

COLLIN HANSEN &
SARAH EEKHOFF ZYLSTRA



GOSPEL BOUND



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Living with Resolute Hope
in an Anxious Age

“Offers neither spin control nor image maintenance for the evangelical tribe,
but genuine hope.” —RUSSELL MOORE, president of ERLC

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Für Elise

—COLLIN

In memory of my father,
Timothy Ray Eekhoff (1953–1994),
who loved both good theology
and a good story

—SARAH

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INTRODUCTION

Why You're Anxious and Afraid

America seems to be in the midst of a full-blown panic attack,” the *New Republic* observed in 2019.¹ Maybe you’ve noticed.

The symptoms started in the late 1990s—high school students began having trouble sleeping and thinking, college students were more likely to feel overwhelmed, and adults scored higher on depression studies.² Between 1999 and 2017, suicide rates increased 33 percent.³

I (Collin) caught a glimpse of this anxiety spread when I asked a longtime friend about his ministry to young adults. We’d been young together ourselves, meeting at the selective, competitive university we both attended.

“What’s changed with young people over the last twenty years?” I asked him.

“Remember how hard it was for our classmates?” he asked. He meant the pressure to perform well, the anxiety of landing a prestigious job, the press of grades and graduate school applications. “Well, that’s everywhere now.”

He didn’t mean that the average American is fretting about graduate school but that, over time, the tight vibration of anxiety had intensified and spread. It’s no longer just the Ivy Leaguers who are living under immense pressure. Everyone seems to be feeling it.

When polling company Gallup asked Americans in 2018 whether they’d felt stress during much of the day before, 55 percent said yes—up from 44 percent in 2008, when the country was at the bottom of

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the Great Recession. Forty-five percent said they felt worry a lot, up from 34 percent in 2008.⁴

Then came 2020.

By mid-March, COVID-19 had shut down and stressed out most of the country. People worried about getting sick, about going to work (what if they exposed themselves or their families to the disease?), and about not going to work (how could they pay the bills?). They worried that the nation's health-care system would be overrun, that their local hospitals would run out of ventilators, that doctors wouldn't have enough personal protective equipment. At the same time, they worried about their savings accounts, about local businesses closing, about the economy sliding into recession.

The instability was exhausting. I (Sarah) would gather with friends once a week in a parking lot (so we could sit far enough apart in the fresh air) and compare notes: Whose job is changing? How many times were you able to leave the house this week? Which neighbor is making masks we can buy? How are we going to facilitate our children's e-learning while working from home?

By the end of March, 45 percent of Americans said stress from worrying about the disease was negatively affecting their mental health.⁵ In April, a government emergency hotline for emotional distress heard from twenty thousand people—compared with 1,790 in April 2019.⁶ An online therapy company said the number of clients jumped 65 percent from February to April.⁷

Then, just as states were beginning to relax their shelter-in-place restrictions, a white police officer in Minneapolis spent around eight minutes kneeling on the neck of African American George Floyd.⁸ Floyd's death was caught on camera, and the video was circulated widely online. Anxiety levels, especially among African Americans and Asian Americans, spiked.⁹ Protestors marched in nearly every American city, and some marches broke into looting and rioting. Social media exploded with debates over law enforcement and Confederate statues.

And that was before COVID cases spiked again, before many schools opted for e-learning, before the presidential election had even kicked off in earnest.

No wonder we're anxious.

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The Death of God?

BUT WE'RE NOT just anxious. We're also afraid. Because while God can certainly inspire holy fear (Hebrews 10:31), a world without him is even scarier.

When Friedrich Nietzsche declared the death of God more than a century ago,¹⁰ he glimpsed in part what we can see more clearly today—a declining social need for religion. During the twentieth century, as the countries of Western Europe became more educated and then wealthier, they lost much of their Christian faith. By 2018, Pew Research Center found that, in countries where people go to school longer, they attend church less often. Where lifespans are the longest, worship attendance is least common. And in wealthy countries, people pray less often.¹¹

Except in the United States.

“America’s unique synthesis of wealth and worship has puzzled international observers and foiled their grandest theories of a global secular takeover,” Derek Thompson wrote in the *Atlantic*. “Stubbornly pious Americans threw a wrench in the secularization thesis. Deep into the 20th century, more than nine in 10 Americans said they believed in God and belonged to an organized religion, with the great majority of them calling themselves Christian.”¹²

That number held steady through the 1980s. In fact, for years “we believed that . . . the mission field was [only] overseas,” author and speaker Tim Keller told church leaders at a conference on gospel-centered urban ministry.¹³ Cultural Christianity was so strong that nonbelievers showed up at Billy Graham evangelistic events in church buses. “When he gave you a twenty-minute Bible talk, you already had structures, a DNA, a worldview,” apologist Sam Chan told us. For most, conversion was largely a matter of tipping over into believing what you already had been taught.

Back then, belief was “thick,” Keller said. “Fifty years ago, virtually everybody had generic religious beliefs. They believed in a personal God, in an afterlife, in guilt and sin.” Not only that, but most Americans “also tended to respect [Christianity], or at least feel they ought to show some respect,” he said.¹⁴

In the nineties, though, Christianity began to slip. It’s hard to say exactly why—Thompson suggested perhaps the end of the Cold War

(which relaxed patriotic feelings and perhaps loyalty to our country's religion), the alignment of evangelicals with the Republican Party (which may have confused the identities of both), or 9/11 (an event whose ideological roots made religion seem dangerous).¹⁵

In 1987, 88 percent of Americans told Pew they “never doubt the existence of God.”¹⁶ But by 2017, only 56 percent believed in “God as described in the Bible.”¹⁷ Church attendance fell from 54 percent in 2007 to 45 percent in 2018/2019. Meanwhile, self-identified Christians dropped from 78 percent to 65 percent of the American population.¹⁸

Those former Christians aren't converting to another religion. They're dropping the faith—or at least an organized version of it—altogether. The percent of “nones,” or those who describe their religion as “nothing in particular,” rose from 8 percent in 1990 to 26 percent in 2018/2019.¹⁹

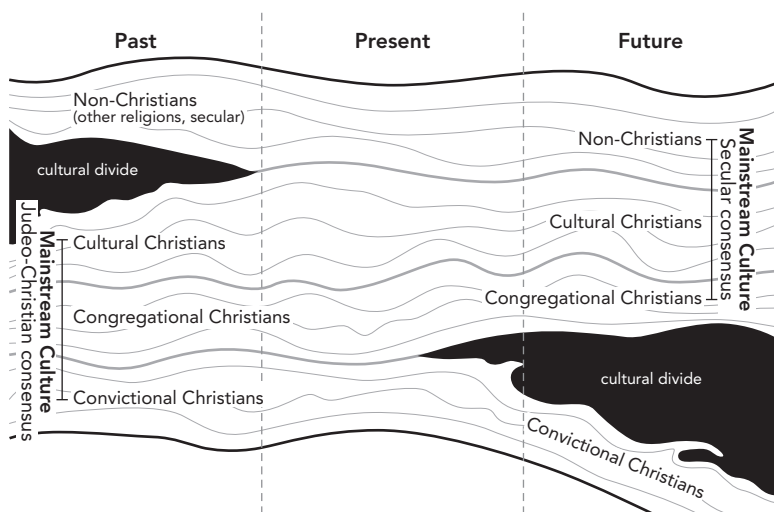
But the number of “evangelical or born again” Christians in America has stayed largely the same—28 percent in 2009 and 25 percent in 2018/2019.²⁰

So, what's going on?

Maybe the best way to understand the change is this: The number of committed believers (at least as most heartfelt Christians would define them) has remained steady. But nominal believers (researcher Ed Stetzer labeled them cultural and congregational—or Christmas and Easter—Christians) are slowly dropping their religious identity and, with it, their religious worldview.

“Nominal people tend not to stay nominal,” Stetzer wrote in *Christians in the Age of Outrage*. “And why would they? Unless there is cultural pressure and guilt (hello, Irish Catholics on Long Island, where I grew up!), there is no reason to keep following traditions that don't have meaning.”²¹

That's why same-sex marriage, illegal until 2015, is now so mainstream that opposing it—or simply refusing to participate in celebrating it—is grounds for a lawsuit. (Without a religious or theological reason to oppose it, why would you?) That's why transgenderism and nonbinary sexuality slid so quickly into cultural acceptance. That's why universities—many of which were founded by Christians—are now refusing to recognize Christian student groups that require leaders to hold to a traditional view of marriage.²²



Source: Ed Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage: How to Bring Our Best When the World Is at Its Worst* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2018), 28. Used with permission.

The nominal slide is also one key reason that cultural respect for Christianity is dropping. Confidence levels in religion fell from 66 percent in the mid-1980s to 36 percent in 2019, according to Gallup.²³ Pew reported that only about half of Americans think religion does more good than harm in society (55 percent), strengthens morality in society (53 percent), or brings people together (50 percent).²⁴

These changes are real, and a nominal Christian culture's disconnect from God has real consequences, even in the secular world. One of them is widespread anxiety and fear. If God's not in charge, who is? How do we know what's wrong or right—especially when the standards may change again tomorrow? If no one is holding our future, how can we make sure it's happy and secure?

Christians aren't exempt from worrying about the many changes that affect our culture—otherwise Jesus would not have needed to tell us not to be anxious (Matthew 6:25). If anything, Christians may have even *more* reason to feel unbalanced and a little scared. Why?

Not because of our faith—there isn't anything wrong with God or his plan of salvation. We know his love and his grace and his beauty.

And not really because of sin. We already know our world is broken. We know people are blinded and twisted. It's been that way since Eden.

No, the source of our anxiety in America is where those two—our unchanging faith and our changing culture—rub together. Many of us aren't used to being misunderstood, to being opposed, to having to defend what we thought was long-standing common sense. Anxiety and fear follow this perceived loss of security and support.

In addition, we're living in an era of media distortion unmatched in modern memory.

Media Versus Religion

IN 2007, PEW Research Center asked journalists whether they regularly attended religious services. As far as we can tell, it was the last time anybody's asked. Back then, about 8 percent of national news journalists (down from 14 percent in 1999) and 14 percent of local journalists (down from 22 percent in 1999) went every week, compared with about 40 percent of the general public.²⁵

The lack of exposure to and understanding of Christianity—and all other faiths—affects media coverage of events. Increasingly, *evangelical* is portrayed as a synonym for *white conservative Republican*, even though a third of Protestants are people of color²⁶ and even though religious people do a lot more than vote.

Don't misunderstand us: We love the news. (So much so that we both have journalism degrees.) And we believe that you can trust reputable sources to report on what's happening in the world. God pours *buckets* of common grace on us all through secular news outlets that help us follow voting trends, track scientific breakthroughs, and engage safety concerns. You'll see many reports and surveys cited in this book.

Yet nobody's denying that the news industry has endured a rough few years. Newspaper circulation is now at its lowest level since 1940,²⁷ and the audience for television news is mostly older than fifty.²⁸ Revenues have plummeted. The number of newsroom employees dropped 25 percent between 2008 and 2018.²⁹ Even the 2020 boost from Americans tuning in to constant coronavirus coverage didn't help for long.³⁰

The main culprit is the rise of news websites and social media—52 percent of Americans now get news from Facebook.³¹ But the news industry also suffers from a collapsing reputation, pushed down both

by accusations of “fake news” from politicians and by stories that turn out to be false or poorly reported. More than half of people on social media told Pew they expect news there to be “largely inaccurate.”³² Odds are that if you were online during the pandemic, you saw coronavirus and vaccine news that seemed completely fabricated. (It might have been.)

By its nature, the news generally isn’t calming or encouraging. One of the first things we learned in journalism school is that conflict makes the headlines. Negative stories—of pandemics or job losses or denominational splits—are also more likely than positive stories to be unusual or timely, which makes them more likely to be reported.

There’s an economic reason for this practice. It *works*. Negative magazine covers sell more copies. Negative television stories cause attention to spike. (People’s reactions to positive news stories are about the same as when they’re looking at a blank gray screen, researchers found.)³³ Even people who *say* they want positive news are more likely to *click* on negative headlines.³⁴

The more people read a story, the more advertisers will pay a news outlet to get in front of those eyes, the more revenue that news organization will make, and the more bills it can pay. Most news, after all, is a business. And reporting on conflict helps the bottom line.

I (Collin) have appeared on a number of national news programs, most of which have been hosted by professional and courteous journalists. But in 2020, I caught a behind-the-scenes glimpse of why so many Americans distrust the news. I was invited to appear on a reputable nightly news program and spoke at length the day before the recording with an inquisitive producer. I wasn’t told, though, until shortly before the recording that my segment would be adversarial. Or the identity of my supposed adversary. I did know we’d be talking about politics. (In fact, it’s been a long time since I’ve been invited by mainstream media to talk about anything except politics.)

I had never talked with the journalist before the program started. Nor could I see her or the person I was supposed to be debating (that’s common for TV news). With slanted questions, the host tried to amplify my disagreements with the other guest. Problem is, I largely agreed with what that guest said! So she tried to ask us the same questions from new angles. Then the other guest started agreeing with me! Clearly, this was not what the producers had expected

or desired. Cordial, qualified analysis doesn't go viral on social media and attract viewers.

The inherent weakness of the news—which as an institution informs and helps us—is that it can also scare and divide us. And the less familiar journalists are with Christianity, the harder it is for them to give accurate and nuanced coverage to a faith that to many seems to be archaic and ignorant, sexist and homophobic.

Social Media

THE SITUATION DOESN'T improve when we turn to social media. About one in three American adults told Pew in 2019 that they're online "almost constantly." Eight in ten use the internet at least once a day.³⁵ The revenue that comes from your clicks is "an incentive for any number of depressing modern media trends, including clickbait headlines, the proliferation of hastily written 'hot takes,' and increasingly homogeneous coverage as everyone chases the same trending news stories, so as not to miss out on the traffic they will bring," wrote editor Michael Luo,³⁶ who oversees the digital presence of the *New Yorker*.

As a result of this constant flow of information, advertising, memes, and hot takes, "people vastly overestimate what they know, and their unjustifiably strong opinions are reinforced by other people who are similarly ill-informed, creating self-reinforcing communities of misinformation," he wrote. We rarely get the whole story. We're easily influenced—the information we have on a given topic is usually not enough to give a full or nuanced picture, leading us to believe that people who come to different conclusions than we do must be crazy. Or worse yet, the *enemy*.

That's why people who vaccinate can't understand those who won't and why those who vote Republican think Democrats are wrong on everything and why those who support gun control—or abortion or criminal justice reform or private health care—have such a hard time understanding the other point of view. We're bombarding ourselves with just a few facts that leave no room for nuance, tucked into stories meant to scare us into reading more. It's anxiety on a cultural scale, monetizing our angst and pitting us against one another.

What's the result? Look around! Everyone feels like the last soldier of sanity, facing an overwhelming enemy who is irrational, evil, and hell-bent on the destruction of all we hold holy. This is why we can condemn whole swaths of people—so long as they seem distant and faceless. And, in the back of our mind, we know they're doing the same thing to us.

The story changes, though, when we're talking about real people, people we know and love. It's why, when polled, Americans say they like their local public school (55 percent) but not public schools nationwide (25 percent),³⁷ why they like their local government (67 percent) but not the national one (35 percent).³⁸ It's why you can love your niece, who votes Democrat, but hate Democrats in general.

It's why you can feel anxious and angry with the country as a whole but still love your neighbors.

That's a clue for where we Christians should turn our attention.

A Different Kind of News

IN 2016, THE two of us took a gamble. Collin asked me (Sarah) to write news that wasn't being reported anywhere else—stories of Christians caring for the weak, loving their enemies, and suffering with joy. He wanted me to look for places where the Spirit of God was working in a big way and then write it down.

"Obviously, I'm not going to do that," I told Collin. "That's not *real* news. That's more like puffy public relations pieces on Christians."

"It won't be like that," Collin told me. "We won't do puff pieces. We'll tell the uncomfortable parts too. We'll be honest when it seems like God isn't showing up. We'll be truthful about the suffering as well as the joy."

I trust Collin's news judgment, and we love working together, so I figured we could give it a shot. Neither of us was sure anybody would read our stories anyway—we know negative news gets the clicks. And we weren't sure how much activity we'd even find. Was anybody actually living like this? Would we run out of stories in a few months?

It's been four years, and we have heard more stories of Christians living sacrificial, gospel-centered, kingdom-advancing, God-glorifying lives than we can publish. These stories aren't puffy—

they're *hard*. They're gritty and real. But they also won't make you anxious or afraid. They'll inspire you with possibilities, spur you to worship the God who leads and provides and surprises. They'll encourage you to see fresh opportunities as your faith in God grows. We believe this because they've done this for us.

I (Collin) am not naturally inclined to look for the positive. Editors tend to be wired for critical analysis. You don't find many journalists known for their hopefulness. We've seen too much. We know too much about what happens behind the scenes.

But Sarah and I aren't just journalists. We're also Christians. We believe in the gospel—*good news* for sinners and our fallen world longing for renewal. We follow the risen Jesus, who invites us to watch and wait: “Behold, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

Are negative things happening in our broken world? Every day. But is God working things for good? Are there really people following him so faithfully that they give up their suburban comfort to love low-income neighbors or they obey God's Word instead of following the world's path to sexual fulfillment? Does anyone still take these words of Jesus seriously: “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39)?

Absolutely. We've seen them. We've talked with them. We've learned from them. And we are thrilled to get to share them with you.

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CHAPTER 1

Resolute Hope

We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

—ROMANS 5:3–5

It's the humidity I (Collin) remember most. After a long day of intern work, I reluctantly left behind the air-conditioned Cannon House Office Building for my second shift, the one that actually paid. It was the first summer after the 9/11 attacks, and I had sought work in Washington, DC, in a burst of patriotic zeal.

I wanted to serve my country. I ended up in the basement of party headquarters, dialing for dollars.

Four nights a week and all day Saturday, I called up devoted party members across the country to ask for another donation. I wasn't very good at it. I'd get on the phone with an elderly business owner in South Dakota and talk for thirty minutes about the congressional campaign and education policy. In the end, he'd politely tell me he'd already donated to his representative in the House.

My colleagues who made the most money never stayed on the line longer than three minutes. Their strategy was simple and effective: scare Grandma with a story about how the other party wants to destroy the country, then ask her to read those sixteen digits on her credit card. I never discerned any patriotic zeal in my most successful colleagues. I never observed any particular devotion to the party that employed them.

On long, sweat-soaked walks home after California had gone to

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bed, I had a lot of time to think about the hope I invested in politics. I never stopped caring about the issues. But I realized I could never play the game to get ahead.

From those conversations in the basement of party headquarters, I understand when Christians are tempted to trust in politicians to protect the church, our perceived interests, or our loved ones. Politicians have real influence. Government leaders, elected or appointed, decide vital moral and ethical issues, such as whether killing unborn babies should be allowed, whether gender is fluid in the eyes of the law, and whether Christian organizations can set their own hiring standards. They decide whether justice will be done for unarmed victims of police brutality and whether young soldiers will be sent into war on the other side of the world. Elections have consequences. Politics matters.

Understandably, Christians want to win every seeming fight for righteousness. We want to be safe. We want to be in charge. We want election victories and righteous judges and religious freedom and growing churches and friendly neighbors and safe schools and everything else. In other words, we want “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10), and we’d rather not have to wait until Jesus returns.

It’s a good instinct—we’re meant to be cultivating our world, bringing renewal to whatever corners we occupy. But sometimes Christians chase power the Bible doesn’t tell us to expect (1 Corinthians 1:28). And it’s not as if Christians in power always wield it for justice. Sadly, it’s often quite the opposite—for example, during what some perceive as the golden age of the 1950s, powerful white church members were segregating, threatening, and discriminating against African Americans.

Power isn’t going to save us. Even Jesus, the only human who could have wielded it perfectly, “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:6–7). Jesus built his church to withstand—even to be corrected by and thrive in—opposition. The church was born into a regime that would hunt and hurt her, and she spread by running for her life. Over and over, Christianity seeped into cultures after being scattered by persecution. What was supposed to destroy her made her stronger.

If we start with a more realistic expectation—that the default

should be marginalization or even suffering for Christ—then the church in America still looks privileged and even protected. The #blessings tagged on social media—rapid career promotions, happy and matching families, and a stream of Amazon Prime boxes—seem more like the prosperity gospel (believing that following Jesus will make life more pleasant or comfortable) than the vision of discipleship we see in the Bible.

From that perspective, sliding out of a privileged position may not be a bad thing for the American church. What if our proximity to power of all kinds is not making us stronger but is *sapping* our potential for genuine Christlike faith and action?

In 2020, just before the World Health Organization declared coronavirus a public health emergency, I (Sarah) flew to a conference of Asian Christians in Kuala Lumpur.

Many of the church leaders I met came from China (minus those quarantined in Wuhan). I don't know when or if I'll ever see them again this side of heaven. But I'll never forget sitting across from them and asking about their stories. In their demeanor I saw calm grace under the relentless pressure of government restrictions.

"Hardship reveals a reality of earthly life—we are bound for another home," said S. E. Wang,¹ who works with house church pastors (his name has been changed to protect his identity). The biggest threat to Chinese Christians isn't having their churches closed or pastors imprisoned, he said.

"We are sojourners on earth, and things like the worship of money and secularism are trying to persuade us that we are permanent residents," he told me. "When the tension eases between your earthly identity and your heavenly identity—that's the biggest threat."

Because if we feel comfortable here, in a world we know is broken and sinful, what does that say about us?

"Persecution helps with that," Wang said. "Even cancer tells you that earth is not your home. Hardship reveals reality—that we are bound for another home, another life."

God doesn't want us to settle in here. And as we see over and over in the Old Testament, discipline is the way God gets the attention of his people, reclaims their love for him, and purifies them from sinful practices that would wreck them.

"Discipline is God's love," Wang said. "He disciplines those he

loves. He's training and refining his church and will bring her up in full maturity. We don't see discipline as negative. It shows God's grace and favor."

Wang didn't make that up—he got it straight from Scripture. "It is for discipline that you have to endure," the author of Hebrews wrote. "God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" (12:7).

What does this say, then, about the American church? In all our concern about persecution, have we neglected the goodness of our heavenly Father's discipline?²

Maybe we don't need to worry so much about losing privilege and power we were never meant to have. Because we have received "a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (verse 28), there is always hope.

Living with Resolute Hope

THE KEY TO living with resolute hope is to think big and small—the same time. Thinking big means trusting God: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:18). Remembering the Lord's vast power, perfect plan, and deep love for us helps us relax into his care. When we think big, our hope rests on promises that have never failed and power strong enough to cast stars into the sky and Satan down from heaven (Isaiah 40:26; Luke 10:18).

Thinking small means looking across the street rather than scrolling social media on our phones. It means digging into the simple, ordinary rhythms of life—befriending the coffee shop barista, helping the neighbor with his car, or volunteering at church. By looking for ways we can make a difference, we see evidence of God working through us. That, in turn, makes us more hopeful.

For example, during the COVID shutdown, my (Sarah's) church offered Zoom Bible studies as a way to connect while we were socially distanced. The simple act of regularly meeting with other believers to hear their love of God and his church lifted my spirits. I could see God at work in their lives, and that gave me hope when not much of our news—of shutdowns, racial injustice, and overwhelmed hospitals—could.

Maybe you sometimes feel anxious about the rising number of “nones.” But think small: The unbelieving girl next door? You’ve known her a long time, and you love her.

The angry shouts of LGBTQ activists may worry you. But your same-sex-attracted colleague? You see how God has gifted him for work, even if you disagree with his lifestyle.

Planned Parenthood’s rhetoric might make you feel ill. But the friend who is unexpectedly pregnant? You want to encourage and support her—you wish her only the best.

Even if your enemy lives next door, if you’re a Christian, Jesus said you must love and pray for him or her (Matthew 5:44). Not only does that behavior benefit your neighbor—and you—but it also thwarts the work of our ultimate foe, Satan, whose lies bring pain to all who believe them.

We know that many feel their hope is being shaken—maybe that’s you. And that’s where we want to help. We want to give you perspective from Christians throughout history and around the world so that, in the power of the gospel, we do not lose heart.

In the pages of the Bible, in the stories of the early church, and in the lives of everyday Christians, we see a different story. We see a tremendous amount of hope—but not a giddy, ridiculous, naive hope, like some fantasy that you’ll inherit millions from some heretofore-unknown uncle.

Instead, the two of us see Christians with a realistic, honest, solid hope. Across time and space, Christians hope that God will help them—and he always does. They hope that he will use them—and he does. They hope that someday all things will be made right—and they certainly will.

Their hope isn’t soft or silly. It’s real and robust because it hopes in something true. It’s rooted not in their ability but in God’s character. This hope grows with time as God’s faithfulness proves itself over and over. We’re calling it “resolute hope” because it doesn’t sway in the winds of politics or wobble under the pressure of delayed (or even unrealized) results. It doesn’t crack when the election doesn’t go the right way or the test shows cancer or the temptation persists.

This hope is anchored in the past and aimed at the future. It plays the long game—a hope that can see the score at the end and works while it waits for the buzzer.

Gospelbound

FOR NOW, WE all live in a fallen world. Christians know that even as we work to show God's light and love to this world, the job won't be complete until Jesus returns. We know that in this world we'll lose many battles against evil. We know that Jesus warned that the world will hate us (Matthew 5:11; John 15:18).

But for many of us in historically Christian America, these warnings have been hypothetical for so long that we don't know what actual opposition looks like or how to minister from the margins.

It's an important skill to recover, because as culture slowly secularizes—or at least looks outside Christianity for purpose and meaning—American Christians have a brand-new opportunity.

We must not waste it. Christians shouldn't be embarrassed about our old-fashioned beliefs, hiding them or apologizing for them. A defensive posture hardly commends our faith to the world. It's no way to reach out to those who need Jesus.

We also shouldn't be antagonistic, lying our way into political power or forcing backroom deals. Nothing good comes from attacking people on social media or fixating on the small number of issues where we might disagree with another Christian. All-out offensive is not only exhausting but also off-putting. It's no way to draw others to Jesus.

So what should we do? Learn from those who are living with faithfulness from a strong foundation, in spite of the challenges that roar around them.

The two of us have seen Christians care for the weak by keeping a mission hospital open during the Ebola crisis. We've seen Christians live with integrity by choosing celibacy even though they feel same-sex attractions. We've seen Christians suffer with joy through physical paralysis, love their enemies through church splits, and show hospitality by sitting with strangers at church.

We've seen a marketing manager pull hundreds of women from the sex industry, a family befriend the meth dealer across the street (and lead him to Christ), and a healthy black church in Iowa merge with a growing white church so they could be a picture of God's multiethnic kingdom. We've seen a classical education movement that puts Christ in the center of the curriculum, men and women

who give up vacations to make meals after natural disasters, and churches that sacrifice their best leaders and their budgets to plant new churches.

And that's just in the United States. Globally, we've seen thousands of children rescued from sex trafficking in the Philippines, Chinese house churches choosing God over government, and a network of gospel-centered churches growing on—of all places—the Arabian Peninsula.

We've been calling these Christians *gospelbound* because they're tied to the gospel of Jesus Christ that turned the ancient world upside down. They're bound by love to tackle today's challenges with hope that the gospel will prevail. And they're bound for glory someday because Jesus is coming again.

As we collected these stories of hope, seven themes kept coming to the fore. Over and over, we saw these gospelbound Christians *embrace the future, live with honor, suffer with joy, care for the weak, set another seat at the table, love their enemies, and give away their freedom*. We saw how these practices matched biblical teaching and historic Christian examples. We saw how relevant, countercultural, and timeless they are. And we began to ask, *How can we all live this way?*

These hopeful, gospelbound Christians show us the way to firm faith in an anxious age. They teach us how to live in the world with love, without falling in love with the world. They lay out a clear and compelling distinction between the way of Jesus and the way of our culture.

As our country loses the light of the gospel, stories like these just glow brighter.

So read on, and learn with us what it looks like to live with resolute hope in shaky times.

Then let's go and do likewise.



CHAPTER 2

Gospelbound Christians Embrace the Future

If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

—ROMANS 6:5

I (Collin) am not a Southern Baptist. You don't meet many Southern Baptists while growing up in South Dakota. We Methodists had to fight the Lutherans and Catholics for a seat at the post-church dinner table. As a child I'm not sure that I even knew the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. I can only remember that they hated Disney or something.

Since moving to the South, I've learned a lot about my Baptist neighbors. If you know a Southern Baptist (or if you are one), you've probably noticed they're big on congregational meetings, soul winning, and altar calls. In 2016, the denomination formally encouraged pastors to share the gospel with unbelievers every week, Bible study teachers to ask whether anyone would like to repent and believe, and congregations to intentionally increase the number of those baptized each year.¹

You could say Southern Baptists are embracing the future: their eyes are firmly fixed on heaven. More than anything else, they ask God to save people from an eternity in hell—they want to see people headed for the joy of being with Jesus in heaven. In fact, it might seem like that's all they're interested in. Are they perhaps too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good?

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

On the other hand, perhaps you know of people or organizations that are so busy feeding or housing or educating people that evangelism is nearly forgotten—that’s the Methodism of my youth. You’ve probably heard someone use this quote: “Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.” (It’s often attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, who not only didn’t say it but also preached with words in up to five villages a day.²) Are they working so hard to meet physical needs that spiritual needs are being neglected?

For decades, Christians have been wrestling with what deserves more time and effort—preparing souls for heaven or caring for the poor.³ And since we have finite time and energy, we need to make wise choices.

But we don’t need to pick between loving God and loving neighbor. In fact, we don’t even need to balance them. The more we love God and the more we eagerly embrace the future he’s promised us, the more clearly we’ll recognize the time we live in. And the better we’ll be able to love our neighbors. Just consider what popular media probably never told you about the Southern Baptists.

Gospelbound Christians Work While They Wait

IN 1967, A Texas hurricane named Beulah spun off 115 tornadoes and killed almost sixty people. When it was over, a group of Baptist men were aghast at the wreckage.

“In a nutshell, some guys said, ‘We have to do something. People are hurting and in need,’” said David Melber, who used to head up the SBC’s disaster-relief efforts. The group of men gathered some ingredients and portable camp stoves and headed to southern Texas.

They kept at it, showing up after hurricanes and tornadoes and floods to offer meals to those in need. Four years later, after receiving a \$25,000 mission offering, they bought a used eighteen-wheeler and converted it into a feeding unit. The next year, they used it to dish up 2,500 meals after a flash flood in central Texas.

Other state conventions followed their example—four more started their own disaster-relief efforts by 1976; another nine joined by 1988. Volunteers showed up after hundreds of local tornadoes and floods, an earthquake in Nicaragua in 1972 (their first international response), and a hurricane in Honduras in 1974.

“Back then, people would throw a chain saw in the back of a pick-up truck and take off for the coast—totally untrained, not knowing what to do but willing to help someone,” former disaster-relief director Cliff Satterwhite told Baptist Press in 2009. “Today, we wouldn’t think of a chainsaw team going out without hardhats, chaps and goggles. No one wore that stuff back then. We were flying by the seat of our pants during [Hurricane] Hugo. A lot of [the] work was unofficial.”⁴

Relief organizations measure time by disasters: If you ask SBC’s North American Mission Board (NAMB) for a history of their organization, they’ll give you a bullet list of bombings, hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes. Growth in finances and volunteers rises not slowly and steadily but in surges after regional or national tragedies.

For example, Hugo catapulted South Carolina’s state response team into existence. Over the next twenty years, the state went from zero to 6,800 volunteers. At the same time, they gained 129 “units,” which is what NAMB calls the trailers or trucks outfitted for a specific purpose—in addition to kitchens, some of them house rows of showers, washing machines, childcare areas, or cubicles with satellite phones and electricity for communication.

Nationally, volunteer numbers also shot up after Hugo, then again three years later after Hurricane Andrew.⁵ Southern Baptists came “by the hundreds and multiplied hundreds every weekend,” said Cecil Seagle, director of the Brotherhood Commission for the Florida Baptist Convention, in 1993.

By 1997, the SBC had more than 13,700 volunteers. By 2000, it had nearly 21,000. By 2004, it was up to about 31,000. Then Hurricane Katrina pounded into the Gulf Coast and blew previous volunteer efforts—even 9/11—out of the water.

Over seven months, 21,000 volunteers served 14.6 million meals in New Orleans (up from 2 million in 2001 and 3.5 million earlier in 2005) and spent 1.5 million hours caring for 7,800 children, mudding out 17,000 buildings, and doing 27,800 loads of laundry. They purified 21,600 gallons of water and sent more than 3,000 ham radio messages.

The enormous effort raised the Southern Baptist profile even higher,⁶ marking them as a sought-after partner and a model for others. (Jim Burton, NAMB’s then-director of volunteer mobiliza-

tion, was asked to write a project-management textbook chapter on Southern Baptist disaster planning and logistics.)

Partnerships with the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) were also growing. The four saw one another again and again after floods, fires, and storms. Each time they met, the organizations refined their roles a little more. The Red Cross or FEMA buys the food, the Southern Baptists prepare it, and the Red Cross serves it from shelters or delivers it to neighborhoods. (If you've seen a Baptist potluck, you'll know why they left the food preparation to the Baptists.)

And when FEMA assesses a neighborhood for damage, it hands the list of addresses and needs over to the SBC and the Red Cross, who split it up. The Red Cross primarily provides emergency medical care, sets up temporary shelters, hands out meals, and occasionally offers financial help. The Southern Baptists cook the meals, help with cleanup and repairs, provide water and showers, and offer trained childcare.

"We could not fulfill our mission without the Southern Baptists," Red Cross president Gail McGovern told Southern Baptists in a 2014 promotional video. "And more importantly, the people that we're serving couldn't get through this without you."⁷

Five decades after the camp stoves in Texas, the Southern Baptists have sixty-five thousand trained volunteers. The SBC's disaster response is so massive it financially trails only the Red Cross and the Salvation Army—and has more trained disaster-relief volunteers than either one.

When Sarah told me (Collin) this statistic, I almost didn't believe her. How could I have not known the size and scope of these Baptist relief efforts? It also made me wonder what else normal Christians are doing every day to help strangers in need—the work we're not told about—and how I can join in.

What's the Time?

THOSE SIXTY-FIVE THOUSAND SBC volunteers aren't cooking meals in trailers because it's a fun thing to do on spring break. They aren't tearing out carpet because they're being paid. They don't remove soggy Sheetrock to get on TV. So why are they doing it?

Because they have a right view of time.

People generally view time in one of two ways. First, many lean toward nostalgia. They see the world getting worse and worse and long for someone or something to restore order. They imagine a past golden era that we must recover—perhaps the time of hearty and pious pioneers or of calm and capable 1950s families. I (Collin) am especially inclined in this direction. I love to get caught up in the drama of history and imagine what I would do in a different time and place. I can't help but judge our current day as lacking interest by comparison. Maybe that's why I identify with Owen Wilson's character in the Woody Allen film *Midnight in Paris*.

But as Wilson's character learns, nostalgia is a liar. There is no golden era. If you had the chance to go back, you wouldn't—and not only because you couldn't survive without antibiotics and Wi-Fi. People in the 1880s or 1950s didn't live in utopia. Their culture was as sinful and unpleasant as ours, just in different ways. In addition, your golden era might not be someone else's golden era. What's good for you and people like you might have been bad for someone else. Nostalgia fails in love for neighbor.

Given that we can't go back anyway and the past is a mirage, nostalgia is unlivable. It's beside the point. It can only breed discontent, making you anxious and afraid that you'll never recover the good old days. And it makes you furious with those who aren't aiming in the same direction you are.

The second view of time is progressivism. It believes everything is getting better and better. History doesn't have much to teach us except how enlightened we are by comparison. Eventually, when every vestige of the confining past has been conquered, we will enjoy full freedom and enlightenment. I (Sarah) sometimes lean too far in this direction. I'm naturally optimistic and a little bit perfectionistic, so I'm constantly working to make things better. If I don't keep checking the posture of my heart before God, I can get both anxious and exhausted.

Because, like nostalgia, progressivism is a mirage—you never actually arrive. There is no utopia except the new heavens and the new earth. And attempts to force one don't end well—consider the chaotic bloodbath of the French Revolution, the Stalinist starvation of Ukraine, the deadly deterioration of Venezuela.

Anyway, you can't live in the future. Comparing the present with an imaginary future paradise just fuels dissatisfaction. It makes you anxious, afraid that the future might not arrive in your lifetime. It makes you fear and loathe the people you think inhibit its arrival.

We need a better view of time. And we can find one in ancient Rome.

The Early Christian View of Time

IT MIGHT BE the most surprising development in world history—how an obscure, crucified Galilean prophet conquered the world's greatest empire without lifting a sword. So how did it happen? In large part, because of how early Christians thought about time.

Ancient Rome wasn't antireligion; in fact, the opposite was true. Jesus was crucified in a culture flooded with gods and goddesses. The Roman deities wore togas and lived on Mount Olympus and needed a lot of attention from the mortals.

The humans eagerly complied. They worked hard to appease big names like Jupiter and Minerva and Apollo, who they believed would hand out favors if they were flattered enough. But the Romans didn't stop there. By one reckoning, there were thirty thousand Roman gods, including Vulcan, the fire god; Fornax, the corn-baking god; and Sterculus, the manure heap god. Romans gave gifts in January to Tellus, the planting god; held a parade in May for Mars, the earth god; and cooked a feast in December for the soil gods.⁸ All year long they sacrificed at the many temples, built household shrines, and retold the stories of their gods' deeds.

In this culture, where emperors themselves were nearly deities and the office of high priest was a political position, there was no such thing as separation of church and state. The gods were needed for military victories and economic success and to legitimize leaders. Being a good citizen, then, meant being highly religious.

Many nations conquered by Rome were also polytheistic, and they added the Roman gods to their list of deities. Rome often returned the favor, figuring the more gods, the better.

The Jews, however, were noticeably different. They worshipped only one God, kept rituals like circumcision and the Sabbath, and held their own feast days. At first (before the Jewish rebellion in AD

66), the Romans didn't mind too much. The Jews seemed like a peculiar ethnic group quietly following their ancestral traditions. They weren't bothering anybody, and for the most part, Rome didn't bother them.

Christians, though, were even more different than the Jews. They were not confined to one ethnic group, but spread to all races and classes of people. They were not following their forebearers in worship of an ancient deity (something the Romans could respect in the Jews) but pledged allegiance to a Savior many of them had met on the shores of Galilee or the streets of Jerusalem. And they didn't just ignore the Roman gods (like the Jews did); Christians condemned them.

They also had a different view of time, which affected everything they did. Christians are confident of a better future. We're both realistic (we know we can never achieve perfection in our fallen world) and ever hopeful (we know our work has eternal significance). Christians know a time will come when we no longer need to broker peace between two quarreling friends, pick up trash, or teach a child to read. And every time we do these good deeds, we see the world a little more like it was supposed to be and like it will be when Jesus returns.

This hope sustained Christians for the first one hundred years after Jesus was crucified, and the church grew modestly. By AD 150, their numbers were up to forty thousand, according to one estimate. Just fifty years later, though, there were 218,000 Christians. And by AD 250, the number of Christians had skyrocketed to 1.17 million.⁹

If you were a Roman, you could pity a small and strange religious sect. You could even abuse them for sport. But as the number of Christians grew, they began to feel like a legitimate threat. Many Romans worried that the gods would frown on this rebellious group. And sure enough, in the 200s, barbarians began to invade along Roman borders, peasants tried to revolt, and the leadership destabilized so much that the government went through twenty-six emperors in fifty years. It was easy to conclude that the gods were punishing the whole Roman Empire because the Christians wouldn't bow to them.

It didn't help that it was easy to misunderstand Christianity. You know what it's like sometimes to explain Christian jargon to someone who can't remember the last time he went to church. The Eucharist sounded like cannibalism—drink my blood and eat my flesh? Talk

of “loving our brothers and sisters” sounded like incest. And anyway, the powerful and prideful Romans were not naturally inclined to follow a God who humiliated himself by becoming human and getting himself killed trying to save a bunch of people. Many regarded Christianity, according to author Steven Smith, as “contemptible nonsense.”¹⁰ Persecution began in earnest. We’re not talking a bit of social disapproval. We’re talking gruesome death.

It shouldn’t have been too hard for the Romans to stamp out this odd little sect—while their numbers had grown, they were still only around 1 percent of the population of the Roman Empire.¹¹ But even when their leaders were beheaded, crucified, fed to lions, and burned alive, their numbers kept growing. In fact, the passionate faith of the fallen inflamed the faith of those left behind.

“Let there come upon me fire and cross, struggles with wild beasts, cutting and tearing asunder, rackings of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, and cruel tortures of the devil, if so I may attain to Jesus Christ!” wrote Justin Martyr, condemned to be beheaded for refusing to renounce his faith.¹²

This forward-looking faith—anticipating a joyful existence with the risen Jesus after death—was mind boggling. Roman religion was all about obtaining blessings in this life; there was no clear idea of what came next. Some believed that life just stopped. “I was not, I have been, I am not, I do not want” was such a popular funeral inscription that it was eventually just abbreviated.¹³ Others believed that people descended to a dark underworld, either to be punished or to live a ho-hum existence in the Asphodel Meadows. Heaven was reserved for the gods and divine kings; normal people didn’t go there.

The idea that Christ went to prepare a place for believers, that they could be with him in paradise, was a far brighter hope. Not only did it remove the fear of death, but this future also gave present life a deeper, heavier meaning while lightening burdens of pain and sorrow. Imagine the difference it would make in our evangelism if we grasped this news as truly good, now and forever. You’re not burdening your friend when you tell her about Jesus. You’re sharing a resolute hope that will help her find meaning and joy no matter what troubles may come.

Consider the case of Perpetua, a legendary figure in the early church.¹⁴ I (Collin) love to introduce my church members to her

when I teach an annual class on living our faith in public. Even though few of us will face her impossible choices, we can still be inspired by her courage. Born around AD 182, Perpetua was raised in the upper classes of Carthage, an early stronghold of Christianity, which made it a target of persecution. The mother of a small child, Perpetua was arrested in 203 as she prepared to be baptized.

Perpetua's father did not approve of her faith in Jesus Christ. Many of us today can relate to this experience of family disapproval, increasingly so even in the West. Her father begged her to recant so the Roman authorities would spare her life. He bemoaned how she made him look bad. He spoke of the fate of her son if he lost his mother. And still Perpetua would not forsake the future she could not see for the family she could.

Perpetua was taken into an arena to be mauled by wild animals. She was attacked by a wild heifer before a sword ended her life.

Some might think she was foolish. (If Jesus isn't coming back, then she was.) Or maybe you can see why the great theologian Augustine considered her a hero. For Christians, to live is Christ, and to die is gain (Philippians 1:21). Gospelbound Christians like Perpetua embrace a future they cannot see.

"Though you have not seen him, you love him," Peter said of Jesus in 1 Peter 1:8–9. "Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

With such a great future in front of us, what should we do while we're waiting? Blend in with the world as best we can to minimize any conflict? Hold our breath and hope nobody notices us until it's all over? Begin every conversation with "Do you know the Lord?"

Christians from Perpetua to the Southern Baptists live out something called "inaugurated eschatology," which basically means that while we wait for heaven, we're working toward it. Since Christ has come, we already have the promised Spirit, the law of God written on our new hearts, and the power to obey God and do his will. Where we live and work and move in the world, we're able to—with God's help—fix some of what is broken and right some of what is wrong. Through us, some of heaven is breaking through on earth.

We know that we do not do this perfectly. Even with our best

intentions and efforts, we mess up all the time. We're slow to see needs, incompetent in our repairs, stumbling in our relationships. We're still sinful people living in a sinful world that has not yet been fully redeemed. This can be frustrating. I (Collin) struggle to make peace with this fallen world. I want to arrive, to see all my plans come to fruition, to watch all my dreams come true. But that's not life in this world.

We live between sin and redemption, between Jesus's resurrection and his coming again, between this world and the perfect one to come.

The apostle Peter helps us straddle those two worlds. "The day of the Lord will come like a thief," he wrote in 2 Peter 3:10, "and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed."

But waiting for "the day of the Lord" doesn't panic or paralyze us. "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness," Peter wrote. "Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace" (verses 11, 14).

We are to be holy, godly, diligent, at peace. We do good on earth because we set our minds on heaven. We work while we wait.

Here's how C. S. Lewis put it in his book *Mere Christianity*:

A continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. . . . It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth "thrown in": aim at earth and you will get neither.¹⁵

Gospelbound Christians embrace the future by working diligently in the present. But we don't want to work on just anything. Our time is short. How do we know, then, how to spend our time, however long it may be?

Gospelbound Christians prioritize their tasks the way God does.

Gospelbound Christians Prioritize the Way God Does

FOR A SMALL stretch of time during graduate school, I (Sarah) lived in Washington, DC. Except for the fact that I was living apart from my husband—who was in school in Chicago—I loved it. The city is beautiful and busy, and when you’re working there, you feel the weight of the important decisions being made.

If you’re ambitious, DC is the perfect place to live. That’s what twenty-eight-year-old John Folmar was doing, hoping to make it big. After graduating from Duke Law School, he got a job as a legislative counsel for an influential senator.

“I was where I wanted to be,” he wrote in *The Underestimated Gospel*. “And yet when I got there, I was empty and unsatisfied.”¹⁶

While out for a run one day, he spotted Capitol Hill Baptist Church and figured he could “make some connections or meet influential people” there. He began attending, started meeting pastor Mark Dever for a morning Bible study, and realized “that I was a moral failure, that I couldn’t turn over a new leaf but needed a new life.”¹⁷

Capitol Hill Baptist introduced John to Jesus and to Keri Harrison, who also worked on the Hill. She was the chief counsel of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution and would eventually write the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban.

As John and Keri dated, fell in love, and got married, John started feeling the tug to ministry. He ignored it, assuming Dever made everyone feel that way.

“My whole life was geared toward political office,” he told us. “And it was difficult to give that up.”

But the call to ministry was strong, and John wound up in seminary, then worked as an assistant pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist. Both John and Keri were interested enough in missions that when the call came for a pastor of an international church in Dubai, they said yes almost before Dever finished asking whether they’d want to go.

In just a few years, the Folmars had traded high-profile legal careers for the sand and Sharia law of the Arabian Peninsula.

They weren’t the first to follow that path. Forty-five years earlier,

doctors Pat and Marian Kennedy arrived in the United Arab Emirates, before the country even formally existed. At the invitation of two local sheikhs, they set up in a mud-brick guesthouse and delivered their first baby before they'd even unpacked.

In a place where obstetric care was so crude that a third of mothers and half of children died in childbirth, the Kennedys delivered sixty-seven babies during their first full year in UAE. Four years later, they delivered 770.¹⁸ With more than two hundred patients arriving each morning and no replacement doctors, the Kennedys worked for years without taking leave. Their thirteen-year-old son wasn't playing baseball with his friends; he was helping with gall bladder and hernia operations.¹⁹

Nothing was easy. There were no roads—just barren desert crossed with donkey and camel paths. There was no running water and no electricity, which made basic cleaning and medicine storage difficult. The Kennedys mixed water, sugar, and salt to make their own intravenous fluids. With no support staff, the doctors also cleaned and maintained the rooms. With few supplies, they treated everything from broken bones to tuberculosis to eye diseases.

Then heavy rain destroyed their mud-brick facility. They moved to another building, this one made of palm branches and corrugated aluminum. Six months later, a cookfire burned it down.

The Kennedys kept at it. Their selfless service won so much goodwill that the hospital—now a world-class facility—is still allowed to place Arabic-language Bibles in the rooms and offer staff prayers with patients. I (Collin) learned their story while teaching Scripture to Christians who worked in their hospital. Many regard the Arabian Peninsula as closed to the gospel. But that's not what you see when you visit. When Christians show they're willing to move to the other side of the world and sacrifice wealth and fame, it's natural for skeptical unbelievers to ask why. And that's especially the case when those Christians love them, both body and soul.

Relative religious tolerance continued even after oil was discovered off the shore of Dubai in 1966. The tiny port town exploded into a bustling global destination, and the surrounding emirates swiftly formed into an organized country.²⁰ Today UAE's population is ten million. Of those, less than 12 percent are Emirati citizens—

the rest are hired foreigners.²¹ That's important because although the UAE constitution declares all citizens Muslim, other people are largely free to choose their own religion.

"In day-to-day life, it's easy to share the gospel with someone who has never heard it before," Keri said. For example, the tailor making her son a suit is a Muslim from Albania. "All I had to say was 'Do you know what an evangelical Christian believes?'" and I could share the gospel with him," she said.

Week after week, John preaches the Bible at United Christian Church of Dubai (UCCD). The church began to grow, from five hundred to six hundred to more than eight hundred. Keri started an inductive women's Bible study that now draws more than one hundred women.

The Folmars were "a drink of water in a dry and weary land," said one former elder. UCCD has planted three churches and continues to train pastors from neighboring countries.

"There is incredible hunger and spiritual poverty in the countries next to us and across the water from us," UCCD elder Etienne Nel said. "We trust the Lord and pray that the Spirit would be at work, convicting people and giving glory to his name. . . . We want to be an effective church—a city on a hill."

Prioritizing the Things of God

BOTH THE FOLMARS and the Kennedys believed so wholeheartedly in a longer arc, in a future they cannot see, that they gave up comfortable homes and lucrative careers and easy friendships in order to move to UAE.

If this world is all there is, these life choices seem extreme. Everybody loves a self-sacrificing hero; fewer are willing to actually become one—because if the hero doesn't get the girl in the end, he's just a fool. The bigger the risk, the less willing we are to take it—unless the payoff is extreme. Mission work is always a long shot; therefore, missionary math adds up only if you multiply by eternity.

This is the future Christians eagerly await—a renewed life in brand-new physical bodies (Philippians 3:21) on a brand-new physical earth (Isaiah 65:17) with feasting (Luke 13:29) and singing (Revelation 5:9–10). If you're looking forward to living safely, building

houses, and planting gardens (Ezekiel 28:26) in close relationship (1 Thessalonians 4:17) with an exciting God who loves you, then spending your short, hard years here doing his work is exactly the right priority.

For the Kennedys, that meant bringing medical care to the desert. For the Folmars, it meant taking the gospel to those who hadn't heard it. For the Southern Baptists, it means talking about Jesus while cooking meals for those who have lost everything. For the two of us, it means writing stories that reveal God at work, which shows us and our readers his faithful love, which helps us all love and obey him. For you, it may mean working with integrity, loving your extended family, or sharing Jesus with a coworker.

Gospelbound Christians are working hard, prioritizing the things of God. They're also giving away their time, their sleep, their lives. They aren't giving away their margins or their extras. They're giving away their best. Mark Dever didn't send just anyone to Dubai. He sent a couple with exceptional potential. Because that's how the kingdom of God advances around the world. And because you can afford to do that when you're living not only for the moment or yourself but for a future beyond the horizon of tomorrow.

Gospelbound Christians Give Away the Best

AT THE SUMMIT Church in North Carolina, the children's facility is shaped like an airplane hangar.

The classrooms are marked like a terminal, with signs such as "Gate K1," "Gate 24," and "Summit Airlines" marking the way. Maps of the world hang prominently. And the sign over the exit says, "You are sent."

It's the refrain of the ten-thousand-attendee church—played on repeat.

When babies are born, parents are commissioned to raise them "as arrows to be launched out into the world," said Todd Unzicker, who was the pastor of sending at the Summit. By the time children finish middle school, the Summit wants them to have experienced a domestic, short-term mission trip with their family. By early high school, they're encouraged to do a trip somewhere in the Americas; by senior year, around twenty-five of them—out of 250—will have

committed to spending three weeks living with the Summit's overseas missionaries.

The Summit asks every college student to give one summer to a mission trip—not to take a beach vacation or barhop across Europe but to serve others in the name of Jesus. Then they ask for two years of mission work or church-planting participation after graduation. They ask baby boomers for something similar, encouraging them to give the first two years of their retirement not to golf or grandkids but to being part of a church plant.

When new believers are baptized, they're asked whether they believe Jesus saved them from sin and whether they're willing to "do whatever he has called them to do and go wherever he has called them to go." When communion is served, it's sometimes presided over by missionaries on video, breaking bread in Africa or India or the Middle East. Every month, short-term and long-term missionaries and church planters are publicly commissioned; when they return, they're given a standing ovation. What you celebrate, others will emulate.

J. D. Greear, the pastor at Summit, connects every one of his sermons to missions or church planting in some way. Instead of "You are dismissed" or "Go in peace," the Summit pastors end each service with the words "Summit, you are sent."

"Preaching that, week in and week out over ten years, has had a big impact on the culture of the church," said Mike McDaniel, who was the pastor of church planting and leadership development at Summit. In 2018, the Summit celebrated sending out its one thousandth person in fifteen years. The church has given money and members to more than forty church plants in the United States and more than two hundred overseas. For the first time in 2017, the average combined attendance of the plants (10,171) bested that of the Summit itself (9,973).

If you aren't a Christian—or even if you are—it may seem to you that the Summit has designed a recipe for disaster. Why would you train leaders just to send them away? Why would you raise funds only to hand them over to another church? Why would you put so much energy into a program that siphons people—with their money and good ideas and ability to volunteer—away from your congregation?

But the Summit’s strategy makes sense if you believe that Jesus rose from the dead and now reigns from the right hand of the Father.

“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17–19).

Christians do a lot of things that don’t make sense: risk their lives to care for the weak, uphold unpopular views on sexuality, give away their money, and send away their best friends to live among unbelieving neighbors. If Christ is still in the tomb, that behavior is sad and ridiculous. We’re wasting not just our own time and energy but also everyone else’s. If Jesus isn’t raised and it doesn’t make any difference in eternity whether we believe in anything he did or said, then Christianity is not benign. It’s cancerous. And Southern Baptists like Greear should be ashamed of their evangelistic zeal. You don’t admire a friend who waits on a future that will never arrive. You pity him.

But if it is true—if Jesus did rise from the dead—that changes everything. So why don’t more self-professed Christians act that way?

Why Americans Aren’t Worried About the Afterlife

WE’VE SEEN THAT ancient Romans didn’t worry much about heaven or hell. But modern Americans—while they’ll tell you they believe in heaven—aren’t overly concerned about the afterlife either.

From 2007 to 2014, Pew Research Center found that American belief in God dropped from 71 percent to 63 percent.²² At the same time, belief in the existence of heaven barely budged (74 percent to 72 percent).²³ So what gives? Why would you believe in the afterlife if you don’t believe in God? Probably because the idea of an eternal paradise is so attractive, especially when you’re standing at a graveside or facing your own declining health. Murmuring “He’s in a better place” or “Now she’s smiling down on us” is more comforting than “We’ll never see him again” or “Now she doesn’t exist.”

But vague religious clichés are junk food. Maybe they feel good in the moment, but they don't contribute to a healthy life. When you separate heaven from the reason martyrs like Perpetua were willing to die to get there—namely, to be with God—it's nothing more than hazy projection or vain longing.

As Barna Group reported in 2003, while 46 percent of people believed that heaven is “a state of eternal existence in God's presence,” sizable minorities said it is “an actual place of rest and reward where souls go after death” (30 percent) or “symbolic” (14 percent).²⁴ They're likely picturing a heaven like the one portrayed by the popular show *The Good Place*—a godless paradise where you get everything you want.

Most people think that's where they're going (two-thirds of those Barna surveyed),²⁵ though not everyone thinks believing in Jesus is the only way to do that. LifeWay Research found that 45 percent of Americans believe “there are many ways to heaven.” About four in ten said heaven is open to people who have never heard of Jesus, and three in ten said there will be a chance for people to follow God after they die.²⁶ The shift from the days of the early Christian martyrs is drastic: Imagine telling them you want to go to heaven but not to be with Jesus.

Even those who believe in hell aren't worried about going there. Just one-half of 1 percent told Barna they thought they were going to hell after death, a place most described as “a state of eternal separation from God's presence” (39 percent) or “an actual place of torment and suffering where people's souls go after death” (32 percent).²⁷

To many Americans today, hell—if it exists—sounds like a place populated only by Adolf Hitler and Osama bin Laden. Heaven, on the other hand, looks boring. In *The Good Place* finale, three of the main characters end up choosing to leave heaven and become energy dust—essentially committing suicide—because they ran out of things to do.

No wonder reaction to the afterlife is often ho-hum.

“Would it be nice not to die?” one person wrote to the *Atlantic* blogger Andrew Sullivan when he asked what atheists thought would happen to them after they die. “Maybe, certainly sounds interesting (although I could see myself wishing fervently for death to put me out of my boredom when I turned a million, and considering it an

inhuman and sadistic torment to deny that to me . . .). How do I feel about [death]? Meh.”

Another replied, “I think that when I die I’ll cease to exist, and in some ways I’m happy about that. . . . I don’t want to live forever.”

And another said, “Life after I am dead will be just like life before I was born. I don’t regret not being here sooner than I was, and I had no sensation of existence before my birth. So it will be after my death.”²⁸

No wonder many Americans have turned away from Christianity. They think they’re facing either paradise or oblivion—neither inspiring nor terrifying. No wonder religion is seen as so peripheral to life. Eternity with Jesus, saved from judgment by his blood on the cross, is our whole thing.

And no wonder gospelbound Christians stand out when they prioritize what God does, choosing to give away their best. No wonder they radiate joy that can come only by experiencing—and anticipating—new life with Jesus. No wonder they’ll risk anything to introduce the world to the risen Christ. Because whether we want to admit it or not, time is running out.

The Gospelbound View of Time

OUR VIEW OF time makes an enormous difference in the way we live today.

We don’t need to long for the past, even for the Garden of Eden. We know we can’t return there. And while we look forward to the future, when life with Jesus will be perfect, we know we can’t expect perfection from our lives on earth. Man-made utopia is the stuff of nightmares.

So we choose neither nostalgia nor progressivism.

In the same way, we reject the false dichotomy of loving God *or* loving neighbor, of evangelism *or* mercy ministry. Yes, time is limited, but that’s one reason God gave us one another. While one Christian may start a workplace Bible study for nonbelievers, another may volunteer at a pregnancy center. Doing one doesn’t mean there’s no room for the other.

We choose both.

We can do that because love isn’t a limited resource. It comes

from God. And the more we give it away, by adopting a child or moving to the Middle East or mentoring a new believer, the more he gives us. He sets before us the tasks *and* gives us the financial, physical, and emotional means to complete them.

Gospelbound Christians can work with joy, knowing the things we do for God—and with his Spirit’s strength—have eternal value. We are not overly discouraged by how dark and broken our world is, how utterly unstable and vulnerable we are. In our jobs, the two of us see that darkness and brokenness clearly. But then we look beyond them, to a new creation where we get to laugh and work and worship and explore with God and with others we love.

That, in turn, helps us be more patient with problems, more hopeful about people, and more willing to jump in to help. Since the work we do here matters for eternity, it’s worth our time to be productive, to work with excellence, to invest in relationships.

And our good service—done with peaceful hearts that trust in God’s character, with gentleness and care for others, and with the best of our ability—can attract those around us to this same hope. The choices of gospelbound Christians—made with eyes fixed on eternity, feet ready for God’s leading, and hands open to his providence—look beautifully different to those around us. We live in such a way that others “may hear of [us] that [we] are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by [our] opponents” (Philippians 1:27–28).

We’re not afraid of this world. We’re waiting for another one, “for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

Take a deep breath and exhale. If you believe in the risen Jesus, this is your future. His promise will not fail. Jesus came once, and righteousness dwelt among us. When he died on the cross, he exchanged our sin for his perfect goodness. When he returns, righteousness will never leave. We’ll be freed from sin and freed from sinning!

Since we already know this promise is true, we can endure the frustrations of this “not yet” time, of the brokenness all around us. Because his promise cannot fail, you can keep picking up fallen branches and wiping up mud. You can keep delivering babies in the desert or preaching the gospel to church members who can barely understand you. You can send away a chunk of your budget and your

best leaders to a new church plant on the other side of town—even the other side of the world.

You can work with excellence, with dedication to the tasks God has set in front of you, and with a cheerful willingness to give him—and his image bearers around you—your best.

The two of us want you to think much more of heaven. Stick your head in the clouds. Remember that our lives here—plagued with fighting, material poverty, and actual plagues—are not what God intended for us. Remember that he has something better planned for our future and that there is nothing in heaven and earth that can keep him from fulfilling his promises.

And while your head is in the sky, plant your feet on the earth. While you wait in hope for Christ to return, get to work. There's so much to do: Visit the lonely; feed the hungry; care for the sick. Nurture a child; tell someone about Jesus; cultivate a garden. Encourage a friend; wash some dishes; plant a church.

We embrace the future, and because of that, we work by faith.