

Foreword by

TIM KELLER



*
Pick up book and hold 12-15 inches from face.
Rotate book 90 degrees counterclockwise.
Close your right eye and focus on the face.
Close your left eye and focus on the cross.
Focus on the cross and lose sight of yourself.
Focus on yourself and lose sight of the cross.

Becoming a Courageous, Compassionate, *and* Commissioned Church



B L I N D S P O T S *

C O L L I N H A N S E N

"I would recommend any book Collin Hansen writes, because he's one of the most thoughtful and devout men I know. But when it's a book about what full-orbed and united ministry looks like in a post-Christian culture, I *enthusiastically* recommend it. The church has a big job in this era, and Hansen's book helps us face into it with courage, compassion, and conviction."

Mark Galli, Editor, *Christianity Today*

"Collin Hansen is one of the best younger writers and thinkers in the Lord's church today. Here he calls on followers of Jesus to manifest three marks, each of which is essential for full-orbed discipleship: holy boldness, loving kindness, and a gospel witness that crosses all bounds."

Timothy George, Founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School;
General Editor, *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*

"Courage to speak the truth, compassion to care for the broken and the oppressed, commissioned to evangelize and plant churches—but how often do all three of these commitments meld together, surfacing as unified Christian maturity in our churches? The simple thesis of this book is that eager submission to the Lord Jesus requires such a unified vision. To opt for only one of these commitments while dismissing those who opt for others is to turn aside from Scripture while flirting with sterility and ugliness."

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

"This book is Collin at his best. With humility and wit, he examines our moment in history and asks, What is wrong with the church? Collin's answer: I am. From that vantage point we begin to understand the beautiful thing God is doing in our generation, encompassing the various gifts he has placed in different Christian traditions. Collin is confident enough in his convictions to write with clarity and authority, yet humble enough to learn from others. This book not only provides insight; it models how to learn from others."

J. D. Greear, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina; author, *Jesus, Continued . . . Why the Spirit Inside You Is Better than Jesus Beside You*

“Collin Hansen provides a valuable framework to the evangelical community to assess our witness and examine our weaknesses in light of Christ’s strengths. This book provides timely, helpful, winsome, and wise counsel for believers seeking to encourage others and effectively expand their witness to a watching world.”

Ed Stetzer, President, LifeWay Research; author,
Subversive Kingdom; www.edstetzer.com

“Collin Hansen is a thoughtful and wise leader. This book will help equip all of us to ask what we’re not seeing in the mission field around us and in our own lives. You will find this book both convicting and rejuvenating at the same time.”

Russell D. Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty
Commission; author, *Tempted and Tried*

“This is a little book that goes to war against all of the right enemies: self-righteousness, pomposity, and anger misplaced. Let’s face it. We’ve heard enough of our ‘heroes’ thunder from the mountaintops. We’ve planted accusatory fingers into the chests of our fellow believers. We’ve lamented a culture in decline. The truth be told, we’re sick of our own Twitter and Facebook feeds. In response to all of these, Collin Hansen knows the source of the problem. It’s you. It’s me. And in the spirit of Carl F. H. Henry’s ‘sober optimism,’ he points us back to the compassion of Christ for a remedy.”

Gregory Alan Thornbury, President, The King’s College; author,
Recovering Classic Evangelicalism

“Collin Hansen offers the multifaceted evangelical church an incisive, sympathetic approach to self-diagnosis. Here is a hopeful vision in which our differences are not ultimately obstacles but opportunities for greater unity in courage, compassion, and commissioning. My hope is that this brief book will win a broad hearing.”

Stephen T. Um, Senior Minister, Citylife Presbyterian Church,
Boston, Massachusetts; co-author, *Why Cities Matter*

“With this timely and challenging publication, Collin Hansen has provided churches with a scripturally based and balanced look at congregational life and ministry. Based on his discerning reflections and an open acknowledgment of his own imbalance and previous blind spots, Hansen offers us an invitation to join him on this important journey toward mature, healthy, and gospel-advancing congregational life. Carefully and thoughtfully written, the descriptors in the subtitle, ‘Courageous, Compassionate, and Commissioned,’ point us toward the need for collaborative service involving head, heart, hands, and feet. I am most pleased to recommend this important book.”

David S. Dockery, President, Trinity International University

“What I most appreciate about Collin Hansen’s *Blind Spots* is the call to be generous with one another. Hansen’s three paradigmatic Christian camps will be instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with church culture. But he reframes these differences as opportunities for mutual instruction and learning rather than divisions to be reinforced. The result is a work that is at once refreshing and edifying and that will hopefully contribute to a more holistic Christlikeness throughout the body of the church.”

Tyler Wigg-Stevenson, Chair, Global Task Force on Nuclear Weapons, World Evangelical Alliance; author, *The World Is Not Ours to Save*

“In this insightful and challenging book, Collin Hansen charts a path for principled Christian collaboration in the midst of our post-Christian culture. Comparing ourselves to Christ more than to others, we will humbly work with fellow Christians and their multitude of gifts to further the purposes of God’s kingdom.”

Thomas S. Kidd, Professor of History, Baylor University; author, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*

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B L I N D S P O T S

Becoming a Courageous, Compassionate,
and Commissioned Church

C O L L I N H A N S E N

Foreword by

T I M K E L L E R

 **CROSSWAY**
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Foreword

Tim Keller

Jonathan Edwards was keenly interested in the philosophy and thought of his day, and at the same time he was fully committed to the absolute authority of the Scriptures. As a result he was, as Richard Lints put it, “arguably the most creative and the most orthodox theologian [at once] that America has ever produced.”¹ Edwards was also as deeply committed to sound, systematic biblical doctrine as he was fascinated by the workings of the heart and how the emotions and senses relate to our reason. This meant, “He stands with Augustine and Luther in the depth of his analysis of religious experience, [and] he stands with Aquinas and Calvin in the breadth of his intellectual grasp of the gospel.”²

This breadth of interest is, however, extraordinarily hard to maintain. Historian Mark A. Noll demonstrates this in his essay “Jonathan Edwards and Nineteenth-Century Theology,” in which he traces out Edwards’s legacy in the American church over the hundred years or so after his death.³

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Old Princeton, including Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield, were the most true to Edwards's orthodox Reformed theology. However, not only were they "far from independent or original thinkers"; they were increasingly inattentive to matters of revival and spiritual experience.⁴ Edwards's New England disciples such as Samuel Hopkins, Jonathan Edwards Jr., and later Nathaniel Taylor were social activists, abolitionists, and creative theological thinkers, but they left behind much of Edwards's biblically faithful doctrine. So did Charles Finney, an enthusiastic reader of Edwards on revivals who strongly rejected his Reformed theology.⁵

Noll's essay demonstrates that there were some who maintained Edwards's doctrinal orthodoxy, some who adopted his creative cultural engagement, and some who kept his enthusiasm for revivals and mission.⁶ Ironically, each of these parties claiming Edwards as inspiration was hostile and critical toward the others during much of the early nineteenth century. Some theologians and ministers kept these various strands—doctrine, cultural engagement, and revival—interwoven and integrated, but that was not true of most.⁷

You must not think by this foreword that Collin Hansen's book is about church history or the historic schools of American Reformed theology. It is not at all. Rather, it is an extended essay on how Christians in Western societies today are responding and how they need to respond to a culture quickly growing post-Christian. Christians have not come to consensus on how to respond to this new world. Collin sees us fragmenting into at least three distinct responses, each

with its own peculiar blind spots, and each one highly critical of the other two.

The three parties of Edwards's followers correspond roughly to the groups that Collin discerns on the scene today. This is evidence that these fissures within our ranks have been with us for a long time and that each party has latched onto some true aspect of what it means to live the Christian life. The "courage" group stands valiantly for the truth; the "compassion" people stress service, listening, and engagement; while the "commissioned" folks are all about building up the church and reaching the lost. Once things are broken down like that, it becomes clear that these should be strands in a single cord. Each group goes bad to the degree it distances itself from the others.

I am, of course, here making this much simpler than it is. Within the pages that follow, Collin Hansen judiciously weighs and discusses the complexities of where we are and what must be done.

Acknowledgments

I'm honored that so many trusted friends and colleagues would read this book and offer detailed, constructive feedback. Turns out you need this critical insight even more when you dare to write a book about blind spots in the church, because these friends help you see your own.

My editor Justin Taylor has always modeled Christlike friendship and genuine humility in an industry where you can't take it for granted.

Supremely gifted writers Trevin Wax and Kevin DeYoung saved me from some of my most egregious oversights. I'm privileged to read and share their writing on a nearly daily basis through The Gospel Coalition (TGC).

Andrew Wolgemuth somehow found time to shape the organization and tone of this book between our discussions about the Kansas City Royals.

Betsy Childs has generously shared her friendship and professional expertise as we work together at Beeson Divinity School.

My fellow TGC editors inspired this work before I knew I

Acknowledgments

wanted to write it. John Starke and Matt Smethurst, in particular, sharpened my thinking through countless conversations about the kind of churches we hope TGC can support. All of us look up to D. A. Carson and Tim Keller, who were living out the hope of a revived and reformed church before any of us was born.

I doubt I would have captured the positive vision for this book apart from the example of the pastors and my fellow members at Redeemer Community Church in Birmingham, Alabama. I write because I've seen what's possible when a local church dares to strive in the power of the Spirit toward obeying everything Jesus commanded.

As always my toughest and kindest editor was the matchless Lauren Hansen. During the two and a half years that this book was in the works, our lives reached excruciating lows and climbed to unexpected heights. We dedicate this book to our son, Paul Carter Hansen, in the hope that he might learn to love and trust the Lord Jesus Christ in a courageous, compassionate, and commissioned church.

Introduction

I wrote this book because my arguments stopped working.

I pointed to Bible verses. I appealed to reason. I turned to church history. Nothing changed with my opponents.

Courage, I concluded by their lack of desired response, must be sorely lacking among Christians today. And that may well be true, at least when compared to our courageous hero Jesus Christ, who conquered sin by his selfless sacrifice on the cross and triumphant victory in the resurrection.

Maybe you're like me and inclined to think that courage is the chief need of the church today. We like to think of ourselves as brave and therefore willing to stand by God's Word and stand up to enemies of the gospel. So when we think of contentious issues such as homosexuality, we tend to see two camps: those who have courage and side with God, and everyone else, who sides with the world against God.

So how do we proceed when our arguments don't work? How do we persuade friends, family, and neighbors who just can't agree? You can yell louder. You can type faster and in ALL CAPS. You can threaten. You can accuse. You can make

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the argument personal. But you and I both know these approaches usually don't work. We've tried them. And we have the scars to show for our well-intentioned folly.

I don't know the exact details of your story. So let me tell you a little about mine to see if you can relate. I grew up in a stable family in a close-knit community, as someone bred to appreciate history and respect authority. I learned about God in Sunday school classes and children's sermons, but I was not raised in a home that talked about Jesus or in a church that preached the gospel. So imagine the shock of my friends and family when at age fifteen I was born again to new life with Jesus. They were more perplexed than angry. Even so, I learned at an early age that I must choose either to deny my Savior or defy my loved ones' expectations. In short I learned that to follow Jesus demands courage. Not coincidentally I bonded in college with the woman who would become my wife, as she shared a similar experience of turning to Christ at the end of high school. And in this private university, where our faith felt regularly under attack by classmates and professors, we typically befriended other Christians who followed Jesus with passion and courage.

I thank God that when he called me, he showed me the cost of discipleship. But many years passed before I truly understood that my experience is not normative for every Christian. I had a hard time relating to Christians who grew up in churches with hypocritical leaders who shackled them with unbiblical traditions. If these believers stayed in the church, they tended to practice a softer kind of Christian-

ity, more enamored with the compassionate Jesus who pardoned the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11) than the righteous Jesus who overturned tables in the temple (John 2:13–22). And don't get me started on the Christians I met in churches who never seemed to move on from the basics about Jesus. They were so busy hyping Jesus with high-energy sermons and upbeat music and message-driven T-shirts that they didn't make any time to talk with me about theology, church history, or the challenges of following Jesus in our consumeristic culture.

With my highly attuned gift for discerning others' motives, it didn't take long for me to see what's wrong with everyone else. Then I blamed them for not seeing the wisdom in my arguments. It took longer to realize that my experience does not exhaust the example of Jesus. And when I finally compared my life to Jesus, as he's revealed across four multifaceted Gospels and the rest of the New Testament, I began to see my own sin, my blind spots. Because I had understood my experience as normative for everyone, I couldn't see how God blessed other Christians with different stories and strengths. Yes, they needed to develop discernment, knowledge, and courage. But God wanted me to see how we would be stronger together in the body of Christ as we worked according to our unique gifts.

I may not share or even understand your experiences. Maybe you're more successful than I am when arguing with people who are different from you. In any event, I know that unless we can both step outside ourselves to hear our

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arguments from another vantage point, we won't enjoy church unity and an effective gospel witness in the world.

You and I have been conditioned by our various cultures and experiences to hear certain aspects of the gospel more clearly than others. When I first responded to the gospel, I didn't hear the good news about Jesus in its fullness. In fact, no one really told me anything about repenting of sin. But as an insecure high school sophomore, I wanted to fit in with older teenagers I admired. I only knew they radiated joy I had never seen before. They saw beauty in God that had never been apparent to me in years of churchgoing. And I wanted what they had—whatever the cost.

Wherever you come from, God doesn't leave you where he found you. This process of growing in grace and holiness can be painful. I know that in my nearly two decades of following him, Jesus has been less concerned with bolstering my self-esteem and helping me fit in with friends than with putting to death my sin and any other hindrance to trusting him. Likewise, your growing love for the gospel will not remove you from your history, experience, and culture. As Jesus progressively reveals himself to you, however, his glorious light will help you see yourself a little more like he does—as God's beloved child eagerly awaiting Jesus's triumphant return.

Compared to Christ

I didn't write this book so you could find popularity with the world or make peace with one another at the expense

of the revealed truth of God's Word. Controversy, disagreement, and persecution do not necessarily indicate sin on our part. They will often result from obeying Scripture and opposing false teachers (1 Tim. 1:3–11; 6:2b–10; 2 Pet. 2:1–22; Jude 3). And, actually, when we consider church unity more important than gospel truth, we end up pointing fingers and naming enemies. Consider the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century, which actually resulted in much sinful division as many churches abandoned the gospel and criticized congregations that did not follow them out of Christianity.

Nor did I write this book so I could criticize the famous Christian leaders you have in mind. Don't expect me to name names here. In what follows I am not so much thinking about the Big Name Leaders as I am about you and me. I'm aiming to help you in self-diagnosis. I wrote this book so you might learn to compare yourself more to Christ than to other Christians. When you and I compare ourselves to Christ, we get unity because we see our sin and forgive one another as God forgave us (Matt. 18:35; Eph. 4:32). When you and I compare ourselves to Christ, we reserve final judgment—your differences will primarily help me test whether I'm missing anything about the character of Jesus. When you and I compare ourselves to Christ, we're more impressed with the grace he lavished on us than with our own contributions to the kingdom.

"Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and people," the Lausanne Covenant explains.

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“When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world.”⁸

I wrote this book with the hope that you would understand the power of the gospel to expose our blind spots so that we could see our differences as opportunity. It is the will of God to put to death our sin and unite our hearts with his so that we can love our neighbors as ourselves. For example, my heart is full of thankfulness to God for the testimony delivered by a woman who began coming to our church about a year ago. She didn’t know her need for Jesus until she saw community in the fellowship of the redeemed. After her first visit to our home group, she asked the friend who invited her, “That can’t be what church is really like, is it?” She knew nothing but the stereotypes. She knew nothing of the grace and forgiveness.

When she recently returned to her hometown for a visit, she met with a group of friends from her former life. At first she enjoyed their company, but when the small talk ended she recoiled at their judgmental, critical attitudes. She knew she’d been no different before Jesus saved her from her sins. And she gave thanks for the abundant life she now enjoyed as a Christian in fellowship with the church. As a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Jesus (Col. 1:13), she’s growing in holiness and sharing the gospel with family and coworkers.

You won’t see this woman’s story on the evening news.

The evangelical website I edit probably won't even feature her. But if we have the eyes of faith, we can see righteousness spreading through this unrighteous world.

Reposition and Repent

By entrusting ourselves to Jesus, we need to be willing to reposition and repent wherever necessary. You and I won't always agree on the direction Jesus aims to take us. And when we disagree, we need to hear each other in humility and test this teaching according to the Scriptures. We're not trying to defeat each other; rather, we speak truth in love so that fellow believers will "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15). We share one Spirit—the Spirit who baptized us into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), who illumined God's Word (2 Pet. 1:21), who raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 8:11). We may live in troubling times, but the times do not trouble this God. One day you and I will rule this world together with Christ. Take heart! Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33), so we can overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21).

The stakes of our cooperation are high. The world needs bold, united followers of Jesus because Christians make the best critics. You might not introduce yourself to a friend that way, but think about our global predicament. Circumstances in this chaotic world have vindicated the biblical perspective. Christians are naturally skeptical of an earthly hope or promise of revolutionary change. We trust no politician who

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promises to make all our dreams come true. We know wishful thinking ends in sure disappointment. We're full of faith and beholden to no one. We make the best citizens in any culture but feel at home in none of them.⁹ We find common ground with various worldviews but resist any attempt to co-opt our support.

We know the debates of our age but question the failed assumptions that strangely persist. We're neither hopeless nor especially hopeful for this age. We're marked by "sober optimism," to borrow a phrase from theologian Carl F. H. Henry. As the apostle Paul observed, we're "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10). You and I can love our neighbors with the confidence that eventually righteousness will triumph, that God can ignite revival at any time. We enjoy unity because we share the same purpose: that one day every knee should bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

My arguments may have failed, but God's Word never does. We must not shrink from the times; after all, no problem we face can ever surpass what the disciples endured after Jesus's death on the cross. Imagine their confusion, their hopelessness, their feelings of rejection. Then imagine their joy mingled with doubt on the third day. Imagine how they felt when they saw their Savior again. Don't you want that freedom and confidence? The same power and the same hope belong to you and me. Jesus, the apostles, and the early church show us how to change the world even when we don't control any levers of power.

This book may sting at times. As God did with me, he may

reveal your blind spots and guide you in repentance for sin and in forgiveness for others you've wronged in word and deed. But this book is about seeing our differences as opportunity. God created us in splendid diversity of thought, experience, and personality. And when these differences cohere around the gospel of Jesus Christ, they work together to challenge, comfort, and compel a needy world with the only love that will never fail or fade.

Pointed Fingers and Helping Hands

It can be embarrassing to identify as a Christian. Every time you turn on your smartphone, car radio, or cable TV, someone is mocking your antiquated, harsh, prudish religion. You'd better avert your eyes from the comments sections and message boards. You don't want to scroll your mentions on Twitter. And that's just the Christians talking about each other. Sure, we've lost some credibility with the culture. But how did we also lose trust in one another inside the church?

You're not sure whom to believe in this hazardous climate of perpetual outrage. Yet you feel pressured to pick sides. *At least I'm not that kind of Christian*, you assure yourself. *I'd never attend that church with the sign out front that says, "Stop, drop, and roll doesn't work in hell."* Or that church across the street promoting a "50 Shades of Grace" sermon series. Body

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piercing may have saved your life, but you let your actions and not your T-shirts do the talking.

Even so, it's not enough to disagree privately. You need everyone to know your disgust for whatever those bigoted/compromised/know-it-all Christians said this time. How dare that man on TV claim to speak for God and you! Hell hath no fury like an embarrassed Christian.

We talk a lot about church unity. So where is the evidence that we actually want it? If you're anything like me, you're as much of the problem as the solution. You love other Christians so long as they make you look good to the world. You lament the divided church, yet you're quick to speak about the problems you see with other believers. You bemoan the church's ineffective public witness in a changing culture, yet you offer the same self-congratulatory solution to every new challenge. You find problems at the end of your pointed fingers and solutions in the mirror. In reality the finger pointed toward the mirror tells you where to search first for the problem.

We all have blind spots. It's so easy to see the fault in someone else or in another group but so difficult to see the limitations in ourselves. Unless you learn to see the faults in yourself and your heroes, though, you can't appreciate how God has gifted other Christians. Only then can you understand that Jesus died for this body, which only accepts the sick. Only then can we together meet the challenges of our rapidly changing age.

Pointed Fingers and Helping Hands

Maybe God has softened your heart with *compassion* for the broken, weak, and abused.

Or he has gifted you with great *courage* to stand with truth.

Or he has *commissioned* you with particular zeal and effectiveness to make disciples in all the nations.

God doesn't want us to look down on and suspect the worst of one another. Rather, he intends us to use these diverse gifts to love the world in a church united by the gospel of Jesus Christ. This moment demands our humility, bravery, and creativity. Why should the world know us by our disharmony, discouragement, and disillusion?

Never beyond Hope

As we point fingers at each other in the church, the world desperately needs our helping hands. Consider our predicament. We in the West learn from a young age that we're happy only if we're free to choose our life adventure. So we trust no one and commit nowhere. Until we turn to Christ, we worship nothing more sacred than self. And we have no greater goal than to be personally healthy and wealthy.

Thankfully, the gospel speaks to every age, including one with no higher aspirations for life than the freedom not to need anyone else except on our guarded terms. And God makes you, Christian, an ambassador of that good news: we can be reconciled to our Creator and live at peace with one another.

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Rather than see us as ambassadors of peace, much of the world views the church as oppressive and self-interested. As a result, religious authority has been displaced, despite two millennia of Christian formation that gave shape to nearly every hope and right the West treasures. The new reality can hardly be considered an improvement. The world wonders why our social ties have frayed. Why neighbors don't look out for each other. Why couples don't want to get married and don't stay together when they do. Why we're plunging into demographic crisis as we wait so long to have children and then stop at one. Why corrupt, ineffective politicians think shouting at each other on news programs will solve problems. Why businesses subsume ethics to the bottom line. Why revolutions depose one despot to replace him with another. Why media promise leisure but leave us nervous and bored with yet another reality TV show intended to make our lives seem somewhat tolerable by comparison. Why our children feel the need to look and act like porn stars if they want to feel affection.

The picture looks bleak. You see it every day in your neighborhood, on the TV, and on your favorite websites. Christians dare not gloat over such suffering. We share in both the responsibility and the effects. We can relate to this disenchantment, because we're tempted even inside the church to see life in terms of control and power. We, too, fear everyone else is out to get us by limiting our freedom. We can't escape the culture wars.

Compelled by gospel love, however, we ambassadors of Christ know how to negotiate a truce—that is, if we'll first lay down the arms we've taken up against one another.

This book aims to help you see where perhaps you've gone astray and how to reorient yourself to follow Jesus and love your neighbor. Let's start small. Can you love a fellow Christian who sins differently than you do? That shouldn't be hard. You've confessed sin. You know you fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Now let's get specific. If you live in an affluent area, do you regularly spend time with Christians tempted by laziness and gluttony? If you live in a middle-class neighborhood, can you identify close friends who confess their greed and arrogance?

If not, you may not understand the significance of God's forgiveness of your sins, and you may neglect to point others to find that same forgiveness by believing the gospel. This good news unites you as family to someone who may seemingly share nothing else in common with you except humanity. And the gospel creates an alternate community that reminds the world how much we all share as we bear the image of God.

What a contrast this gospel offers to the world! Everywhere we see the need and longing for community. On this planet we've never been more closely linked together due to our social media, volatile climate, massively destructive weapons, and multinational corporations. To live together peacefully and in prosperity we need basic consensus on

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what makes life well lived. True community shares a vision for the kind of character we want to cultivate in our children. But you can't even count on such agreement these days at your local PTA meeting or Little League game.

By the grace of God we Christians can show the world a better way. Jesus is our guide. He tells the truth about the world. And he gives life to all who ask. When his followers rest together in the love of a long-suffering God who does not share his glory with another, we can give up the fight for our reputation and get on with the work of the kingdom. Even now you can enjoy fellowship overflowing from Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who from all eternity have loved in perfect harmony. If this God is for us, who can be against us? And how can we be against each other?

Because of this gospel, we can see opportunity in the rubble. We can find hope in the ruins.

Already you can see encouraging signs of this counter-revolution of grace. In your Christian community you can almost certainly find youthful zeal to love your neighbors near and far in practical ways. Look hard enough and you'll see new churches that love their neighbors and welcome the stranger to hear about Jesus. You'll see Christians standing courageously against injustice and telling the good news about Jesus at great risk. You'll enjoy artists and musicians who beautify our world to serve our creative God. Our heavenly Father forgives our finger-pointing and forbears our foolishness. With Jesus we're never beyond hope.

Three Responses

So that we don't squander that hope, you and I need a new narrative to understand our debates in the church and engagement with the world. Since at least the late 1800s and early 1900s, American Christians have been preoccupied with the battle between fundamentalists and modernists. This struggle has sought to situate Christians along a spectrum where they tend toward one side or the other. Depending on your perspective, modernists either update Christianity as necessary for a changing world or sell out the fundamentals of the faith for popularity. As for fundamentalists, they either defend Christianity in a hostile world or consign their neighbors to judgment. You could try to make peace in the no-man's-land at the middle of this battle, but that only means both sides shoot at you as they aim for their enemies.

I can't muster much sympathy for the modernists, whose project has destroyed the very churches it has purported to save. When you lose the distinctive doctrines of Christianity—starting with the resurrection of Jesus—you lose everything. But I reject the narrative that offers only these two solutions to our problems. And I resent the skepticism that pushes Christians toward one pole or the other. Consider the outcome as we look back on this battle for the soul of Christianity. The fundamentalist/modernist war left a legacy whereby, in some churches, you're branded a liberal heretic if you take away their hymnals. And in other churches a

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minister will sooner marry a man and his avatar than allow you to cite Ephesians 5 at a wedding.

As I survey the contemporary evangelical church, I now see three main responses to the world. You might use different names to describe them or even add additional characteristics—you could claim, for example, that a fourth group prioritizes “experience” of God over any other virtue. I have aimed to root my analysis in Scripture but don’t claim that my three categories cover everything important to the Christian life. Rather, with an eye toward the limitations of the earlier fundamentalist/modernity divide, I want to show that none of these responses on its own reflects the depth and breadth of the way Jesus taught and the apostles followed. We tend to cluster around Christians with similar personalities, who reinforce our strengths but turn a blind eye to our weaknesses.

Many Christians are like me: we grew up in stable communities with strong extended families. We went to church because that was the right thing to do. We honored authorities and tradition because we believed they safeguarded the ways of wisdom. So if you’re like me, you tend to see the church’s problems as a failure of *courage* to walk the time-worn paths.

But a lot of Christians have different stories. If you scraped by in childhood and suffered abuse from leaders who should have protected you, you may see *compassion* as the great need of our day.

And if you’ve been weaned on the power of technology to effect needed change, you might think the only thing hinder-

ing unprecedented church growth is our resolve to fulfill the Great *Commission* through creative new methods.

None of us is entirely wrong. But you and I tend to reason from the personal to the universal and judge each other for our different experiences and perspectives. For every illness you see in the world you write the same prescription. And I do likewise, only with my preferred cure-all solution. Then you and I turn against each other in the church when we don't get our way. The problem is, we tend to separate what God has joined together. And he put you and me in the same church to build up one another according to our different gifts (1 Cor. 12:7). He wants to illumine our blind spots so we can see our differences as opportunity.

Where, then, do you fit in this description? Fill in this blank: The greatest problem with the church today is _____. Ask yourself, *Where do I invest the bulk of my time, money, and other resources?*

God variously calls us to champion certain causes. Such differences should be celebrated where we see them in our local churches, among evangelical churches in the same city, and even across movements of Bible-believing churches. Don't be concerned about "single-issue Christians," those believers with particular passion to end abortion, relieve poverty, adopt orphans, or close the 10/40 Window by sending missionaries to unreached people groups. Even if you don't share their interest or gifting, you can pray for them, support them, encourage them. But look out for "only-issue Christians," those believers who don't just want your help.

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They demand you to fall in line behind their agenda. They do not tolerate other priorities.

You can learn to decipher between God-given difference and sinful divisiveness. Here's how you know you're divisive: you thank God you're not like those theology-obsessed fundamentalists. Or those bleeding-heart liberals. Or those pragmatic megachurch pastors. You already know the enemy before you know the details. You know the solution before you even know the specific problem. Furthermore, you don't pray *for* these opponents in the church. If anything, you pray *against* them.

But Jesus himself told us to pray for our enemies. Can you do so? Can you understand that different approaches may be needed in different scenarios, like a counselor exercising discernment and care? Even better, can you admit that we need all the compassionate, courageous, and commissioned Christians we can muster to work together out of respect for God's gifting and in obedience to Jesus? The magnitude of our challenges today ought to dispel the illusion that any one wing of the divided church can go it alone.

We need new hero stories. Or at least we need to vary the tales you and I tell each other to explain the solution for our problems. Think about the biographies you'd find on the bookshelves for each of these three groups. If you're *compassionate* you cheer the prophet who dares speak truth to oppressive authority on behalf of the wounded. If you're *courageous* you celebrate the lone warrior, bloody but unbowed by popular sentiment. If you're *commissioned* to reach

the lost for Jesus you look up to the creatives, the influencers, the entrepreneurial leaders who leverage new measures for greater results.

In isolation these stories can conceal as much as they reveal. You and I suffer from a curious case of self-blindness. Only one Hero is above critique. Only one Hero is an infallible guide in every circumstance. Following Jesus warns us not to think every challenge demands the same solution. Sometimes you must shed a tear. Stand your ground. Brainstorm a fresh approach. Indeed, the example of Jesus reveals that our problems often compel all three responses at the same time. And the best way to respond faithfully and effectively is to lock arms with someone who sees the problem from a different perspective, who meets the challenge with a different skill set while staying faithful to Jesus above all.

Unless we shine light onto our blind spots and measure ourselves against Jesus, we will be tempted to apply our standards inconsistently.

The *compassionate* struggle to empathize with their critics.

The *courageous* don't like truth that makes them look bad.

And *commissioned* Christians don't always enjoy the mission when it jeopardizes their lifestyle and preconceived notions about the way of the world.

Instead of representing Jesus in all his wisdom, we're tempted to cast him in our own image. Having manipulated Jesus, we wield our chief concern like a stick useful for beating up other Christians who don't understand the problem.

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Unfortunately, those other Christians often hit back. They don't see things your way.

Meanwhile, no one sees the bigger picture. Each stick is like a side of a triangle that represents either the heart, the head, or the hands of Jesus. Together these sides form the fullness of God's testimony to the world. Remove any side of the triangle and the whole edifice collapses into a pile of sticks useful only for beating.

Please understand: I'm not telling you to search for the perfect balance between heart, head, and hands, or compassion, courage, and commission. I'm telling you that if you want to follow Jesus in this world, you need all three in full, blessed abundance—in ourselves, our local churches, and the church at large.

The problem with blind spots is that they tend to hide behind good traits. Your weakness is often the flip side of your strength.

If you're compassionate, you sense your neighbors' needs. Good! So did Jesus. But you can be so concerned with what others think that you shrink from telling the truth, especially about Jesus.

If you're courageous, you stand fast in the face of pressure. Good! So did Jesus. But you probably fail sometimes to hear and heed legitimate criticism.

If you're commissioned, you look to explain the good news in a way the world can understand. Good! So did Jesus. But you also may struggle to confront the culture's values where they conflict with the gospel.

No mere attempt at “balance” can avoid the offense of the gospel. That’s not the call of Jesus. But in aiming toward Jesus you and I can learn more precisely *when* and *how* we must offend as we put on his righteousness and put off our sin. Only by loving Jesus more than he loved the world could Paul distinguish between times when he needed to confront other Christians for undermining the gospel (Gal. 1:6–10) and when he rejoiced to know that other Christians preached the gospel even with mixed motives (Phil. 1:15–18). Neither situation should become our only paradigm for handling disagreement. His intimate grasp of the gospel made Paul jealous to guard it and eager for anyone to spread it. You would not describe him as balanced, as if he mixed a dash of tough love with a touch of free love. Instead, Paul loved Christ more than himself, so he feared neither criticism from false teachers nor suffering for righteousness’ sake. He could be equally zealous for pure doctrine, generous charity, and urgent evangelism.

Better Together

Because of these blind spots, neither you nor I see everything clearly. We need each other. And hopefully by the end of this book you’ll learn to see these differences as opportunities to serve Jesus more faithfully. You may also see that the same blind spots that apply to us individually plague many of our churches, blogs, and conferences as we tend to congregate around like-minded leaders. As a leader in one such ministry, I see this problem in myself and many good

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friends. And in this book I'll probably be harder on myself than others, because I'm more familiar with those temptations. I fear that spending time only around whatever group we regard as the "forces of light" can often make us all at least two-thirds blind. Rather than provoke judgment, your differences should primarily help me test whether I'm missing anything about the character of Jesus. Bravery, empathy, and innovation are all good and necessary because they roughly correspond to Christ's roles of prophet (courage), priest (compassion), and king (commission).

As the head of the church, Jesus guides us in how and when to respond in the proper role. You won't always excel in every capacity. But by learning to respect how God has gifted others, you'll enjoy God's power at work in your weaknesses. You'll grow in love and charity even as you deepen your convictions in God's good plan for the church in the world. You'll see that in the body of Christ, the head needs the hands needs the heart. Remember, we're not just looking for balance, as if we can triangulate the proper approach. The church needs you to bless the rest of us with your particular gifts so that together we're stronger when serving a needy world.

In the following chapters we'll explore how compassionate, courageous, and commissioned Christians can work together to meet the challenges of our age. We'll identify our God-given motivations and personality, appreciate these gifts as they correspond to the ministry of Jesus, illumine our blind spots, and consider how each of us makes a vital contribution to the church and the world.

Pointed Fingers and Helping Hands

The church of Jesus is the only institution equipped in this age of skepticism to enjoy unity in diversity through profligate, never-ending truth in love. Together as we notice our blind spots, we'll prepare to turn from our sins, follow our Savior, receive his reward, and await his return. We'll find evidence that the kingdom of God has already dawned in Jesus Christ. We'll search for signs that his kingdom advances in, through, and despite us. And we'll find hope for our time in the sure promise of a day coming soon when united we'll stand before the throne of grace.

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WHAT IF OUR DIFFERENCES BECAME OPPORTUNITIES?

The world needs bold, united followers of Jesus. It needs you and me to understand and appreciate the contributions of our brothers and sisters in faith. However, too often, our blind spots lead to divisions and disagreements, preventing God's people from testifying to his grace with one voice.

In this provocative book, Collin Hansen helps us view our differences as opportunities to more effectively engage a needy world with the love of Christ. Highlighting the diversity of thought, experience, and personality that God has given to his people, *Blind Spots* lays the foundation for a new generation of Christians eager to cultivate a courageous, compassionate, and commissioned church.

"The church has a big job in this era, and Hansen's book helps us face it with courage, compassion, and conviction."

Mark Galli, Editor, Christianity Today

"Collin Hansen is a thoughtful and wise leader. You will find *Blind Spots* both convicting and rejuvenating at the same time."

Russell D. Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission

"This book is Collin at his best. With humility and wit, he examines our moment in history and asks, 'What is wrong with the church?' Collin's answer: 'I am.'"

J. D. Greear, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina

"Hansen provides a valuable framework to the evangelical community to assess our witness and examine our weaknesses in light of Christ's strengths. This book provides timely, helpful, winsome, and wise counsel."

Ed Stetzer, President, LifeWay Research

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