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"Jeff's clear call, through compelling stories and biblical foundations, is to connect the gospel to all areas of life, and then speak it fluently to believers and nonbelievers alike."

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CHRISTIAN LIVING / EVANGELISM
ISBN-13: 978-1-4335-4603-7
ISBN-10: 1-4335-4603-5
5 2 2 9 9
9 781433 546037
US \$22.99

VANDERSTELT

GOSPEL FLUENCY

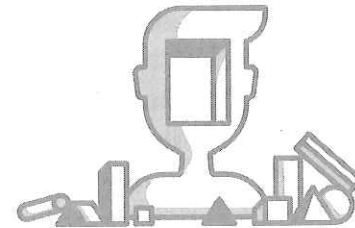
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JEFF VANDERSTELT

Foreword by Jackie Hill Perry

GOSPEL FLUENCY

*Speaking the Truths of Jesus into
the Everyday Stuff of Life*



EVERYONE IS AN UNBELIEVER

I'm an unbeliever. So are you.

"Wait," you're thinking. "What are you doing writing a book about the gospel of Jesus Christ if you're an unbeliever? And what do you know about me? Who do you think I am?"

I grew up believing that people fall into two categories: you are either a believer or an unbeliever; you either believe in Jesus Christ and what he has done for us or you don't. Now, after more than twenty-five years as a pastor, I see that every one of us is an unbeliever, including me—at least in some areas of our lives.

Don't misunderstand me. I do believe there are some who are regenerate children of God and others who are not yet.

There are those who have been given new life through faith in Jesus. They have become new creations and have been given fresh starts because of their faith in Jesus Christ and what he has done for them. And I believe there are others who are still dead in their sins and not yet truly alive in Christ (see John 1:12–13; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:1–10).

When I say we are all unbelievers, I mean we still have places in our lives where we don't believe God. There are spaces where we don't trust his word and don't believe that what he accomplished in Jesus Christ is enough to deal with our past or what we are facing in this moment or the next.

We don't believe his word is true or his work is sufficient.

We don't believe. We are unbelievers.

I struggle with unbelief on a daily basis. I have a conversation with my wife, and when she points out something I've yet to get better at, I hear the word *failure* in my head.

I try to lead a good conversation about the Bible at the dinner table with my children, but instead of eager beavers on the edges of their seats, I get slouched bodies and rolling eyes. *Bad father.*

I teach on being a good neighbor, one who knows the stories of the people who live on your street, but since I moved into my current neighborhood a few months ago, I know only the story of failed attempts to meet people. *Hypocrite.*

Unbelief.

I slip in and out of believing God's word about me and trusting in his work for me. Jesus gave his life to make me a new creation. He died to forgive me of my sins and change my identity from *sinner* to *saint*, from *failure* to *faithful*, and from *bad* to *good* and even *righteous* and *holy*. But I forget what he has said about me. I forget what he has done for me. And sometimes it isn't forgetfulness. Sometimes it's just plain unbelief. I know these things. I just don't believe them.

I am an unbeliever. Not every moment, of course. But I have those moments.

So do you. I'm certain of it.

We all struggle with unbelief in God because the message of who he is and what he has done for us can sound unbelievable at times. We all slip in and out of confidence that what he has done for us in Jesus is sufficient for us today.

It's very possible that even though you are familiar with Jesus, you have yet to believe in him for yourself, for your life. Or maybe you have come to faith in Jesus, but it hasn't really changed what you do daily or how you engage in the everyday stuff of life.

The apostle Paul said to the believers in Jesus in Galatia, "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God [Jesus], who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). They had started with faith in Jesus, but they were putting their faith and hope in something else to make them right instead of Jesus. Paul called them back to an awareness that the good news about Jesus—the gospel—is for all of life: everything.

A life of true living is a life of faith in Jesus, a life of believing in Jesus in the everyday stuff of life.

I'm still learning how to live like that. I'm still an unbeliever in many ways. And yet, I don't want to stay that way. I want all of my life to be marked by faith in Jesus.

God is intent on making everything about Jesus because it is *through him* that all things came into existence and it is *in him* that they are sustained (Eph. 1:22–23; Col. 1:15–20).

God also wants to rescue you from unbelief and sanctify you to become like Jesus. *Sanctification* is just a big word for becoming more and more *like* Jesus through faith *in* Jesus. You *become like* what you *believe in*. So becoming like Jesus requires believing in him more and more in every part of your

life. Sanctification is moving from unbelief in Jesus to belief in him in the everyday stuff of life.

You're not there yet, are you? Neither am I. We're still unbelievers who need Jesus more—in more ways and more places.

As I wrote this book, I came to see once again how badly I need Jesus. Sometimes I believed my writing could change a life. But when a writing day went poorly, I was crushed under the weight of this responsibility. I needed to believe again that God changes lives, not me.

Sure, he works through us to do it, but he isn't dependent on how well we do it. God can speak through anyone and anything. He actually spoke through a donkey once (in the older versions of the Bible, a different word was used in place of *donkey*.) So I guess he can speak through me.

Remembering this, I went from unbelief to belief. "Jeff," I said to myself (or others said to me when I forgot), "trust in God's work, not yours. Believe in his words spoken over your life through Jesus, not yours." Then I could rest again while I wrote.

So I kept writing as the fruit of my faith in Jesus.

This doesn't just happen for me when I write. I find myself needing to do this when I have to get up early to work out; consider how we are going to pay the bills; or sit in the Interstate 405 parking lot that we call a highway, but which so often isn't moving when I need to be someplace sooner than everyone else on the road!

I need to remember because I forget. I need to believe because I don't.

Thankfully, I don't do this alone. I have a community of people around me who are also professing unbelievers. They believe in Jesus, but not all the time for everything. Not yet, at least.

We are journeying together, moving from unbelief to belief in Jesus more each day—and sometimes less the next day.

That is why I am writing this book. I know that I need this book, and so do you.

We all face daily struggles and battles, sometimes from enemies we can't even see. We hear lies and accusations. We struggle with temptations and we are often deceived. We hear words that were spoken over us when we were younger, echoing in our hearts in ways that don't breed life to our souls. We look at our present situations and wish they were better. And many of us face uncertain futures that, without God, cause us to lead lives of anxiety, worry, and fear.

We all need help because we can come up with plenty of reasons not to believe, not to hope, and not to trust in God's word and work for us.

We need the gospel and we need to become gospel-fluent people. We need to know how to believe and speak the truths of the gospel—the good news of God—in and into the everyday stuff of life. In other words, we need to know how to address the struggles of life and the everyday activities we engage in with what is true of Jesus: the truths of what he accomplished through his life, death, and resurrection, and, as a result, what is true of us as we put our faith in him. The gospel has the power to affect everything in our lives.

I wrote this book because I love unbelievers and I know God does too. He loves you and wants to save you from your unbelief.

I believe the only hope for all of us is the gospel of Jesus Christ and communities that live life together while proclaiming this gospel into one another's lives daily—gospel-fluent communities.

Jesus said we are to make disciples who can make disciples (see Matt. 28:18–20), and a disciple of Jesus should know, believe, and be able to speak the gospel. He or she also should be capable of leading others to know, believe, and speak the gospel.

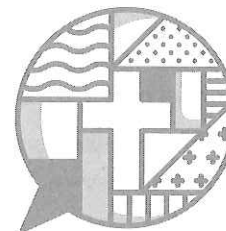
My hope is that this book, first of all, will bring about hope and healing for you as you come to believe and apply the truths of the gospel to your life. I also hope that you and others around you will become fluent in the gospel, so that together you will be able to lead others to find hope and help in Jesus in every part of their lives.

I am more certain than ever that apart from belief in the gospel, sinners will suffer everlasting punishment and saints will fail to live lives that bring glory and honor to Jesus Christ.

So it is my hope that more sinners will be saved from condemnation and more saints will be set free to overcome sin, fear, and insecurity in their everyday existence.

I hope that this book moves you from unbelief to more belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ and equips you to help others do the same.

2



GIVE THEM JESUS

“He’s such a jerk! He’s doing it again,” Alisa said.

“What’s he doing?” one of the members in our group asked.

“He’s doing what he always does—canceling at the last minute when it’s his turn to pick up the kids for the weekend. And then, when I talk to him about it, he intimidates and tries to threaten me. He scares me. And now I’m constantly thinking about how we’re going to make it financially if he doesn’t help us. Half the time, I don’t want the kids to be with him, but I know they need to see their father. I don’t want to see him or even talk to him. He’s so intimidating! I just can’t keep doing this. I’m constantly worrying and can hardly sleep.”

Alisa’s husband had cheated on her with her best friend.

Subsequently, the marriage had ended in a divorce. Neither of them was a believer in Jesus. Additionally, shortly after the affair, Alisa's house had been destroyed in a fire, and she had lost everything.

Alisa was introduced to our community when Clay and Kristie, new Christians and members of our missional community, asked if we'd be willing to help her. They knew Alisa through a mutual friend, and our kids all attended the same elementary school. Without a husband or a home, it was clear Alisa needed the help of God's family.

So we pitched in together to buy groceries and to provide money for her to purchase clothes and other necessary items. For a season, she and her two daughters lived with Clay and Kristie and their two children, Emma and Keagan. Eventually, Alisa started to hang out with our missional community and started learning about Jesus with us.

"Don't worry," one of the men in our group spoke up. "We'll take care of him! We're not going to let him treat you like this."

Someone else chimed in: "Alisa, you can't put up with this! You've got to stand up to him. And if you won't, we will. We won't just stand by and watch this happen to you."

The conversation continued like this for some time until I realized what was going on.

"Wait a minute, everyone!" I said. "This isn't what Alisa needs right now. She doesn't need us to make this about her husband any more than it already is."

I knew much of her problem had to do with the fact that she had already allowed her husband to have too much influence over her. He had taken center stage in her life to the point where she was emotionally controlled by his every behavior. In a sense, he had become her god.

I went on to say: "All we're doing is affirming him as the

problem. We're making the focus all about getting him to change. Sure, what he's doing is wrong. But we can't make this all about him. What if he never changes? Then Alisa will continue to be a slave to his brokenness. We can't change him. Alisa can't either. Only God can do that."

Alisa needed us to direct her to God for help. She needed something much better at the center of her life and attention—someone who could truly set her free and change her from the inside out. So I said: "We need to give Alisa Jesus, not our efforts to change her ex-husband. I'm not saying that we shouldn't have a conversation with him at some point, or that we shouldn't step in to protect her. However, let's start with Jesus first."

I turned to Alisa, saying: "You need Jesus to help you overcome your fear. You need Jesus to be your source of security and love. In fact, you also need Jesus to enable you to forgive and love your ex-husband."

I've seen this pattern play out many times over the years. I've been guilty of it myself. People share their struggles and, with every good intention, others give good advice or try to step in to be the solution themselves. People do need answers. They are in need of help. But we fail to truly help them if we don't give them Jesus. He is the best answer and the most powerful help they can receive.

Speak the Truth

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the church in Ephesus, states: "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and

fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ*" (Eph. 4:11–15).

It is God's intent that every person who comes into a relationship with him through Jesus Christ eventually will grow up into maturity. And maturity looks like Jesus. He is the perfect human, providing an example of what we are meant to be. A mature Christian is one who resembles Jesus Christ in thought, attitude, emotion, and behavior. And one of the most significant ways by which we grow up into maturity is by speaking the truth in love to one another.

Many wrongly believe that speaking the truth in love is actually just speaking hard words to one another with loving hearts: "You have bad breath, but since I love you, I've got to speak the truth to you." "We want you in our group, but you aren't very kind to others, and as a result, people don't want to be around you! I'm just speaking the truth in love." But that is not what Paul is talking about here. Sure, we do need to speak truthfully to one another and do it with love, but Paul has something more in mind.

We need to read just a few verses further to discover what Paul means. He clarifies the truth that we are to speak to one another in verse 21. He states, "The truth is in Jesus." "Speaking the truth in love," for Paul, is shorthand for "speaking what is true about Jesus" to one another—that is, speaking the gospel to one another. Paul knows that if people are going to grow up *into Christ in every way*, they need to hear the *truths* of Jesus (the gospel) and learn to speak them *into everything*.

As my friends Steve Timmis and Tim Chester like to say: "*What's the question? Jesus is the answer. What's the problem? Jesus is the solution.*"

Too often, when giving people answers to their questions or

solutions to their problems, we give them something other than Jesus. If they are struggling with their finances, we give them the best budgeting plans we know of. If they are working through relational discord, we teach them communication techniques. If they are struggling with doubt, we challenge them to just believe, promising that all will get better if they do.

But we fail if we don't give them Jesus.

In some cases, we encourage them to read their Bibles or pray, which, of course, are wonderful things. However, if we don't teach them to meet and know Jesus through their Bible reading and prayer, we are dangerously close to leading them away from Jesus through very good things. This is the heart of idolatry—taking a good thing and making it a "god thing." We take something God gave us to direct us to him and love it or depend on it more than him. As a result, we fail to come to him through it.

Missing Jesus

The religious leaders in Jesus's day were the greatest Bible scholars and the most religious pray-ers. Yet they completely missed Jesus! At one point, Jesus said to them, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39–40). They loved the Scriptures that point to Jesus, but didn't love and depend on Jesus. They missed the entire point!

I have met too many people who love their Bibles yet have no genuine relationship with Jesus Christ. They don't really know him. They don't really love him. They don't really worship him. Instead, they worship their Bibles. They are not growing up into maturity because they are not growing up into Christ.

Bible studies are great. Prayer is wonderful. Applying wisdom for financial planning, relationship building, and every

other area of life is important and necessary. However, if we fail to give one another Jesus, we lead one another away from him. We might grow in Bible knowledge, but not in love for Jesus. We might become the most religious pray-ers of all and yet be talking to the wrong god. We could have our finances in order while our hearts are completely out of order because we are doing it all for the wrong reasons. We might be great at communication and conflict resolution, but if we are not reconciled with God through Jesus Christ, then our relationships will be shallow and temporary in nature.

Think of it this way: if we are to help one another grow up into Christ in every way, we need to learn how to speak the truths of Christ into everything—every aspect of life, every situation we face, and every issue we address.

What does the gospel of Jesus Christ teach us about our finances? How should we address relational discord in light of the gospel? How does what we know about Jesus shape how we handle anxiety and fear? If we speak the truths about Jesus into each of these issues or situations, we will grow up together in every way *with* Christ, which also means we will grow up in every way *into* Christ.

In other words, if we are going to grow up to be like Christ, we have to grow up with the very truths of Jesus.

However, if we try to instruct, counsel, or grow one another with something other than the truths of Jesus Christ, then every area in which we speak something other than Christ will be an area in which we grow away from him. This is why so many people look to Jesus only for their afterlife; they've been given the truths of Jesus primarily as the answer for going to heaven when they die. But they have little knowledge of how Jesus gives a better answer for what they do with their money, their sexuality, their work, or their families. Jesus is good news to them for their afterlife, but

they wrongly believe he has little to nothing to offer them in the everyday stuff of life.

But he has truth to offer—for everything. He *has* better truth and he *is* better truth.

Jesus is the true and better human, and everything in life is better if Jesus is brought into it. He has done everything better. He can make everything better. And the truths about who he is and what he has done, when applied to our lives, are always a better answer than anything else. There is good news and great help for absolutely everything in life in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus and Sex

For instance, let's consider our sexuality. I remember hearing people say, when I was growing up, "You should wait until you're married to have sex because sex is always better if you wait."

Well, first of all, that isn't entirely true. As a married man, I have found that sex gets better the more you do it. Seriously, that's just true.

In fact, I tell most of the couples who come to me for pre-marital counseling that their first night together will likely include the worst sex they will ever have, but that it will get better with practice. Not that the wedding night will be bad. Engaging in sexual intercourse with one person to whom you've committed yourself for a lifetime is an amazingly sacred and enjoyable experience. It is God's very good and right plan that sexual intimacy be reserved for marriage.

However, the motive for abstinence is not better sex in the future. In fact, this motivation leads to the opposite experience. Why? Well, if your primary reason for waiting to engage in sexual intimacy is your own satisfaction, you undermine the purpose for sexual intimacy. The purpose is not the fulfillment

of your selfish desires. In fact, most of the marriage problems I encounter in counseling spouses have to do with the faulty mind-set that marriage is all about them and their desires being fulfilled. Couples in the best marriages understand that giving yourself to another to please him or her glorifies God, satisfies the other, and brings great personal joy as well. Great marriages are self-giving, not self-serving.

How do I know this? Because sex and love were created by God, and Jesus showed us, in his life and death, how best to love.

So what reason should we give people to abstain from sexual activity prior to marriage?

Give them Jesus.

Tell them that the picture God has given us of his love for his people is that of a husband pursuing his bride. God loved his bride so much that he pursued her faithfully for hundreds of years. Eventually, God took on flesh in the form of a baby named Jesus, and he humbly lived as a human for thirty-three years. The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because he was tempted in every way just as we are, yet he did not sin (Heb. 4:15). He fully understands us, the church, his bride, because he put himself in our shoes. Therefore, he is able to live with his bride in an understanding way, just as Peter directs husbands to do (1 Pet. 3:7). Jesus really knows his bride, so he really empathizes with her. He gets her better than any man has ever understood a woman!

Jesus loved his bride enough to serve her and give up his life as a ransom for her. She was unfaithful to him. She gave herself to others. She did not wait for him, but grew impatient and easily gave in to those not committed to a covenant relationship. And yet, he paid the bride price of his own life to purchase her out of her adulterous enslavement. His death on the cross paid the debt for her sin and cleansed her of all her impurities. With

his own life, he purchased for her a perfectly pure wedding dress. In fact, the dress she gets to wear is his own righteousness, which covers the shame of her sin. He died to give her freedom, purity, and unending love. Then he rose again and went to prepare a place for her. One day, he will come for his bride and take her home to dwell with him forever. And though it has been more than two thousand years, he is patiently waiting for that day when his bride will be fully prepared, and he will consummate the marriage at the greatest wedding party of all eternity. He has been waiting faithfully all this time for his bride. Talk about a faithful, loving, and patient lover who is willing to wait for the love of his life!

The reason we wait to have sex until we are married is because of Jesus's faithfulness to us. We are his bride, and we live to tell the story of his love for us.

Jesus purchased our lives so that they would display his pure, holy, selfless, unadulterated love for us! And if we fail—*when* we fail—we remember God's love for us and run back to the cross in faith, trusting that Jesus died for us. We believe that his death paid for our sin and cleansed us from all unrighteousness; that we are now clothed in his righteousness; that we are changed; that we are new; and that God has declared us pure through the pure love of Jesus Christ.

This doesn't just change who we are. It changes how we live.

Because of Jesus's pure love for us, we want to tell the story of his love by displaying it through our own sexual purity. We want to be sexually pure not for selfish motives but for godly reasons: we want the world to know that though we have betrayed the love of our life, we have been forgiven and made new, and he has not forsaken us because of what we have done. We want people to see this in our sexual purity. We also want them to hear it in his forgiveness. We want them to hear that though we have sinned—though they have sinned as well—we

have one who can make us pure because he never sinned. His purity is ours and ours is his!

What do we tell people about sexual purity and sexual immorality?

We give them Jesus!

We are Jesus's people, who speak the truths of Jesus into the everyday stuff of life.

Speak the truths of Jesus for rightly ordering our budgets. Speak the truths of Jesus for finding a spouse. Speak the truths of Jesus for how we respond to our employers or employees. Speak the truths of Jesus for how we parent our children. Speak the truths of Jesus into everything.

Alisa needed the truths of Jesus—the gospel—spoken to her during our group time.

“Alisa,” I said, “Jesus is the only man who will never let you down. Every other man will fail you, but he never will. God wants you to stop looking to your ex-husband, or any other man for that matter, to be for you what only Jesus can be for you. He wants Jesus to be at the center of your heart, your affections, and your hope. Jesus wants you to know that he loves you very much and wants to be your ultimate protector and provider.”

“But how can I know for sure that he will take care of me?” she asked.

“Well, God loved you so much that he sent his only Son to die on the cross for your sins. While you were an enemy of God, God loved you enough to die for you so that you can be forgiven. You can be certain that he will provide for you. If he didn't hold back his only Son, you can be certain he will give you every other good gift that you need as well.

“And not only does he love you and want to provide for you,” I continued, “but he also wants to set you free from the past. Jesus suffered for sin—your sin and the sin of others—so

that you not only might be forgiven yourself, but also be able to forgive others and be healed of the wounds you've received through the sins done against you. God wants you to come to him through faith in Jesus for forgiveness and healing.

“We can eventually talk to your ex-husband if you'd like, but what is most important is that you meet Jesus, come to know his love for you, and be healed by him yourself. What is most important is that Jesus becomes the center of your life instead of your ex-husband or anything else. God alone can forgive, provide what you really need, and love you forever through what Jesus has done for you” (see John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 8:32).

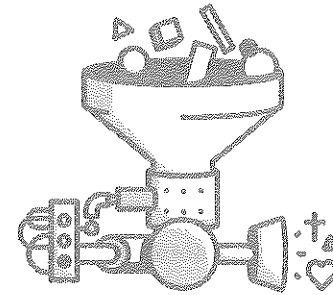
This was the beginning of many similar conversations with Alisa about Jesus.

This is what it looks like to speak the truths of Jesus into the everyday stuff of life. This is what it looks like for people to know Jesus in their everyday life, not just their afterlife.

This is gospel fluency.

Now, let's consider what it takes to become gospel fluent.

3



FLUENCY

Have you ever traveled to a place where the people didn't speak your native tongue? When I served as a youth pastor, we often took students on mission trips to places where the people spoke Spanish. To prepare everyone, we had our translator teach a crash course on the basics of Spanish. The team learned such phrases as "My name is . . ."; "I am hungry"; and "Where is the bathroom?" (*very important*). We also taught some basic cultural differences so that everyone on the team would be careful not to offend people unnecessarily. We spent months prior to our trips practicing Spanish with others who didn't know the language themselves (maybe not the best way to learn, since it was kind of like the blind leading the blind).

My wife, Jayne, who is definitely the more entertaining of the two of us, learned “Spanglish.” In her goofiness, she had a little too much fun in the process. She put “el” at the front of words or “o” at the end while mixing in a little Spanish here and there: “Where-o is el bathroom-o?” “Me llamo is Jayne and I am very hungry-o”; or “My husband is very guapo and I want to kisso el jefe!” We were all very humored by her silliness.

Some of the team members tried speaking English really slowly, thinking that slowness would promote greater comprehension. When people still didn’t understand, they spoke even slower, and louder, assuming the lack of understanding was due to speed or volume, not their deficiency in the language. Fortunately, the people we were serving expected this and were generally entertained by our foolishness. Our problem was that we knew just enough to sound as if we knew some Spanish, but we never knew enough to really have a conversation.

We too often do the same thing with our gospel training.

I’m thankful to say that more recently there has been a greater interest in receiving training in how to speak the gospel, both to one another in the church as well as to those outside it. However, our effectiveness, I’m afraid, has often been less than desired. Much of our training mirrors the approach and effectiveness of our language training for cross-cultural, short-term missions, and has led to similar experiences.

Gospelish

In Sunday school classes or church courses, we teach believers to sprinkle some gospel truths into their conversations. Or we give them a short presentation to share or a diagram to draw, which works really well if people are asking the questions the presentation or drawing addresses. However, in most cases, we and the people with whom we speak are like ships passing in

the night because we are either giving answers to questions they are not asking or we are speaking a language none of us really understands that well.

So we go about “preaching” gospel snippets, thinking we’re speaking the gospel to others, but what people hear is not good news. Oh, it might contain gospel elements, but they don’t hear it as good news because they are not hearing the truths of Jesus applied to their lives and situations. What they get is just a set of phrases and propositions that don’t make much sense to their context, culture, or language.

“Why does someone need to die for me? How does blood forgive sins? What is sin? Why does it really matter what I’ve done? How does a man who lived and died two thousand years ago help me?”

Much of our talk sounds a little like my wife’s Spanglish.

I have found that most Christians don’t really know why we need the gospel, what it is, why it is good news, and what it actually does—at least not enough to apply it to the everyday stuff of life. It’s not that they *can’t* know it well, but most aren’t being equipped to become gospel-fluent people. Most believers have become gospel-snippet people, who speak gospel catchphrases. They’re speaking gospelish, but not the actual gospel in a way people can hear and believe. They say: “Well, we preached the gospel, but they rejected it. People just have hard hearts and deaf ears.”

Some of these believers get into debates and just speak louder, as our students did on mission trips, only creating greater objection to the gospel. Then they quote passages from the Bible about rejoicing in suffering for the sake of the gospel, when, in fact, people are just rejecting what they are saying because no good news is coming through.

Yes, I know the Bible teaches that the gospel is good news to those who are being saved and foolishness to those who are

perishing, so it won't make sense to everyone. I know that we can't make people hear and believe. Some won't. It is God who saves, and it is God's Spirit who enables people to hear and understand the good news about Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:18; 2:14).

However, I'm not sure that we should just write ourselves an excuse when we preach what we believe is "good news." It may not be good news to our hearers if we don't take time to listen, understand, and then speak the gospel to the real brokenness and longing of their souls in a way that they can hear—a way that sounds like the good news of Jesus for them and their present situations.

We must do better at this.

It may be a laughing matter when we're talking about Spanish. But it is no laughing matter when we're talking about the gospel of Jesus Christ and the lives of real, broken, lost people separated from God.

We have to become *gospel-fluent* people.

How Does Fluency Happen?

You gain fluency in a language when you move from merely translating an unfamiliar language into a familiar one to interpreting all of life through that new language. It happens when you can think, feel, and speak in a language. In a sense, the new language becomes the filter through which you perceive the world and help others perceive your world and theirs.

I spent the second semester of my junior year in college studying in Spain to fulfill my language requirement. Prior to leaving Michigan, I took a crash course in Spanish, learning some basic grammar and common phrases. It was similar to our mission teams' preparations. However, I was not going just for a week of serving with a group of English-speaking students. I was going to attend college in Spain, where the majority of my interactions would be in Spanish for more than four months.

I lived in a home where my host mom knew no English. Some of my professors spoke only Spanish, and the majority of the people in the town where I lived were unable to speak English at all. For the first month, I went to bed exhausted every night. Communication was tiresome. I had to listen very closely to people as they spoke Spanish (way too fast at first), process every word and phrase, translate into English, think about what I wanted to say in English, translate that back into Spanish in my head, and then speak it while trying to remember how to maneuver my mouth to say every word correctly. It was exhausting! So during this time, I learned to listen a lot and talk very little because talking was just too tiring.

After a few months of being immersed in constant Spanish for every moment—hearing it everywhere I went, reading it on every sign, listening to radio and television broadcasts in Spanish, and speaking it most of the day—I woke up one morning realizing I had been dreaming in Spanish. Something had changed. It became more normative for me to see something and describe it in my head with Spanish words and ideas.

Gradually, I stopped translating every word and phrase because I started thinking in Spanish. I even remember calling my parents in Michigan and, without thinking about it, talking to them in Spanish until they interrupted me and reminded me that they couldn't understand what I was saying.

I was becoming fluent.

Gospel Immersion

I believe such fluency is what God wants his people to experience with the gospel. He wants them to be able to translate the world around them and the world inside of them through the lens of the gospel—the truths of God revealed in the person and work of Jesus. Gospel-fluent people think, feel, and perceive

everything in light of what has been accomplished in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

They see the world differently. They think differently. They feel differently.

When they are listening to people, they are thinking: “How is this in line with the truths of the gospel? What about Jesus and his work might be good news to this person today? How can I bring the hope of the gospel to bear on this life or situation so this person might experience salvation and Jesus will be glorified?”

When they see movies, they see the themes of the gospel, and they also notice which themes represent a false gospel. They begin to evaluate the storylines of their surrounding culture in light of the story of God’s redemptive purposes in Christ Jesus, and they learn to perceive where God might already be at work around them, preparing the soil of a community and individual hearts for the seeds of the gospel to be sown.

Most significantly, those who are growing in gospel fluency are experiencing ongoing transformation themselves.

They are experiencing ongoing change as the truths of the gospel are brought to bear on their thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and actions, transforming them into greater Christlikeness every day.

They are growing up into Christ in every way because they are learning to hear and speak the truths of Jesus Christ into everything.

They are becoming gospel fluent.

The gospel is becoming their native tongue because it was through the gospel that they were born again. It is by the gospel that they find themselves growing up into Christ. And they are convinced that the gospel will keep them to the end and perfect them into the true image of Christ.

To use theological language, the gospel is becoming their native tongue because it brought about their regeneration, justification, and adoption; it is bringing about their sanctification;

and it will bring about their eventual glorification. It is the beginning, the middle, and the end of their new life in Christ.

The gospel is everything to them.

But gospel fluency does not come about only in a classroom or during Sunday morning gatherings. In other words, people don’t become fluent through classes or by passively listening to preaching—or even by reading a book.

They become fluent through immersion in a gospel-speaking culture.

You *do* need to receive some formal training in the basics of the gospel, just as learning a language requires knowing the basics of grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure. That is why I dedicate the next section of this book, “The Gospel,” to laying out the basic principles of the gospel. You need to know the basics of the gospel in order to become fluent in the gospel.

However, formal training alone does not make one fluent. You become fluent through immersion in a gospel-speaking community and through ongoing practice. You have to know it, regularly hear it, and practice proclaiming it. That is why the final three sections are entitled “The Gospel in Me,” “The Gospel with Us,” and “The Gospel to Others.”

Gospel fluency begins in you, gets worked out within community, and is expressed to a world that needs to hear about Jesus.

Your ongoing development in the gospel best occurs through involvement in a gospel-proclaiming church—a people who gather regularly to hear the good news of Jesus spoken. Please, if you want to grow in gospel fluency, gather with a church that regularly preaches the good news of Jesus Christ. I am also convinced that people need to participate throughout the week in a gospel community on mission or in a missional community,¹ where the members consistently bring the gospel to bear on one

1. For more on missional community, read my other book, *Saturate: Being Disciples of Jesus in the Everyday Stuff of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), or go to saturatetheworld.com.

another's lives and on the lives of those who don't yet believe in Jesus.

Whenever I start a new missional community, I begin by asking people to share their stories. I encourage people to listen with "gospel ears" for what people believe has saved them and is saving them. I also encourage them to listen for who or what is the hero of each story.² And I spend several weeks laying down a gospel foundation, making sure people understand what the gospel is, what it does, and how to apply the truths of Jesus to the everyday stuff of life. Much like my crash course in Spanish during college, I believe we have to establish people in the basics of the gospel if they are ever going to become fluent in speaking the gospel.

Then I encourage the group members never to settle for having a time together where they don't listen well and look for opportunities to speak the truths of Jesus into the conversations they are having or the situations they are facing. It's not a good night of Christian community if Christ isn't present in our thoughts and conversations. We need to—*we get to*—talk about Jesus whenever we come together. He's the whole reason we exist and function in this world.

Language fluency requires immersion into a community of people who speak the language constantly. Gospel fluency requires immersion into a community of people so saturated with the gospel of Jesus Christ that they just can't stop speaking the truths of Jesus wherever they go and in whatever situations they find themselves.

Always Talking about Jesus

Several years ago, a young woman spent the summer with us to fulfill her college requirement for an internship. At the end of the summer, our leadership team threw her a going-away party. During the party, we provided some space for her to reflect on

her time with us. One of our leaders specifically asked her what was different from what she had expected.

She paused for a moment and then said: "Well, this might sound a little strange, but the thing that most surprised me was how much you all talk about Jesus. I mean, I know we believe in Jesus and this is supposed to be all about Jesus, but you guys talk about him all the time. Every day, every meeting, every situation—you're always talking about Jesus!

"At first, I just thought you were strange. Then, I started to think maybe something was wrong with me—that I didn't really know and love Jesus. The church I came from talks about Jesus here and there—especially when we have an evangelistic Sunday. However, most of the teaching is about us—about what we should do and how we need to change. We might hear three key ideas on how to better manage our time or five principles for engaging in serving. But we don't hear Jesus preached every week through every Bible text, and we certainly don't talk about Jesus whenever we get together.

"To be honest, while I was with you all, I began to wonder if I was even saved. And, well, I'm not sure how to say this, but I think I finally came to really know and love Jesus this summer with you. It was just impossible to get away from hearing how great Jesus is with you all!"

We were so encouraged to hear this!

Gospel fluency is developed by being immersed into a Jesus-saturated community. A Jesus-saturated community knows and speaks the gospel every day into everything, so that all parts of our lives grow up into Christ and are eventually fully transformed by and submitted to Jesus Christ, who is everything for us (Eph. 1:22–23; 4:15; Col. 1:15–20).

That is how gospel fluency happens, but let's first start with what the gospel is.

What is the gospel?

2. There is more on this in chapter 12, "The Hero of Our Story."