

“Dan Day has provided us a front-row seat witnessing his tenacious journey to make meaning of an inherited theology whose usefulness had worn thin and shallow. Holding scripture central, while engaging the messiness of life, he chronicles a personal theological transformation, and a joyful discovery of a new direction in proclaiming and living out the gospel. All who enter the pulpit Sunday after Sunday would benefit from examining their theological presumptions with the same courage and humility as exhibited in these pages. And in doing so, God’s dream for the world is realized!”

—*Paula Dempsey*  
*Director of Partnership Relations*  
*Alliance of Baptists*

“Drawing on years of active and insightful ministry, Dan Day offers this important survey of issues and actions that have shaped his life and his life’s vocation in the church. At a time when Christian identity often seems in permanent transition, Day calls us to reflect on what it means not only to enter into faith, but also to be formed by faith throughout our lives.”

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“Here is a book that will cause you to reflect on your inherited gospel and ponder the question, ‘Is the church really interested in what interested Jesus?’ Without disowning ‘The Plan,’ Dan Day shows us a better way to understand the gospel. Speaking hard truths with humor and humility, Day keeps us kingdom-focused. As he states, many of us know how to do church, but we don’t know how to do kingdom. This book gives us a good starting place.”

—*Lynn Brinkley*  
*Associate Director*  
*Baptist Women in Ministry*

“Dan Day captures the transformation ethos of the gospel. Over time, thoughtful Christians are transformed by a living gospel that challenges our preconceived ideas regarding faith. Faith is not a stagnant concept, but a living philosophy adapting to time and circumstances shining the gospel’s light and justice. Day’s book says it in an extraordinary way.”

—*R. Mitch Randall*  
*Chief Executive Officer*  
*Good Faith Media*

“This is a wonderful book. I hope it will receive the very wide readership it surely deserves.”

—*Fisher Humphreys*  
*Professor Emeritus*  
*Beeson Divinity School, Samford University*

“In the Old Testament they were called ‘hoary’ heads—an adjective we don’t use in the twenty-first century. It meant gray or white hair that comes with age. The Old Testament and New Testament God-followers considered these hoary-headed ones to be sages, priests, and prophets. Dan Day is one of these ‘hoary heads.’ And, rather than sinking into a retired dotage, he has continued to be a pastor in heart and head. If I were still leading seminary-level courses in ecclesial ethics, this book would be a required text. For those who haven’t had the opportunity of seminary or other theological education, take this one as a must-read primer.”

—*Bill Tillman*  
*Retired Christian Ethics Professor*  
*Coordinator of the Center for Congregational Ethics*

# Finding the Gospel

*A Pastor's Disappointment and Discovery*

\*

J. Daniel Day

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Finally, I dedicate this endeavor to all the pastors who, especially in this time of whirligig change and demonic polarization, are steadily attempting to teach the faith, nurture hope, and model love. My continuing admiration and prayers are with you!

# Introduction

*Finding the Gospel* is a book about changing one's mind. Or, more accurately, it is a book about how I have changed my mind about some portions of the Christian faith—especially its central message. Apparently, I am not the only one caught up in this rethinking endeavor. Some people suggest Christianity itself is undergoing one of its every 500-year “rummage sales” when all manner of doctrines and practices are dragged out to the driveway for disposal.<sup>1</sup> I don't know if that's true—and I will be long dead before the historians settle the question—but what I do know is that as I enter the fourth quarter of my life, my own faith doesn't look like it did in the first quarter, or, for that matter, in any previous quarter. It is still a work in progress. Perhaps it is so for you, too. If so, I'd like for this book to be my way of sharing notes with you.

There's one thing I learned very soon in my process: Change is hard work. Intellectually and emotionally, it is hard work. If we were talking about something less emotionally charged—such as changing from cable to satellite TV—it would be so much simpler. But when the change has to do with what you think about God and everything south thereof, the stakes are much higher. If you are a pastor, it can even feel suicidal. You begin to worry that you might wind up like the Reverend Jim Casy in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Casy is quick to clarify that he used to be the Rev. Jim Casy, but now he is just Jim Casy:

Ain't got the call no more. I wouldn't take the good ol' gospel that was just layin' there to my hand. I got to be pickin' at it an' workin' at it until I got it all tore down. Here I got the sperit sometimes an' nothin' to preach about.<sup>2</sup>

Nobody wants a faith that's “all tore down” and leaving you with “nothin' to preach about”—or to trust in. But then, nobody wants a faith that doesn't make sense either. And when that clash begins inside you, the hard work of change has already begun—like it or not.

So perhaps a helpful first note to share is an encouragement to put aside your fear of giving fresh thought to what you believe—or more specifically, to what you were taught. It's inescapable that we all begin this life with a passel of other folks' conclusions as our orthodoxy. (Some of us even go to seminary to have more orthodoxy laid on us.) We predictably drink in Mama's morals or Daddy's worldview as being the gospel truth. And it was—for them. This is where we all begin, with inherited orthodoxies about everything from religion to how to bake a ham, from what patriotism means to how frequently to bathe. But others' orthodoxies have a sneaky way of eventually colliding with our own meaning-making, and when that collision occurs, we are faced with the challenge of sticking with what we picked up from others or forging our own orthodoxies—with changing our minds, or not.

When reaching that crossroad, I take heart from the Bible's reports that even God risks some changes of mind (see Exod. 32:14, Jer. 18:1-11, Jon. 3:1-10). Surely, changing one's mind can't be all bad if even God has done it.

I also find encouragement in God's repeated cry for us to repent. Though repentance is usually associated with tearful regret, the principal Hebrew and Greek words (*teshuva* and *metanoia*, respectively) that are translated as repentance literally mean to turn or turn around and to change your mind. Repentance, then, isn't just a cathartic religious experience of feeling horribly sorry. It is a change of mind that leads to a new direction.

Life, if lived as a learner and with any degree of humility, will be a series of repentances, a succession of mind changes and consequent life changes. Every plateau of life brings new vistas, vistas that require us to recalibrate our course based upon what we now can see. What seemed like True North yesterday now appears to be three degrees left or right of True North, and, if we wish to reach our destination, it is today's reading we had better follow.

I will admit up front the brashness of this project, as though you really care or need or want to review my baggage-laden journey, or as though I had such a unique story to tell or was such a prominent character that my theological journey would be of interest. The truth is that I am not that different from a great many Protestant clergy persons—neither scandal nor great honors have been mine.

For more than fifty years I have been a Baptist pastor, minding the store at several different churches across America's southland, facing Sunday sermon deadlines, tending to parishioners' hurts and hopes—while also trying to carve out a life of meaning for myself. As a capstone to that deployment, I taught seminarians in a divinity school for five years. I want to believe that across those decades I learned some things about life, myself, God, and what makes the world tick—that I gained some “sage-ing” with my “age-ing.” And now, in the fourth quarter of my life, it is important to me to say what I think I have learned—to voice some second thoughts about my theological inheritance and to say as clearly as possible how my mind has changed.

Why be so self-revealing, one may ask. I would reply with two principal reasons. First, I'd like to share notes with some of you who are wrestling with your faith, or lack of it. Perhaps I can suggest a new tune for some who have grown weary of the church's same old song. It could be that the song you learned was helpful for a while, but as your life has unfolded, that song now has too many sour notes or not enough stanzas (that is, it quits long before your questions do). If so, I'd like for you to hear something possibly better.

I write also because of the current state of things in our nation and its churches. Where America stands today (angry, divided, suspicious) and where the church in America stands today (angry, divided, suspicious) is not what I thought I was giving my life to, nor where I thought I was leading in all those Sunday sermons, pastoral conversations, and church meetings. So I write because I'd like for the church to start singing a new, a better song. I'd like for her to learn new ways to read her scriptures and to live her life. I'd like for her gospel to be more fully engaged with life this side of heaven.

There are many today who would call themselves “seekers,” or persons who doggedly hope there is more to the Christian faith than many of our Sunday experiences reveal. Without trying to be cute or sensational, these pages are my attempt to tell you, sometimes with embarrassment, what one preacher/pastor has found thus far.

In Part 1, “Disappointment,” you will find the story of my growing disenchantment with the understanding of the gospel I formed from my early teachers. No doubt some of those teachers would be disappointed if they knew how I heard them and would protest that what I heard was not what they were trying to convey. Perhaps the fog of fundamentalism was so thick within me that it concealed the fine distinctions some tried to offer me. Perhaps I was just not listening. But “Disappointment” tells you why I had to find a better gospel or quit. I have intentionally kept this part of the book as brief as possible, believing you already have heard or lived enough tales of eroding faith. Besides, that is not the message I want to tell you.

Part 2, “Discovery,” is the heart of the book, the message I want to tell you. In this section I state my convictions about the gospel Jesus preached, the kingdom of God. My thesis throughout this book is that this message of God’s kingdom is the good news, the better gospel needed for this hour—at least I know it has “saved” this sinner. This section is, admittedly, more demanding than the first, but I have done my best to explain my convictions in sequential, bite-size units rather than in convoluted professorial paragraphs. But I cannot reduce the mystery of faith to child’s play. I warned you that this is hard work!

In Part 3, “Discernment,” my intent is to show you how a gospel of the kingdom has influenced my thinking about three theological topics and three ethical issues. This is the “So what?” section of the book; for some readers it may be the most important section. If nothing more, these chapters illustrate once again that theology and ethics, belief and behavior, are always linked.

Some readers will recognize that I have attached some lines from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “In Memoriam A.H.H.” onto these section headings. Tennyson (1809–1892), like many of us, also struggled for his faith in times of great cultural and theological turmoil, and, thankfully, left us better for his search. I can only hope that a sentence or two within this book might do the same for some who read it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008) offers this analogy. Representative of this trend, see Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World’s Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian* (New York: Convergent Books, 2016) or Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe* (New York: Convergent Books, 2019).

<sup>2</sup>John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 20-21.