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Book Review: The Explicit Gospel by Matt Chandler

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if we do not learn from history, we will repeat it. The harsh language may be apropos.

The book is replete with gold that pastors and church planters across our country would do well in mining. The cost is high and the methodology clear. It requires only those with the courage to accept the truth behind human behavior to see that man does not change. His response to God's church has been consistent to his nature for two thousand years. The specificity to our culture and context of the American church as described in the findings of this material ought to encourage and sober the honest Christian.

Americans are looking for real religion which means something and brings to them something that cannot be found in any other arena. The body of Christ is uniquely gifted to provide that environment, and yet through arrogance and neglect, we have excused many of our churches to ruin. The bright spot comes from the undying truth that if any church or denomination fails to reach the lost, there will be others in their wake who will rise up to meet the challenge. According to Stark and Finke, this cycle will continue as long as there are humans.

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I trust you can see the high value I place on the diligent work of these great social scientists. I believe they are a gift from God to His church in America.

Chandler, Matt. *The Explicit Gospel*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2012. 224 pp. \$17.99.

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The Explicit Gospel is Matt Chandler's first book. In this book, Chandler identifies the problem of a lack of clear gospel presentation and understanding in many churches and in many Christians' lives. Chandler argues that if leaders of churches were to really dig into their congregants' testimonies, they would probably find that their people do not have the true gospel but rather a Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism instead. At the heart of the book is a desire to help people understand the importance of a balanced view of the "gospel in the air" and the "gospel on the ground" without excluding one or the other.

Matt Chandler is the senior pastor of The Village Church in Highland Village, Texas. He pastors one of the fastest growing churches in America with four satellite locations. He is a popular conference speaker and a main leader of the

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young pastors of the Reformed faith. He is currently the president of the Acts 29 Network, a fast growing church planting network that focuses on planting like-minded churches across the United States and beyond.

The Explicit Gospel examines a move away from assuming people know and understand the gospel toward being explicit with the gospel by helping people clearly understand God's redemptive purposes, thereby causing people to worship Him and give their lives to Him completely.

The book is broken down into three sections with a total of eleven chapters. The first section (part one) is "The Gospel on the Ground." Chandler states his thesis: "Here we will see the power of grace for human transformation" (16). Part two is "The Gospel in the Air." Chandler says, "We'll see how the apostle Paul connects human salvation to cosmic restoration in Romans 8:22–23. Here we'll look at the oft-forgotten meta-narrative of the Bible's story of redemption" (16). Part three is "Implications and Applications."

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Part one contains chapters one through four and traces the biblical narratives of God, man, Christ, and man's response to the gospel, as Chandler calls it, "On the ground." Part two contains chapters five through eight and identifies the Creation, the Fall, reconciliation, and consummation of the "Gospel in the air." Part three contains "Implications and Applications" and identifies the dangers of staying too long in the gospel on the ground and also the dangers of staying too long in the gospel in the air.

The most helpful chapters of the book are chapter seven where he explains that as Christians we are "reconciled to reconcile" (151) and the final three chapters in which implications and applications are explained and the reader is warned of the dangers of an imbalanced gospel in the air and on the ground.

Chandler's main purpose for writing this book is to help the reader understand the importance of a clear presentation of what the gospel means and how it should affect our worship in our everyday lives. It is very much a theological treatise as commonly found in many systematic theology books. He also uses a large section of the book, all of chapter five, to defend the faith against science and evolution. His goal is to clearly move the reader from a nominal understanding of the good news and perhaps a lukewarm faith to a clear and explicit understanding of what the gospel means incarnationally and cosmologically. His hope is that this will ignite the readers' faith and set them on fire for Jesus.

The author accomplishes his purpose by telling compelling stories of conversations with his congregants. Chandler writes of one baptism night especially where this idea for the need of an explicit gospel came to him. "One after

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another, each person stirred the waters and told some variation of the same story: ‘I grew up in church; we went every Sunday morning and night; we even went to Wednesday prayer, vacation Bible school, and youth camp . . . but didn’t understand what the gospel was, and after a while I lost interest in church and Jesus and I started walking in open sin. Someone recently sat me down and explained or invited me to The Village, and I heard the gospel for the first time. I was blown away. How did I miss that?’ Or they would say, ‘No one ever taught me that’” (12).

After reading the book, I was convinced that a clear and explicit presentation of the gospel in multiple forms is necessary to help people truly understand what it is and how it affects their lives both eternally and daily. Furthermore, I was inspired that an explicit presentation can help congregants grow more confident in their faith and in their ability to witness, thereby growing the church through conversions in people’s relational networks.

I believe the author approaches the subject with a theological and philosophical bias. Although this bias is slight, it is evident nonetheless. He is a recognized leader in the Reformed movement and is convinced that the best way to reach people is through more doctrine. His church has been growing rapidly—not necessarily from new conversion growth—but rather from hundreds of already churching people leaving other churches and joining his church for deeper and what I call “angry doctrine.” He is dogmatic about people being fully committed Christians.

The strength of the book is that he supports his thesis of explaining the explicit gospel in terms of its implications for the gospel in the air and the gospel on the ground. He articulates well the pros of the gospel on the ground in which we see our deep need for Christ and the necessity to worship God and not the many idols that pop up in our lives. He also does a great job of showing the cons of the gospel on the ground too long which can become too man-centered and more like “Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (13), whereby we make ourselves feel good by doing something for God while expecting God to do something for us in return—in a way manipulating God. He also adequately explains the gospel in the air in which creation (not just man) longs for redemption and looks forward to the return of Jesus to restore all things—a new heaven and a new earth (161). He explains that the danger of emphasizing the gospel in the air too long is that we can become too much a part of culture, too much into doing good works for society without sharing the gospel, which can lead to a worship of nature and a pantheistic view of God.

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The book has a number of weaknesses. First, Chandler contradicts himself by expecting his church and the readers of this book to be totally committed believers. Earlier in his book he states, “In my regular ‘State of the Union’ addresses, I say to the congregation, ‘Hey, quit coming here. If you’re not serious, if you don’t want to plug in, if you don’t want to do life here, if you don’t want to belong . . .’” (73) Yet, just a few pages earlier he shared his testimony of coming to faith in Christ as a process. “I was converted to Christianity over a period of time . . . the process of my understanding and acceptance took place over a year-long time of some guys being patient with me and loving me and walking with me” (67). Is it not fair to allow others at least the same amount of time and patience before hammering them with an all or nothing ultimatum?

Secondly, the book is limited in its application. It is heavy on doctrine, and it gives the reader plenty of head knowledge without giving application. No clear application to what someone should do with this information is given except to worship God. Worship, of course, is central and instrumental in someone’s faith, but this book is lacking in the application of “how to” and full of “how NOT to.”

Thirdly, this book does not address the nonbeliever or unchurched person who may have absolutely no biblical background. I fear that if someone were to pick this book up hoping for an explanation of what Christians believe, the argument would be won, but the person would be lost.

One would think that a book about the *Explicit Gospel* would be explicit about how non-believers or agnostics (as Chandler says he was before his conversion) could get some “next steps” help to get plugged into a local church or could visit a recommended website to get their many questions answered and make the gospel come alive in their own life.

I learned a great deal from this book. Chandler does an exemplary job of explaining the gospel in terms of its applications to our lives in the past, present, and future. In chapter seven he shares how we are “reconciled to be reconciled” (143). He also explains the Oikos model of evangelism without using the word Oikos but rather the more common usage of relational evangelism (148). Our church is heavy on Oikos/relational evangelism, and with a lot of new believers and non-believers, we are probably light on doctrinal awareness in comparison. After reading this book, I am going to be implementing more opportunities for people in our church to grow doctrinally while still being outwardly focused. Although Chandler has plenty of dogma in this book, I can sense his heart for reaching people for Christ through his emphasis in this book of giving people the full and *Explicit Gospel*.