

DON'T HOLD BACK

LEAVING BEHIND THE AMERICAN GOSPEL
TO FOLLOW JESUS FULLY

DAVID PLATT

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PEEK



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UNCORRECTED
PROOF

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF RADICAL

DON'T

HOLD

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to Follow Jesus Fully

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MULTNOMAH

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

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



THE GOSPEL

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

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INTRODUCTION

The Risk Before Us

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

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

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

many things we associate with that dream.

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

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

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

Silence sat at our table for a moment.

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

tion, and keep his position in the church.

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

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

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

“I would appreciate that,” I said quietly.

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

—

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

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

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

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

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

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

people,” but in you and me.

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

What do I mean by an *American* gospel?

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

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

Jesus's lead into a different future.

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

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

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

A future of doing justice instead of merely debating it.

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

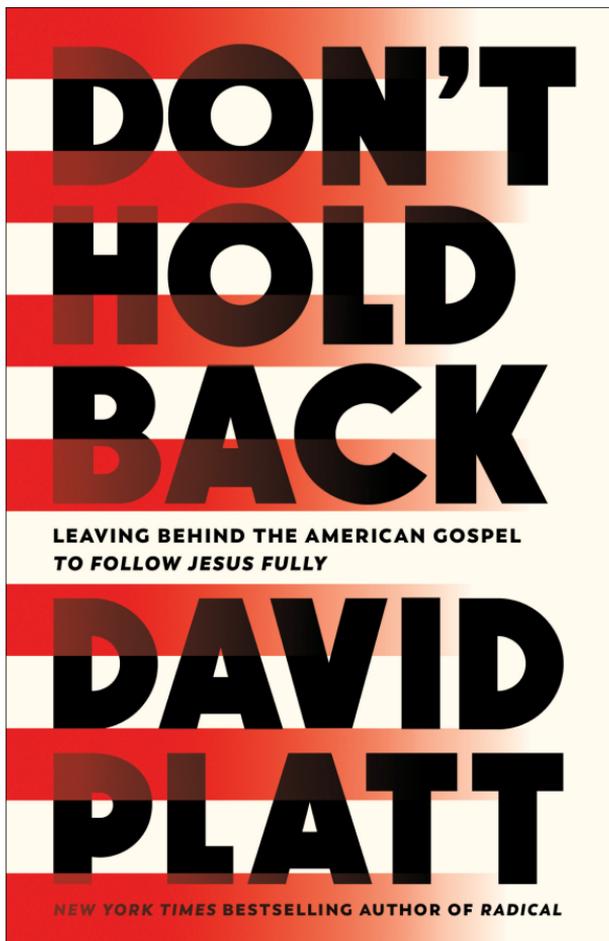
Ultimately, a future in which we realize, either in a fresh way or for the first time, that the goal, gift, and prize of the true gospel is God himself—a future in which you and I find in him everything our souls desire.

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

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

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

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



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