyond what the Bible clearly and directly teaches about race, politics, or a number of other issues are far more important than ice cream preferences. But those opinions and convictions aren't what makes us a family. Jesus makes us a family, which means that if we're allowing those opinions and convictions to divide us, then we're making them more important to us than Jesus himself.

Second- and third-bucket issues can't divide us if Jesus is the one who unites us.

Let's gladly come together, then, under Jesus, and let's not be afraid to discuss all sorts of issues even when they're dif-

difficult. Where we might have disagreement and division, let's strive to love one another well, just as Jesus loves us. And when we talk through our views with God's Word as our authority and God's grace in our hearts, let's be open to potential changes in our perspectives. Maybe more importantly, let's be open to the healing that our hearts—and others' hearts—might desperately need amid disagreement and division.

I think about responses I have heard from church members when we created avenues to discuss issues like race and justice. One Asian American sister wrote to thank me, saying,

As an academic and social scientist who has been teaching on, and researching topics related to, race for over fifteen years in university settings, I am very comfortable having conversations around race and racism. However, what makes me discouraged or frustrated is that in the church, the place (i.e., the body of Christ) that is most central to my identity as a child of God, it seems rare or awkward (or deemed “divisive”) to have these conversations. That is why I am so excited to have this opportunity to truly integrate our faith in the gospel around issues of justice and race.

A Latin American brother shared how he is often shut down when he tries to have genuine discussions about these matters, but he was thrilled to see the church tackling the conversation with God's Word at the center. One Caucasian church member summarized so much of the feedback I re-

ceived:

I am concerned that Christians, on average, don't have the skills to have a genuine, loving, humble conversation when we disagree with someone on a personal, emotional topic. I think this is a skill that we ought to develop, and we are not representing Christ well if we do not develop this skill of dealing with conflict and remaining united with those with whom we disagree.

Indeed, this certainly seems like a skill worth developing in our lives and in the church.

What might happen among Christians and churches in the United States if we made it a priority to gather around the table with other sisters and brothers in Christ and prayerfully and lovingly discuss topics on which we disagree, with our ears attuned to God's Spirit through God's Word? What might happen if we spent less time posting, commenting, and tweeting about one another and more time being with one another? What might happen if we had the courage to leave our echo chambers and listen to people who believe differently from us?

## **RECOVERING HUMILITY**

If unity around Jesus is our aim and listening long and hard to those who are different from us is what we need, that will take a good measure of something that's fallen out of favor in American society: humility. After all, none of us has everything figured out, and we all have blind spots. Isn't it wise,

then, to hear from sisters and brothers who have different convictions than we do and humbly ask whether there's something we can (or need to) learn from them?

Toward this end, let's come together to ask sincere and honest questions of one another, and let's carefully avoid unhelpful assumptions or unfair conclusions about one another. Let's intentionally resist the temptation to assemble and attack straw men.

In the tumult of the last couple of years, I had a sharp disagreement with a couple of people who I know are followers of Jesus. I was upset at them, and they were upset at me. Unfortunately, I found myself telling others about my frustration with "*these people*" who "actually believe *this*" and "had the nerve to do *that*." I was fully convinced in my own mind—and I was convincing others—that what they believed was wrong and what I believed was right.

But then something happened. I was convicted that we needed to sit down and talk. Thankfully, they were willing to talk with me, and as I asked them questions, I soon realized that I had misunderstood and mischaracterized their position. While I still disagreed with them, I knew I hadn't listened to them humbly or spoken about them appropriately. I apologized and did what I could to make things right, not only with them but also with others I had influenced concerning them. And I hope that they did the same concerning me.

It's frightening to see how easy it was to wall myself off from truly seeing, understanding, and receiving people with whom I disagreed. I hate it when others do this to me, yet I was so quick to castigate them instead of doing the hard work of honestly listening and humbly responding to their

convictions. I readily admit my need for God's grace to grow in these ways.

Yet even in the middle of humble, honest conversations, we will still disagree on second- or third-bucket issues. And when we're dealing with second-bucket issues, we may find it best to be a part of different churches. But we can still relate to one another in a way that is very different from the world around us. By the power of God's grace in us, we can learn to handle our differences the way God commands us in his Word—with affection, sympathy, patience, kindness, gentleness, tenderness, and selflessness.

Forging unity in this way won't be easy. In fact, if my experience is any indication, it will be *really* hard. It requires a resolve to love one another in a way that is extremely countercultural in our country. It requires a commitment to live in peace with one another and protect one another despite passionate disagreements on some matters. But this kind of unity among believers is worth it. In a wearying world that is constantly beating us down, we all long for brothers and sisters who will stand with us and for us like we're family.

## **YOU ARE NOT ALONE**

When I was in the ninth grade, I was invited to a high school basketball camp. Upon arriving, I soon learned that the seniors at camp traditionally initiated the freshmen in not-so-pleasant ways. I remember sitting with another freshman in our dorm room when a senior burst through the door, picked my friend up off the bed, carried him to the bathroom, stuck his head in the toilet, and flushed. My friend came back with a shocked look on his face and wet, swirled hair on his head.



I was next.

The same senior grabbed me by the arms and turned to take me to the initiation ceremony's flushing throne. But as he turned, another senior stepped into the room and said, "Stop! We can't take him!"

"Why not?" the guy holding me asked.

My newfound senior buddy said, "That's Platt's brother."

You see, I had a secret weapon growing up: my older brother, Steve. I was a runt, but Steve was a giant. Not only was he big, but he also knew how to use his size. He was the heavyweight wrestling champion in the state of Georgia, and during the championship match, he picked up and body-slammed his three-hundred-pound opponent. In our high school, Steve Platt was a living legend.

The guy holding me looked me up and down and said, "This is not Platt's brother. This is Platt's left leg!"

It was a fair assessment when you compare my size at the time with Steve's leg. And I don't think this guy meant his words to be a compliment. But I was proud to be "Platt's left leg" that day, particularly when my would-be swirler sighed, put me back down, and walked out of the room.

That wasn't the only time that being related to Steve proved particularly beneficial. On one cold winter day, I wore a prized possession to school—a new coat my granddad had given me. I set it down in the corner of the classroom at the beginning of the day and went back at the end of the day to find that it was gone. Someone had stolen it.

My dad came to pick us up from school, and when I told him what had happened, he went in to talk with the principal. Meanwhile, I sat on a bench outside the principal's office. Steve noticed how upset I was and asked me what had

happened. I told him, and he immediately responded, “Let me see what I can do.”

While my dad talked with the principal, my older brother walked over to a guy who was the leader of a group known for petty theft. Steve pulled him aside and said, “My little brother’s coat is gone, and I’m guessing you know who might have it. I’d like that coat back first thing in the morning; otherwise, you and I are going to have a talk.”

The next morning, while sitting in my class, I looked out into the hall and saw Steve walking down the hallway. Guess what was in his hand?

Steve came to my desk, handed me my coat, and whispered in my ear, “David, no matter what happens to you, always know that your brother has your back.”

Fast-forward a few more years to when Steve and I had both married and moved away from home. While I lived farther away, Steve still lived near Mom and Dad, and I’ll never forget getting a call one night. I heard Steve’s voice shaking on the other end of the line. He was at the hospital, where our dad, our best friend for all our lives, had been rushed to the emergency room following a heart attack. Steve could hardly get any words out, but three were unmistakable: “Dad is gone.” We wept on the phone, and we promised to walk together through the grief ahead alongside our mom and other siblings.

This is what family is all about, right? It’s about walking through a hard, wearying world together. It’s about holding one another up and having one another’s back. While it’s not necessarily about body-slamming one another’s opponents, it is about being one another’s tender protector in a world that constantly tears us down.

Dear brother or sister in Christ, before our heavenly Father, I so badly and sincerely want to look you in the eye and simply say,

I am in awe that I am in an eternal family with you, and I want you to know that I have your back. You are not alone. As your brother, I am with you. Even if we're not in the same local church and even if we have a variety of sharp disagreements about second- and third-bucket issues—actually, I would say that especially if we're in different churches with sharp disagreements—I am still for you. I genuinely love you.

At the same time, I want to honestly and humbly confess my need for you to look me in the eye and say the same thing back to me as your brother in Christ. God has wired us to need and want otherworldly family like this. As followers of Jesus, we share a supernatural bloodline that supersedes ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic situations, political parties and positions, and personal preferences and opinions.

Despite all our differences, we are *one family* in Christ.

Our family is not fundamentally African American, Asian American, European American, Hispanic American, Native American, or even American. Our family is not fundamentally rich or poor. Our family is not fundamentally Republican, Democrat, or Independent. None of these things are grounds for division among us, because our family is fundamentally Christian. We are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people possessed by God himself (1 Peter 2:9). In the biblical gospel, we have been acquitted of

sin before God the Judge and adopted as daughters and sons by God the Father. And if we will realize and constantly remember this, we will experience so much needed healing not just in the church but in our lives.