

A gentle
MANIFESTO
against the STATUS
QUO
THE
PRODIGAL
CHURCH

jared c.

wilson

“Jared Wilson provides a stern warning against the *excesses* of pragmatic approaches to church growth while reminding us that if the power of the gospel is not driving our ministries, we may build a crowd, but we are not building a church.”

Thom S. Rainer, President and CEO, LifeWay Christian Resources

“Jared Wilson paints a vivid picture of the grievous outcome of church centered on programmatic pragmatism instead of the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ. His critical analysis and probing confrontation, coupled with his personal encounter with grace, has the potential to bring the church to her senses and usher her back to our Father’s restorative embrace. *The Prodigal Church* is a desperately needed wake-up call.”

Jeff Vanderstelt, Visionary Leader, Soma; Pastor, Doxa Church, Bellevue, Washington; author, *Saturate*

“*The Prodigal Church* is indeed a gentle manifesto against the status quo. Wilson writes with humility, urgency, and true pastoral concern for God’s people. He pushes back against the consumerism and pragmatism so prevalent in twenty-first-century congregations, and points the church to something far superior—the gospel of Jesus Christ. All who love the local church will benefit from reading this book.”

Jason K. Allen, President, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and College

“Jared Wilson writes that we’ve forgotten “who the church is for.” He rightly, and with a kind spirit, questions the status quo in this book. The church is not a consumer experience. It’s not supposed to be a volunteer-draining, CEO-driven business. No, it’s much bigger, better, and more beautiful than that.”

Brant Hansen, CURE International; storyteller; radio host; author, *Unoffendable*

“Although I don’t agree with all of the conclusions Jared comes to, he asks penetrating questions and lovingly argues as a man who deeply loves Jesus, the gospel, the church, and pastors. I am fully confident that what he has written here will save some weary pastors from burning out and will make The Village Church a healthier place.”

Matt Chandler, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Dallas, Texas; President, Acts 29 Church Planting Network

The Prodigal Church

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A Gentle Manifesto against
the Status Quo

Jared C. Wilson

The Prodigal Church: A Gentle Manifesto against the Status Quo

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Introduction

The Parable of the Prodigal Church

Once upon a time, there was a church that loved God and loved people but had a difficult time showing it because the image they gave of God was rather one-dimensional and so the way they attempted to love people was also one-dimensional. The church believed in a holy God, a just God, a vengeful God, and so they preached wrath very well, pushing the hearts of all who darkened the church doors with the imminent foreboding of their eternal damnation.

They did their best to scare the hell out of people, and when that didn't work, they cried and pleaded and begged. Wretchedly urgent, the church regularly reminded its people of the dire importance of obedience to God, of being holy as God is holy. And the church grew vividly aware, year in and year out, of the "thou shalt nots" of the Bible. And they came back for more, because guilt can be a powerful motivator.

But guilt is not a very *enduring* motivator, so as time went on and people grew weary of the burden of the law laid so heavily upon them, they began to drift away. Some had begun to suspect this church's God was not quite love and that this God could never quite be pleased, so they stopped trying. But some kept trying, of course, fearful and diminished.

One day some brave soul gently suggested that the old way wasn't working. People could not be won by a God who seemed angry all the time, he reasoned, and in fact it made no sense to expect people to have interest in a God who didn't seem to care about their happiness. The God of the old way seemed so preoccupied with holy things that he did not care much for people's everyday lives. "Couldn't we make the way of the church more practical, more appealing?" this person asked. "The way we may see growth again," he reasoned, "is to deconstruct the old way, remove the old barriers, and reassert that God is love."

So, where once the church emphasized God's perfect holiness, now they emphasized his abundant love. Where once the church emphasized obedience, now they emphasized success. Where once the church emphasized sin, now they emphasized happiness. Where once the church focused on God's demands, now they emphasized man's specialness and abilities. "If we help people tap into their inner potential and remind them of how special they are," the church decided, "and if we highlight how God loves them no matter what, people will be interested in church again."

They changed the songs, the architecture, the style of dress. They took the crosses down, because they seemed too religious. It was a clean slate. And, lo and behold, people began to come to church again.

The church grew in attendance week by week and year by year. People came excited and exuberant. This was not their grandfather's church!

But as the years went by, the church noticed something. Little by little, they discovered that while some new people were discovering church for the first time, most who came to experience the new way of doing church were actually in recovery from the old way of doing church. And while helping wounded people recover is not a bad thing at all, the church began to discover that most of their people—new Christians and "old" Christians alike—were not

growing very deep in their faith. The lack, it seemed to them, was of a more relevant way to apply their faith to everyday life.

So the church came up with some new ideas to help people grow. They changed traditional Sunday school to innovative small groups, outdated special music to contemporary video montages. In order to help people see God's Word in the world around them, they began applying Bible verses to songs on the radio and movies at the theater. The church continued deconstructing more things, making more things over. The church had—in their own estimation, cleverly—traded out the “don'ts” for “dos,” but in the end, they discovered that even the regular dispensing of practical helps for victorious living wasn't having the desired effect. People certainly enjoyed the weekend experience now. But, day by day, they still seemed no closer to God than in that old way of doing church. In fact, though it scared them to admit it, people actually seemed *less* interested in God than before.

For him who has ears to hear, this is the parable of the prodigal church.

For my own part I hate and distrust reactions not only in religion
but in everything. Luther surely spoke very good sense
when he compared humanity to a drunkard who,
after falling off his horse on the right,
falls off it next time on the left.

—C. S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night*

And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out;
beware of the leaven of the Pharisees
and the leaven of Herod."

—Mark 8:15

What This Book Is Not

I dare you to read this book.

I don't dare you as someone who aims to make you mad (or sad), but as someone who himself has been dared to read things that have challenged his own assumptions and presumptions—which benefited him greatly in the long run. I just want to appeal to your desire as a leader to stretch and grow and be thoughtful and have firmer convictions than ever before. I just want to ask you some questions. I want to show you some things. I want you to consider some different lines of thinking, even if they end up leading you right back to affirming what you already thought.

If you don't like the book, return it and ask for a refund. Tell them I'm an idiot and these pages should line birdcages. But please give me the chance to earn your rejection. And if you will make the commitment to hear me out to the very end, I make these promises to you:

This Book Is Not a Rant

I'm pretty good at rants. Or at least, I feel pretty good when I rant. But this book will not be a grand venting. Who wants that? Not

you. Not me. We've all had enough yelling in the Christian world, I think, or at least enough yelling about things that don't need yelling about.

I don't know about you, but I've got LOUD NOISES fatigue. When someone who disagrees with me thinks the only way to convince me is to trigger the All Caps button and lay heavy hands on the Exclamation Point key, I tune them out right-quick.

When I came up with the idea for this book, it began as an extension of things I've been thinking, writing, and preaching about for nearly ten years now, but this project is really the culmination of twenty years of life and ministry. I'm not writing purely from theory but from experience. But I also knew that some of the ways I've written about issues related to church models and methodology in the past would not be suitable for this book. Not because those previous ways were wrong, necessarily, but because they were often for different audiences, perhaps too often for the already convinced. Like many of you, I have that "spiritual gift" of sarcasm, but too often that kind of humor is used in harmful, cutting ways, in ways that are counterproductive. Like lots of people, I can too often vent my frustrations rather than plead my case. I want to take the Bible seriously when it says that venting is foolish (Prov. 29:11).

There's definitely a place for harsh words. We see them used in a variety of ways in the Bible, including to correct wrong belief and wrong action. But what I want you to read here isn't intended as a rebuke. I don't want to appall you; I want to appeal to you. I won't snip at you or nag you. I might *pester* you, but I definitely don't want to pick on you.

I'm also not writing this book to preach to the choir, which is all that ranting really ends up accomplishing. Preaching to the choir can be fine and good (the choir needs the preaching, too), but I know that if we expect others to not just hear what we're saying but also to actually *consider* it, we have to be kind, respectful, and affirming of all that we can affirm. So I won't lie and say this isn't

a manifesto. It is. But hopefully it will be a gentle one. You can be the judge of whether I succeed or not.

This Book Is Not an Argument for a Traditional Church

You may think I want to sell you on a particular way of doing church. I do. I absolutely do. But I hope you will relax as it pertains to music styles, clothing styles, or almost any other kinds of styles, because this isn't that kind of book.

Many times, when a person complains about the so-called "attractational church," people understandably assume that the person is arguing for a "traditional church" instead. If I complain about the superficiality of certain contemporary worship songs, the response can be something like, "So you think we should just sing hymns?" Hymns are great. More churches should sing them. But there's nothing intrinsically holy about old music. When someone argues that too much contemporary Christian music is superficial or theologically suspect, it is not a call to give up songwriting but a call to write better songs.

I was once part of a rather large church that fell apart. The elders had to dismiss the lead pastor for a variety of sins, including ongoing verbal abuse of numerous staff members. The pastor announced a public meeting, which I attended, to give his side of the story, part of which consisted of saying the elders had kicked him out because they wanted to make the church more traditional. This was not true at all, and most of us saw right through it. But the pastor knew it would gain some traction because many people in our church were there "in recovery" from bad experiences of legalism and lifelessness in traditional churches. Traditionalism had become a handy bogeyman.

There are all kinds of churches in the world, and there are good ones and bad ones among all those kinds. There are good traditional churches and bad ones. There are good contemporary churches and bad ones. But when, faced with critique, the contemporary church

holds up an idea of the traditional church as boring or fundamentalist or backward, it is the cheapest kind of defensiveness and self-justification.

So in my critique, I hope this kind of response will be set aside. I am not asking anyone to give up their guitars or their coffee bars—just, perhaps, to reconsider what they do with them. This is not an argument for a more traditional church so much as it is an argument for a more biblical one.

This Book Is Not a Reactionary Rejection

It has been said that the prophets of one generation become the Pharisees of the next. Maybe that's true.

What we see in the cyclical nature of the church in the Western world is how each generation in some way rebels against the values and establishments of the generation before it. Some track this reactionary cycle through the generations of church models, as well. It is possible that the rise of the so-called “seeker church,” with the primary influences of Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois and Saddleback Community Church in California, precipitated a reactionary movement of similar churches against the traditional—maybe fundamentalist—churches before them. Then my generation, often called Generation X, began to flirt with things like liturgy, creeds, more structured worship, even candles and incense. In response to the loosened-up church style of the Boomers, the Xers went further back than their fundamentalist grandparents even, and adopted some sort of merging of contemporary church with elements of high church formalism, seeking less relevance and more reverence. We might say the movement known as the emerging (or emergent) church came from this reaction.

Today the church world is a bit fractured, with tribes springing up all over the place. The mantle of the Boomers’ “seeker church” has been passed through the “church growth” movement, on to

a new phase in contemporary church styles predominant in the American megachurch movement. But we have to be careful there, because not all megachurches are created equal. There are very big traditional churches and very big contemporary churches. The bigness of a church is no indicator of its style or approach to worship. Similarly, the seeker church paradigm can be found in hundreds of smaller churches around the nation.

The emergent church seems to have fractured off from evangelicalism altogether. Although there are certainly evangelicals in the emergent church movement, as a stream of church life it seems to have found itself more at home within the denominational mainline, where religious and political liberalism are more common.

The tribe sometimes called the “neo-Reformed”—or alternately, the new Calvinists, the neo-Puritans, the “young, restless, and Reformed”—is another offshoot of the contemporary church that ran parallel to the emerging church for a time. Those of us who identify with the slightly larger tent we might call the “gospel-centered” movement would align more with the neo-Reformed, but there is plenty of variety denominationally and stylistically even in this group. Just get the Presbyterians and the Baptists talking about baptism, for instance, or the traditionally Reformed folks and the Acts29 Network gang talking about church music.

There is a beauty in all of this diversity. It is legalism when we place a burden on another local church body to look more like our own than Christ’s. So in all this beauty lies a great danger, and the danger is this: assigning a level of spirituality according to one’s stance on an open-handed theological issue—that is, important but nonessential issues that we hold more loosely than the essential tenets of orthodox Christianity, which of course we hold very tightly in a “closed hand.” We must be very careful that our modes and models of church are sincere attempts to contextualize our common faith to our particular mission fields and communities. In this vein, it is just as narrow-minded to suggest that a traditional church is

necessarily boring and legalistic as it is to suggest that a contemporary church is shallow and worldly.

We've got to get out of reactionary mode. When we find ourselves making particular transitions from one way of doing church to another, we have to be on guard against shaking a fist at those in the places we leave behind.

I have deep concerns about the current approach to what used to be called the seeker church, what some today may call the "attractional" church. I think there are some fundamental assumptions and instrumental decisions being made at the heart of this way of doing church that are not in step with the truth of the gospel. I am trying to be totally up front about that. But if you are committed to that approach, I do not question your faith. I do not question your love for Jesus. I know that you do what you do precisely because you do love Jesus and because you love the people Jesus loves and want to be about the business Jesus was about. I know you do what you do because lost people need to know Christ; your way of worship style and preaching style—your entire mode of "doing church"—comes from a desire to do what many churches have simply left undone for many, many years, which is to say, reveal the loving heart of God for those spiritually far from him. You want lost people to be saved and you want found people to walk more closely with him. I see that, and honor it.

I will tell you, in the final chapter, my own personal story of transition from the traditional church to the attractional church and then into another way. But you should know, ahead of time, that I invested in the attractional church because I shared its heart for the lost. I still have not rejected its primary aims. I simply come at those aims from another angle now. So this book isn't intended as a reactionary diatribe. You wouldn't read that. I wouldn't read that. So I won't write that.

I'm writing this book not as a reactionary rejection of what you do, but as a reaction to what God has done in the gospel.

I'm asking you to thoughtfully consider the different angle laid out in these pages. You may think this is much ado about nothing, that this kind of stuff is petty. But I ask you to consider this carefully. I simply want to suggest that, even if we agree on the goal we are trying to reach, if we are just one or two tiny degrees off, the further we go the further away we will be from our intended destination.

And while faithful Christians may disagree on church forms and the like—while we may, in love, differ on all manner of secondary doctrinal matters—could it not be that some of these secondary things we differ on have implications for how people receive and believe primary things? How we “do church” shapes the way people see God and his Son and his ways in the world. If you agree with that, it behooves us to constantly evaluate what shape our church is taking and what shape of Christian our church is making.

This Book Is a Call to Question Ourselves

Many of our strongest churches began when a group of visionary people began to question the way they'd always done things. The best missionary work begins with an evaluation of previous work in the same field. The strategy begins with asking, “What has been done before? How fruitful has it been? What changes, if any, ought we to make?”

The worst ministry work assumes that the old ways of doing things are the best ways simply because “that’s the way it’s always been done.” You and I laugh at this idea when it comes up in our churches. When we’re not laughing, we’re weeping. Many a great ministry initiative has stalled out, many a necessary alteration in the way of doing church has stopped before it began, because influential voices have raised the objection merely of its newness. No pastor wants to hear, “That’s not the way the previous pastor did it.”

The problem is that all of us are susceptible to this kind of

thinking, including those of us in cutting-edge churches. We get locked into our ways of doing things and end up ruling out any questions or objections. The new way becomes the old way after a while, and we ourselves won't give any quarter to any newer ways of thinking because our *old* new way has been working just fine, thanks. Do you see how that works?

But if you are in a successful contemporary church, you didn't get where you are by doing things the way they've always been done. (I'm appealing to your sense of innovation here, and your willingness to evaluate things.) What happens when the innovative, relevant, cutting-edge ways of doing church become the old way? How do you know, for instance, that the way has gotten old? How do you know when the measurements you're making don't tell the whole story?

Do you, for instance, allow anyone to suggest that, despite all appearances, perhaps the way things are being done isn't the best way they *could* be done?

So here's what this book is intended to be:

You and I are sitting down for coffee. Or a long breakfast, since this is a book, not a pamphlet. I ask you, as a friend, to hear me out. I have some concerns about the way you're doing church. You're on guard, because you're tired of rants, tired of legalistic whining, tired of reactionary diatribes. You just want to get on with God's mission. I want that too. But for this long breakfast, I ask you to put the guard down and let me speak to you as a friend. As one iron sharpening another.

In Mark 8, Jesus and his disciples are in their boat after he has miraculously fed the four thousand. The disciples, as always, are a few tacos short of a combo. Jesus had just performed this great miracle using bread, and they very soon after are wondering where they're going to get some bread. Jesus, as he often does, turns their doubts into a teachable moment. In verse 15, he says, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."

This appears to come out of left field. The disciples miss the point right away and continue wondering about where to get bread. They don't know it, but their missing the point is actually quite *on point*.

When Jesus says to beware of the leaven (yeast) of the Pharisees, he is referring to self-righteousness, what we often call legalism. But legalism doesn't always look like rigid fundamentalist hellfire-and-brimstone Captain Bringdowns. (We'll talk about this later.) The point is that self-righteousness is very subtle. Just a little can spread and take over. The same is true of the leaven of Herod, by which I take Jesus to mean, essentially, "worldliness."

The leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod appear on the surface to be opposite dangers. Pharisees are religious; Herod is irreligious. Pharisees are legalistic; Herod is licentious. These are the two extremes we sinners often find ourselves swinging between on the great spiritual pendulum of life. Because this is true, it is true that our churches tend to swing between these poles as well. And often we justify our own tendencies by in some way saying, "Well, at least we're not like *those* guys."

But, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Gal. 5:9). If we give either legalism or license an inch, they will take a mile. This is why Jesus says to "beware" of them both. And he also says to beware of them both so that we won't think that a dose of one is the antidote to the poison of the other.

That is the way many have forged their church movements. We hope to flee legalism by "loosening up." Or we hope to repent of worldliness by "tightening up." Certainly we could all use some loosening and tightening in strategic places, but this is not what Jesus is teaching.

In Mark 8 he has just fed the four thousand. The disciples are still wondering where they will get bread. Jesus says to beware of the bread of the Pharisees and beware of the bread of Herod. Because he wants us to find our bread in him, to find in fact that he *is* our bread.

If Jesus is, as he claims to be, the bread of life, what implications might this have for the way we do church? I don't simply mean that we will want people to know Jesus—I'm assuming you and I both already want that. That's the whole purpose of your church. The issue is this: Is it possible that the way we communicate the bread of life has been compromised by one of these other leavens that ought not be there? Jesus says to beware of this happening, so we shouldn't simply take for granted that good intentions will rule the possibility out.

What if the way we communicate Jesus actually works against people trusting him? Could we consider that together?

For all of the evaluation we tend to inflict upon ourselves—from test marketing felt needs to measuring the participation of our churchgoers, from studying the demographics of our target mission fields to critiquing the level of excellence of what takes place on our stages—I hope we have never ruled out asking, “What if what we're doing isn't really what we're supposed to be doing?”

We should ask that. All of us.

Also Available from Jared Wilson



This book is not a tired RANT.

This book is not a reactionary DIATRIBE.

**This book is a gentle MANIFESTO
against the STATUS QUO.**

In *The Prodigal Church*, Jared Wilson challenges church leaders to reconsider their priorities when it comes to how they "do church" and reach people in their communities, arguing that we too often rely on loud music, flashy lights, and skinny jeans to get people in the door.

Writing with the grace and kindness of a trusted friend, Wilson encourages readers to reexamine the Bible's teaching, not simply return to a traditional model for tradition's sake. He then sets forth an alternative to both the attractional and the traditional models: an explicitly biblical approach that is gospel focused, grace based, and fruit oriented.



"Wilson's critical analysis and probing confrontation has the potential to bring the church to her senses and usher her back to our Father's restorative embrace. *The Prodigal Church* is a desperately needed wake-up call."

Jeff Vanderstelt, *Visionary Leader, Soma; Pastor, Doxa Church, Bellevue, Washington; author, Saturate*

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CHURCH LEADERSHIP

