

Be the Message



Taking Your Faith Beyond Words
to a **LIFE** of **ACTION**

Kerry & Chris
SHOOK

Authors of the *New York Times* Bestseller *One Month to Live*

Be the
Message



BOOKS BY KERRY AND CHRIS SHOOK

One Month to Live

One Month to Love

Be the Message

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to a LIFE of ACTION**

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For Woodlands Church



*You have been God's message of grace to our family
every single day for the past twenty years.*

We love you.

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Part 1

Transforming...

Your Words into a Life That Shouts

We want you to know that, for us, this is more than another book and another message.

This is our personal journey of the past few years, a journey that has changed the way we think and the way we live.

It's truly been an awakening. We've become aware that the words we had been speaking, although true and biblical and well intended, were not always being acted out fully in our lives. We've been waking up to the real call of Christ, waking up to an understanding that the gospel is so much more than words spoken.

We're still on the path of this journey. We have a long way to go and much to learn. But we're discovering more each day.

God in His grace is already working. We see a difference in our family and church and community. We see needs met in people's lives all over the planet. And most of all, this experience of transforming words into life action has changed *us* in a deep and profound way.

In *Be the Message* we'll tell these amazing stories, take you with us on this eye-opening journey, and share with you what we've been learning.

As you read this book, understand that we are two people with one voice. We've found that when we work on a book together, it can be confusing to constantly identify who's speaking—Kerry or Chris. And so on these pages we've chosen to speak as one. Only when it's absolutely necessary to the meaning do we specify which one of us is writing. Of course, ministry for us has always been a shared calling, and so speaking as one voice accurately reflects who we are and what we do. But it's all the more appropriate for this book because we are living this new understanding of the gospel together.

And, wow, has it been an adventure! This illuminating, miraculous walk with Him has led us beyond words into greater authenticity and action.

We want this for you too. We challenge you to do more than just read this book. One of our key points, as you'll see, is to get beyond words, and so we don't want this to be just another book you read. We urge you to take these thoughts and discoveries and put them into action.

It all starts with a simple, fresh understanding about words and messages, life and calling, and the real meaning and purpose of the gospel.

I want to talk about God less
and walk with God more.

#BeTheMessage

The Great Disconnect

*Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary
use words.*

St. Francis of Assisi

*The Word became flesh—and then through
theologians, it became words again.*

Karl Barth

I'm sick of sermons. I'm tired of talking about God. I'm tired of hearing about God.

Now that may seem strange to you. After all, I'm a pastor. I preach and teach. It's my job to talk about God. In many ways, my life is all about words and messages. It's what I've been gifted to do. It's been my vocation and calling.

But frankly, I'm tired of all the words. I'm tired of all the messages. I'm tired of hearing myself preach.

Don't get me wrong. I love the call that God has placed on my life, and I love teaching His life-changing Word. I still believe that there's deep value in all of that. But increasingly I'm feeling I talk so much about God that I

sometimes fail to really experience Him. Sometimes my life seems more about words than it is about actions.

I want to talk about God less and walk with Him more.

I want to hear about God less and experience Him more.

The highway near our home is lined with more than our share of the nearly half-million billboards in the United States. As we drive past them, we can listen to our choice of the dozens of radio stations that fill the airwaves. Add to that another dozen broadcast television stations, hundreds of cable channels, Facebook posts, Twitter feeds, text messages, junk e-mail, and plain old-fashioned direct mail pouring into our mailboxes, and you see what I mean.

We're inundated with information. Our culture saturates us in a constant stream of daily messages that comes from every direction imaginable.

And the church is square in the middle of the problem, pumping out its own stream of information to help us increase our spiritual knowledge and become better Christians. There are 350,000 religious congregations in the United States, most of them with their own websites. A quick check of Amazon.com as I'm writing this shows more than 159,000 Christian-living books, the precise category for this book.

That's a lot of sermons, Bible studies, podcasts, and audio files.

In the midst of all that noise, the Christian message often becomes just another slogan. It seems we've taken the disciples' experience of literally walking with Jesus, an experience lived out in the early church and divinely recorded and carefully handed down through the generations, and made it into nothing more than a sound bite. We've turned the inspired, life-giving Word into just one more set of words among many.

And we're party to it. We roll from sermon to sermon, Bible study to Bible study, event to event, striving to learn the language of faith—all with good intentions as we seek to be deepened and enriched spiritually. Yet so

often it becomes just a rote exercise in saying the right things and giving the right answers. In doing so we reduce the gospel to a collection of tips and techniques, catchy phrases that show our mental agreement with certain philosophical and theological propositions, and a whole heap of pat answers.

We wind up with a lot of words and are quite separated from the actual experience of Jesus. For all those “spiritual” words, not much translates into how we live.

We’ve mastered messages. We haven’t mastered life.

HIDING BEHIND THE WORDS

This disconnect between message and life is something I experience as much as you do. It’s something I’ve become more keenly, and more painfully, aware of in just the past few years.

As a pastor, I’m especially careful to make sure my life honors God, that my life in private matches my life in public. But there are other ways message and life get disconnected for me probably as much as they do for you.

For one, I have to admit that sometimes I hide behind the words I’m speaking. I notice this happens when I’m with someone who’s in emotional or physical pain. I sometimes just don’t know how to respond. There’s an awkwardness in those moments, and to relieve the tension I find myself spouting the handy message, the Christian slogan about suffering, hope, and God’s purposes—all true words, for sure, but words I’m actually hiding behind.

I too easily speak the sound-bite answer rather than live alongside someone in the painful question. Shouldn’t I have the courage to sit without words beside that hurting soul?

Do you do this too? Give someone a message instead of your life? Do you

find it easier to offer words instead of actions? Do you do as I do, often hide behind a nice-sounding message about someone's need rather than get your hands dirty in actually doing something to help?

It happens on a grander scale too.

I've realized my response to global problems and issues becomes just another set of words. They sometimes gush out of my mouth in the form of sound bites and statistics. I can say that of the 7 billion people on the planet, 1.4 billion live on less than \$1.25 a day, 1.7 billion lack access to clean water, 35 million are living with HIV/AIDS, and 21,000 will die today of hunger or hunger-related causes.

All true, but the problem in saying this is that I'm hiding behind the message of the numbers. Sure, the numbers describe a real problem, but rattling them off is my way of sounding good while disconnecting that issue from my life. "The global problem is so big, and it needs to be addressed." And by saying those things I can sound like I'm really in the moment, really caring, really trying to change the world—all without being personally involved.

This changed for me when I read a news article about Stephen, a nine-year-old boy.

Stephen lived in a slum outside Kampala, Uganda. Orphaned and living on his own, he provided for himself by breaking rocks with a homemade hammer, working twelve hours every day in the scorching heat of the sun. Every twelve hours he managed to fill three five-gallon buckets with crushed rock. For all the dust and sweat, Stephen earned six cents per bucket, or eighteen cents for a day's work, which he used to buy food. After each excruciating day of backbreaking work, he spent the night alone in a mud hut.¹

Now this was just a news article on child labor, but it touched me personally. Reading about a real boy enduring hard labor couldn't help but affect me

deeply. I thought about my own kids, about the children of other families I know. What if he were one of ours?

This was a wake-up call alerting me to the disconnect between my message and my life. Spouting facts and experiencing reality are two different things. I could look like a world changer without it really affecting my life. And that troubled me. How could there be such a gap between the desperate life of this child and the comfortable life I was able to have?

Yes, this was just a news article, but for me it became the beginning of more, something that would bridge the gap between my message and my life.

THE COST OF DISCONNECTION

I soon became aware of what the disparity between message and life does to my heart and soul.

Rick Warren has said the great disconnect between what we say we believe and how we really live causes most of the stress and discouragement in our lives.

I say that my health is very important, but I don't always eat right and exercise. I say that my family deserves top priority, but many times work and the so-called urgent demands of life crowd out family time. I say that God has first place in my life, but I rush into my busy schedule with just a quick prayer and a verse of the day rather than taking time to get quiet and sit still before the Creator of the universe. I say one thing, but I live something very different.

I say one thing but live another.

Sound familiar?

Such incongruity creates deep frustration and disappointment inside us.

The human heart cries out for an authentic life, a life that is outwardly consistent with the things we believe in our hearts and know to be true. But at the same time we're driven to achieve more, please others, and climb the ladder at work. In those frantic pursuits we proclaim messages we can't possibly live up to, and our authenticity is lost.

It works like this: In each arena of life, we want to be something, appear like something, attain something. We offer up a message (to others and ourselves) that creates an image or "identity" that helps us achieve what we want.

But there are two problems here.

One is that the image/identity we project in one arena might be completely different in another arena. So, to get ahead at work, we strive to be distant and disciplinary—yet at church we want to be considered caring and compassionate. Those two messages about ourselves don't fit together, and so we compartmentalize. We create different boxes with a separate identity for each arena of life.

We wind up with a work box, a recreation box, and a family-life box. We often add a "Christian" box for our life at church. We create boxes for convenience' sake, thinking it simply makes everything more manageable.

But before long those same boxes become traps. Rather than take us to a place of wholeness, those boxes fragment our lives. With that comes tension, stress, and frustration. No wonder we're so exhausted all the time!

Here's the other problem. Never mind the number of boxes. Even in just one box it's unlikely for the message we project to really match the person we truly are. Each message is what we *want* to be true about ourselves or want others to see about us in that box. But rarely does that message match the reality of our lives.

Deeper down, what we really long for is an authentic life, fully integrated in the present.

But along the way we become *dis*-integrated, our lives disconnected from

the messages we project about ourselves. This message-life disconnect eats away at us inside.

A CHURCH OF DISCONNECTION

I can't talk about the great disconnect without talking about the church.

Know that I write these next words carefully and thoughtfully. I love the church and have devoted my life to serving the body of Christ. I also write these words humbly, because I know I have been guilty of some of the very things I'm about to describe.

But the truth is that many of us Christians in church have proclaimed words without following up with actions. We spend a lot of time talking, teaching, discussing, and arguing the Bible, but do we really live it out for the world to see? The world is tired of just hearing our sermons and Christian phrases; *they want to see a sermon lived out*. They quickly tune out our talk; they long to see the walk.

It's not that Bible studies, sermons, and church services aren't valuable. Of course, the talk is important for lots of reasons. But too often our words are just a form of posturing: how we project ourselves to be better or more spiritual than the next guy.

I think that's a big reason many people have the wrong idea of church. They think it's the place where perfect people meet up with other perfect people to sing about how perfect their lives are.

Nope.

The church is a place where sinners come together in their brokenness and acknowledge they're not who they might have claimed they were. Church is a place for people who admit they have fallen and have failed. It's a safe place to share our failures, our weaknesses, our addictions, our needs, and our pain.

It should be a place where we can be real, not cool.

As Craig Groeschel, pastor of LifeChurch, says, “Authenticity trumps cool every time.”

By the way, when we pose and posture with messages that are disconnected from the reality of our lives as sinners, you know what gets created?

Religion.

That’s why outsiders consider *religion* such a bad word. They recognize the huge gap between the words of Christians and their actual lives. And that disconnect gets labeled with the word *hypocrisy*. The reason so many are quick to launch the *h* word at people in the church is that our words don’t match our actions.

In fact, it’s this lack of authenticity that is driving so many young people away from the church. As Dave Kinnaman said in his book *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why It Matters*, “When outsiders...see Christians not acting like Jesus, they quickly conclude that the group deserves an unChristian label. Like a corrupted computer file or a bad photocopy, Christianity, they say, is no longer in pure form, and so they reject it. One quarter of outsiders say that their foremost perception of Christianity is that the faith has changed for the worse. It has gotten off track and is not what Christ intended. *Modern-day Christianity no longer seems Christian.*”²

I believe the church God intended is not supposed to be about religion. It’s all about restoring broken lives.

If only we would talk less and walk with God more.

WORDS AND THE WORD

Another thing.

All these words can increase our knowledge, but only the Word—Jesus Christ—can change our lives. Christianity is not a slogan, a sound bite, or

even a sermon. It's a personal relationship with the Savior, a relationship that plays out in our daily lives. We are called to emulate Jesus's life, not by parroting Bible verses and using hip religious language, but by living the gospel through our lives, making it real in our actions.

In fact, the great disconnect was precisely the focus of much of Jesus's ministry. In particular it came up repeatedly in His run-ins with the religious leaders of the day, the Pharisees. We might think of the Pharisees as the masters of legalism in the church of that time. They were sticklers for saying all the right things, and they were the ultimate posers of proper religion.

In one encounter Jesus said to the Pharisees point-blank, "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39–40).

Really, it's pretty comical. The Pharisees have their heads buried in the Scriptures, the sacred rules and regulations, the words of religion. Meanwhile they're completely oblivious to the Word, Jesus, standing right before them.

The Pharisees talked about the life of faith, but they reduced it to mere religion, belief confined to words alone. Legalism. They prized the use of the correct language but avoided the lifestyle of faith by every means possible. *They talked about faith but stripped it of life.*

Isn't that the problem we feel? Isn't that part of the disconnect? Life can be filled with sermons but empty of life.

I think it's interesting that the "sermon" Jesus Himself is best known for, the Sermon on the Mount, isn't a sermon in any conventional sense. In fact, you could call it the antisermon. It's brilliant, a message that dismantles all the standard messages that people, and especially the Pharisees, were using at the time.

On the side of a mountain in front of a large crowd, the Sermon on the

Mount is the launch party for Jesus's ministry. Jesus delivers the speech that tells everyone that authenticity matters, that their message needs to be lived out in their lives.

I encourage you to read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), especially with the “great disconnect” in mind. Notice how often the word *hypocrite* is used. Jesus is speaking directly to those whose words are not lived out in their actions. And when Jesus repeatedly uses the phrase “You have heard that it was said,” He’s calling out the common messages and sermons that were spoken and preached at the time.

Take a closer look: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also” (Matthew 5:38–39). The Pharisees’ common sermon of the day was the letter of the law: “eye for eye...” But Jesus surprises everyone by turning that on its head. He calls people to act—live—differently from what was expected: “Turn to them the other cheek also.”

Oswald Chambers wrote, “The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is not, ‘Do your duty,’ but is, in effect, ‘Do what is not your duty.’ It is not your duty to go the second mile, or to turn the other cheek, but Jesus said that if we are His disciples, we will always do these things.... Never look for righteousness in the other person, but never cease to be righteous yourself. We are always looking for justice, yet the essence of the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is—Never look for justice, but never cease to give it.”

You see, Jesus consistently challenged the religious sermonizing of His world, calling people to go beyond words and live in a radically different and authentic way.

The problem of your life and mine is the disparity between the messages we proclaim and the lives we actually lead. And Jesus is telling us, just as He

told the Pharisees, to talk a lot less and follow Him more. He's calling us to lift our heads from the noise of the words on the page and to look at Him, the living Word.

He's daring us to live lives consistent with who we are and what God calls us to do.

This is the adventure of being the message.

Hear God's Voice, Obey God's Call

As you walk this path, I want to share with you some practical tools I have found to be helpful. At the end of each chapter are two application sections: “The Divine Whisper” and “Love the One in Front of You.”

One of the things I’ve had to learn along the journey is, quite frankly, to shut up. Shut up and listen to God. I have discovered that we have to stop talking long enough to hear God’s divine whisper.

The account of the prophet Elijah in the Old Testament has a great lesson for us. When Elijah needed clarity from God, he cried out to the Lord. But God didn’t come in a way Elijah expected: “The LORD said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’ Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper” (1 Kings 19:11–12).

I love that phrase “a gentle whisper.” God speaks to us through a gentle whisper in our hearts. The problem is that too often we’re talking and not listening. The section “The Divine Whisper” at the end of each chapter is designed to help you carve out a time of quiet and listening.

Another lesson I’ve learned is that merely understanding God’s call to be the message is not enough. The whole point is to change words into actions! And so we need to find ways of acting on God’s call, right now.

But sometimes we shrink from the call to action because we feel we need to do something big or substantial or global. Yet God never asks us to do something big for Him. He asks us to take small steps of faith so He can do something big in us and through us.

The section “Love the One in Front of You” at the end of each chapter is designed to help you focus on the one small thing you can do right now.

Let's take a step of faith and let God lead us on the great adventure of being the message and living the gospel. As we let God do something great and profound *inside* of us, we will begin to see God do something great and profound *outside* of us.

The Divine Whisper

1. Read Psalm 46:10 out loud: "He says, 'Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.'"
2. Read it again, silently. Pray. Ask God to open your heart to hear His "gentle whisper."
3. Take a deep breath and realize that He's God and you're not. Just relax in the Lord and remember that His purpose will be accomplished in the world and in your life.
4. Spend five minutes in silence before God, allowing Him to restore your soul. This practice may feel uncomfortable at first. Five minutes may feel like an hour. But you have to detox from noise addiction so you can hear the divine whisper of God.

Love the One in Front of You

1. Pick someone you see regularly but may not know well (for example, your child's teacher, a coworker, the custodian), and look for practical ways to brighten that person's day.
2. Reread the statistics of global suffering in chapter 1. Ask God to open your heart to the fact that all pain is personal. Each statistic is made up of real individuals. Try to imagine a living, breathing person as one of those statistics.
3. Invite a friend to read *Be the Message* with you. Together, go on the journey to talk less about God and walk with Him more.

Your image may communicate
a brand, but your life shouts
the real message.

#BeTheMessage



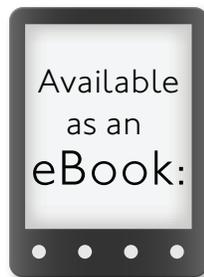
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