



Martha Grace Reese  
WITH AFTERWORD BY Brian McLaren

# UNBINDING the GOSPEL

Real Life  
Evangelism

**2nd edition**

*With new, 40-day  
personal prayer  
journal!*

**Church Leaders' Study**  
Unbinding the Gospel Series

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My understanding of congregations and ministry have been shaped by two tremendous experiences in leadership: seven years as senior pastor of Carmel Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) near Indianapolis, and the years as director of the Bethany Project, a Lilly Endowment project in congregational revitalization through spiritual leadership. I will always be grateful for those people and all they taught me.

Many dear friends have helped me think about faith, church and evangelism during these last years. Thank you each for your insights, your ability to spot the weak point in an argument, your appreciation of a glimmer of truth. You have prayed for this work and for me. Most of

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I used to think it was pro forma good manners that prompted authors to thank their spouses for their infinite patience and kindness, endurance of obsessive narcissism, skilled reading of drafts, sweetly worded advice, prayer, supportive critique, encouragement and enticement to long walks and the occasional meal away from the keyboard. I now see that fulsome gratitude falls short of the mark. Thank you, Russ White. You have been a saint—a patient, kind, insightful, brilliant saint, a sparkler of creativity, and ballast.

MGR

Marcell, Minnesota

September, 2008

***Note for Second Edition:** I have had the joy of working with thousands of pastors and lay leaders who have studied **Unbinding the Gospel** in the year and a half since it was published. People have stopped me in hallways, left voicemail messages and sent e-mails asking the same big question: “Our church LOVES this book—we can do evangelism if this is what it is! It’s great that you emphasize prayer so much. **But how do we pray the way you’re talking about? How do we pray together?**” This second edition of **Unbinding the Gospel** may help you answer these questions.*

*I have written a 40-day individual prayer journal (Part Four) that you can use while your group studies **Unbinding the Gospel** together. (**Unbinding Your Heart** contains another set of 40 days of prayers for your whole church to use later, if these are helpful to you.) Pray on your own each day. Meet with a prayer partner once a week. Talk, argue, think, laugh and pray with a group of other church leaders from your congregation each week as you study this book together. **MY** prayer is that you will have a wonderful time with **Unbinding the Gospel** and with these prayers. May you and your group become even more faithful disciples of Jesus and faithful friends to each other. People who don’t know about God are waiting to hear from us! Blessings, mgr*

*Most of us, most of the time, feel left out—misfits. We don't belong... One of the ways we have of responding to this is to form our own club, or join one that will have us. Here is at least one place where we are "in" and others "out"... The terrible price we pay for keeping all those other people out so that we can savor the sweetness of being insiders is a reduction of reality, a shrinkage of life.*

*Nowhere is this price more terrible than when it is paid in the cause of religion. But religion has a long history of doing just that, of reducing the huge mysteries of God to the respectability of club rules, of shrinking the vast human community to a "membership." But with God there are no outsiders....*

*As Luke tells the story, all of us who have found ourselves on the outside looking in on life with no hope of gaining entrance (and who of us hasn't felt it?) now find the doors wide open, found and welcomed by God in Jesus.*

Eugene Peterson, Introduction to the Gospel of Luke, *The Message*



# Unbinding the Gospel

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## PART ONE

- **PART ONE** looks at evangelism in churches today. What is evangelism? Why do it? How is the church doing?
- **PART TWO** shows examples of great churches sharing their faith. You can see and analyze what is possible.
- **PART THREE** will help you move into the possibilities God has in mind for you.
- **PART FOUR** is your 40-day personal prayer journal. Move closer to God through your individual prayer, then discuss it with your ***Unbinding the Gospel*** group.

*Wake up, and strengthen what remains (Rev. 3:2)*





# Breaking the Curse

*October, 2004.* The country watched as the curse was broken. On the night of a total eclipse, after 86 years of heart-wrenching defeat, Boston fans' cheers ricocheted off the walls of Busch Stadium and ascended into the firmament as the Boston Red Sox won their first World Series since trading Babe Ruth. Ballplayers can be superstitious folks. They believe in things like Lucky Game Underwear That Can't Be Washed or the Winning Streak Will Break. Trading Babe Ruth Was a Bad Thing for the Red Sox. As the results rolled in, year after year, the fans, the Red Sox Nation knew it. But 86 years later, the miracle happened in St. Louis, and the cheers echoed around the world.

About 86 years ago the mainline churches did something. Maybe we washed our lucky game underwear. Maybe we traded Babe Ruth. Lots of people have lots of ideas. But we have not been winning any evangelism series for one looong stretch of time. It's about time *that* curse gets broken. It can be done. It is time to see *our* players jumping and slapping each other's backs. It is time to hear the cheers of *our* fans echoing into the firmament again. It is time.

### A Book about the E Word

That's what this book is about. It's about breaking the curse. It's about untying the knots that keep us from living exciting lives in the Spirit. It's about unbinding the good news that God adores us and everyone else, that God has shown this to us through Jesus Christ. This is a book that is unabashedly about evangelism: faith sharing. It's intended for members and pastors of churches that want to start living a more exciting life with God and with each other. It's intended

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This book is about *evangelism*, the “E” word. The E word has replaced sex and money as “That Which Must Not Be Named” in our mainline churches!

The purpose of the Mainline Evangelism Project was to find churches that are doing effective evangelism. What motivates their faith sharing? What makes these congregations, their pastors and their members tick? What are they doing?

for members and pastors of churches that want to share that joy with people who don’t know it.

This book is about *evangelism*, the “E” word. The E word seems to have replaced sex and money as That Which Must Not Be Named in our mainline churches! The most comprehensive survey ever made of American congregational pastors (the Duke Clergy Study),<sup>1</sup> revealed that most pastors love being in ministry. It also showed that these pastors’ greatest discouragement is that they feel ineffective in sharing the Gospel.

A recent study of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) laity shores up the findings of the Duke Clergy Study. Over 25,000 members of 262 Disciples congregations completed a 53-question survey covering the breadth of congregational life (Disciples Members’ Survey).<sup>2</sup> They ranked statements about their churches according to how strongly they agreed with them. The statement ranked dead last was, “This church is effectively reaching unchurched persons.” The second weakest score was in response to, “This congregation provides training in sharing Christ with others.”

Most of us feel guilty about our losing streak. Sometimes we ignore it. Sometimes we rationalize it. Let’s stop that. Instead, let’s look at what’s going on and make some changes in our focus, our training, our lineup and our game plan.

The book you hold in your hands can provide a starting point. It was born from the Mainline Evangelism Project, a four-year study of hundreds of mainline congregations.<sup>3</sup> We interviewed over 1200 church members, new Christians and pastors. We scoured statistics and visited churches. We met with pastors and laypeople, professors and seminarians, denominational officials and kids in the youth group. We conducted a statistical study of the beliefs, motivations and actions of 150 of the mainline churches that are doing the best job reaching people with no church background.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of the study was to find churches that were doing effective evangelism and to discover their motivation. We also wanted to discover what made these congregations, their pastors and their members tick. How do they think? What are they doing? We found some exciting answers.

***Our most important discovery is that a vivid relationship with God lies at the heart of real evangelism.*** People who share their faith love God and believe that other people’s lives would be better if they were in a relationship with God, too. They know why they are doing evangelism: they want to share a driving force in their lives. These Christians are growing in their own faith. They

learn to talk about their faith. Their churches put a high priority on evangelism—faith sharing.

We will look into many aspects of faith sharing in this book. Here are three highlights:

1. Evangelism arises out of healthy relationships with God, within the church and beyond church walls.
2. Great evangelism exists in churches all along the theological spectrum. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives faith, but churches where evangelism flourishes cooperate with the Spirit. These churches focus on helping new people begin a life with God.
3. People who learn to share their faith say evangelism changes lives—theirs included!

Let's take a brief look at each of these three highlights:

***1. Evangelism emerges from a trinity of relationships.***

Congregations that are doing evangelism best are held together with three inseparable yet distinct areas of honest, loving relationships:

- with God,
- within the congregation and
- with people outside the church whose lives are not centered in Christ.

The heart of evangelism emerges from the interaction of these three sets of relationships: our personal relationships with God, healthy congregational relationships, and caring about people who don't have a conscious connection with Christ. The heart of evangelism is being in love with God, being part of a church you love and caring about other people who do not know that faith. Faith sharing focuses on relationships, not "bringing in more young people," or "helping our church to grow again." Evangelism is motivated by growing love—not by all the lists, bread deliveries, mailings, parties for unchurched friends, small group curriculum decisions or new members classes. Details matter. Means of showing love are important, but the heart of evangelism is love—of God, of church, of others.

***2. Key leaders in churches of every theological stripe are doing great evangelism. These leaders hold their churches to a laser-like focus on: (a) church members' growing relationships with Christ, and (b) sharing their faith with others.***

People in evangelistic churches can tell you what difference being a Christian makes in their own lives. They believe passionately that having a relationship with God and being part of their church community will help both friends and people they've never met. Many

These Christians learned to articulate their faith and share it with others. Life felt different. They never want to go back to the old days of mute, and muted, faith.

The heart of evangelism is having an alive relationship with God, being part of a church you love and caring that people outside the church find what you've discovered.

other mainline Christians, along with many mainline pastors, have a hard time articulating how being a Christian matters—for themselves or for anyone else.

Evangelism has no theological bounds. It isn't about talking people into beliefs. It isn't about scaring them with horror stories of Hell. There are no quick fixes, no silver bullets. At its core, evangelism is people sharing with others their personal understandings that life is better, richer, truer if one has faith in Christ and lives in a faith community. These are some of the things that people in churches, many of them quite ordinary churches, are discovering as they begin to share their faith beyond church walls.

**3. Faith sharing changes the lives of Christians who do it.** Many Christians in evangelistic churches (and their pastors) volunteered striking experiences. When they started learning to articulate their own faith and to share it with others, they began to see “coincidences,” “answers to prayer,” “miracles.” Life felt different. They were more aware of tiny promptings from the Spirit. They say this new life with the Spirit felt even richer when they started seeing changes in the lives of the people with whom they talked about their faith. They never want to go back to the old days of mute, and muted, faith.

One pastor said, “I used to preach and run the church. After the accident, I started talking with people about what really matters in my own life. After I had experienced a tragedy and recovered a bit, I wanted to at least listen to other people about whatever situation they're in. This has given me a feeling of being more in touch with God and of being a more 'full-time' Christian instead of a maintenance pastor. Talking about faith one-on-one and working with the church on it has become completely addictive. As addictions go, it's a great one!”

### How to Use This Book

You can read this book alone, but it will help you most if you do a small group study with other church leaders. Elders, evangelism teams, groups of key leaders can profit immensely from both the faith-sharing ideas and the faith-developing prayer journal you can do on your own and discuss with your group. See *Unbinding Your Church*, the Pastors' and Leaders' Guide for the *Real Life Evangelism Series* for my best advice. (The first two pages at the beginning of this book describe the *Series*).

**Here's my bottom line, best advice:** (1) *Do the exercises* at the ends of chapters with your small group; and (2) The more people in your church that study the book and begin to pray seriously, the greater chance for real change in your church.

**Part One** of *Unbinding the Gospel* is a look at “what is.” Chapters 1 through 3 deal with the questions, “What is evangelism? Why do it? How are mainline churches doing?”

**Part Two** shows examples of great churches doing powerful faith sharing. It should help you see what is possible. Chapter 4 deals with prayer in congregations. Chapter 5 discusses the three sets of healthy relationships we found in evangelistic churches. Chapter 6 looks at what new members say they need, and find, in their new churches.

**Part Three** will help you get started in your own congregation. Chapter 7 analyzes nine types of evangelism, barriers that fend new people off and ways of building bridges into the church for new members. Chapter 8 discusses “who does what” in healthily functioning congregations, with a special section for denominational ministers. Chapter 9 will help you see and deal with the growing pains, conflict, and distractions that can result from growth and change in churches. The final chapter, 10, suggests a year-long plan for several churches to help each other begin a year of evangelism.

**Part Four** is a 40-day (six-week) personal prayer journal. Underline, scribble thoughts, and dog-ear pages! Please don’t try to share a copy with someone. *Unbinding the Gospel* works best as a group study, with each person doing these exercises each day. Then come together once a week to discuss what you’re learning in the chapters and what God’s showing you through your prayer time.

**Length of Study.** An eight-session study is best (weekly for a class or monthly for your elders or a church board). Combine the first two and the last two chapters. If you must collapse it to seven weeks (the very minimum), put chapters 3 and 4 together. Be sure to begin the prayer exercises (Part Four) so that you discuss the completed first week of prayers in the same session your group discusses chapter 4. Some groups schedule ten weeks and allow extra time for the chapters that spark most discussion.

**Discussion Questions and Exercises.** Use them! Thousands of congregations are using these books. Their feedback reveals a clear trend: The more you use the exercises, the greater the chance for change in people’s lives and in your church. People report that they are talking for the first time about deep things in their lives with people they have known for years. They’re praying together. Talking for real is scary, but it produces results. No matter how much benevolent arm-twisting it takes, **do the exercises!**

**Have Fun!** One of the hallmarks of the great congregations I’ve been able to visit is that they have fun. I hope a glimmer of that joy is reflected in this book. I am praying that your reading and discussions

## **Highlight Findings of the Mainline Evangelism Project**

1. If we know **why** to do evangelism, we’ll figure out **how** to do it.
2. Faith sharing arises out of vibrant relationships with God.
3. It is important to learn to talk about our faith.
4. Where it flourishes, evangelism is a high priority for pastor, congregation and individuals.

feel light rather than weighty and that they will help you get started on whatever adventures God wants to bring you next.

***A Big Thank You...Names...and Stories.*** Over 1200 people spoke honestly with us about deep feelings and understandings of their faith. Thank you to each of you. This book would never exist without you. I quote many people and describe many churches. The geographic and denominational descriptions are accurate. I have changed people's and congregations' names. Where a full name is given for a person, it is a real name. I have masked the few negative examples more heavily. The quotations are accurate, although I have simplified some sentences and clarified some grammar. A few of the long quotes are compilations of basic stories that we heard again and again. Each of the three stories in chapter 4 is accurate to a particular church—they are ***not*** compilations. If you would like more detail from the sociological portions of the Mainline Evangelism Project, an expanded bibliography or additional information, please download them from [www.GraceNet.info](http://www.GraceNet.info).

We found no rigid formula for success, no quick fix, no silver bullet. Each one of us must enter the great adventure by thinking, learning more, praying and asking God a humble question: "Which small things can I do today to help more people know you?"

### Let's Get Started!

We have heard stories of inspiration, struggle, excitement, disappointment, spiritual learning and changes in lives and churches for four years. We studied hundreds of congregations and talked with over 1200 people about evangelism. It is clear. We found no rigid formula for success, no magic plan that will work for every church. Each individual must enter the great adventure by thinking, learning more, praying, and asking God a humble question: "Which small things can I do today to help more people know you?"

This adventure may take you on a trip you can't anticipate. You may have to pack a bag and go far. The Boston Red Sox won the Series in St. Louis—not before the home crowd at Fenway Park.

Are you ready to get going?

<sup>1</sup>See the *Survey of Clergy* at [www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/research.html](http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/research.html).

<sup>2</sup>Homeland Ministries and Church Extension Faithful Planning Congregational Survey Results, 2001—2005.

<sup>3</sup>The Mainline Evangelism Project, made possible by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., studied congregations in seven denominations over a period of four years: American Baptist Churches USA, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church USA, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ and The United Methodist Church.

<sup>4</sup>See [www.GraceNet.info](http://www.GraceNet.info) for a formal sociological report on this survey.

## Steadfast Love, from Everlasting to Everlasting

### *Scripture: Psalm 103*

Light a candle to remind you of God's presence. Take some slow, deep breaths and relax. Sit quietly for a few moments and ask God to bless this six-week prayer adventure and your group's study of *Unbinding the Gospel*.

Let's start with Psalm 103.

Will you read the Psalm slowly? Which lines speak to you most powerfully? Write them down. Sit quietly for a moment. Now read the Psalm again, slowly. What words or phrases shine out at you this time? Mark them in your Bible or jot them down here.

What in this Psalm do you *know* to be true? Have you experienced any of this yourself? Can you remember a specific time in your life when you blessed the Lord with all that is in you? When you experienced forgiveness? Healing? Redemption? Love? Renewal of your youth? Mercy? Graciousness? Steadfast love? Compassion? Your own mortality? God's majesty? Everyone's moments with God are different. Ask God to show you yours. Write down what feels most important.

### *Notes, lists, drawings, ideas:*

**Prayer:** God, you are the Holy One of Israel. Your steadfast love endures forever, from everlasting to everlasting. I bless your holy name with everything that's in me. Thank you for my life, for my family, for my friends and the people you can reach through me. Please let me know you better as I go through these next six weeks. I will meet you here tomorrow. Amen.



## Leave It?

**Scripture:** *Matthew 4:17–22*

The Bible has four gospels, books that tell the story of Jesus' life: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. This story tells about the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus starts with two things: (1) he asks people to repent (the word means "turn around") because the kingdom of heaven is getting close, and (2) he starts calling disciples. Peter, Andrew, James and John leave their whole lives behind—boats, jobs, families—to go with Jesus. Immediately.

We only have so much time, so much energy and so much focus in our lives. If we want to follow Jesus, we have to create some space and time. You've started. You're connected with a church. You are praying right now. That's a big deal. But it might be only the beginning of starting a richer life with God.

Close your eyes. Ask Jesus if he'd like you to follow him. Does he want you to leave anything behind? An opinion? A sin? TV? A habit? Something you want? Money? Being a couch potato? A relationship? Some old, moldy bitterness? Ask Jesus directly if there is anything you are using to keep him at a "safe" distance!

Hold your hands in front of you, palms up, little fingers touching. Imagine the idea or habit or activity or grudge rests in your hands. Now, with a prayer, with great love in your heart, even if it's a little scary, hand it to the Lord.

**Notes, lists, drawings, ideas:**

**Prayer:** Oh, Lord. Here is what I think you'd like me to leave behind to follow you. I'm handing it to you now. Help me not to pick it up again! Help me see you and myself with better focus in these 40 days. Please let me begin to understand how much you love me. Amen.

## Seeing with Jesus' Eyes

**Scriptures:** *Mark 1:39–45; 6:30–44; 8:2*

Read these stories slowly. Picture what was going on. How did Jesus feel toward the people? Write down a few words in the space below. Jesus was moved with pity toward the leper in Mark 1. He had compassion for the crowd that had gathered in Mark 6. This is how Jesus looks at us—with love, with pity, with compassion. Then he cares for us and gives us what we need: healing, teaching, encouragement and physical help like food.

Last week, I read on CNN.com about a 15-year-old girl in Atlanta who saw a Mercedes parked next to a homeless man. She was overwhelmed by the sight and thought, “if that guy had a smaller car, the homeless man could have something to eat.” Her idea started a family discussion. Her family decided to sell their large house and downsize to a smaller one so they could send the extra money to feed families in Africa. We can *feel compassion* and *take action* if we see people and situations with Christ's eyes.

Will you try an experiment? Pick up your newspaper or news magazine, or go to your Internet news site. Ask God to let you see with Christ's eyes. Now pray for someone you have read about. Is the Spirit is moving you to do anything?

**Notes, lists, drawings, ideas:**

**Realization:** “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness...I have the immense joy of being human, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate...”

*Thomas Merton, Trappist monk and American Catholic writer (1915–1968)*

## A Prayer Exercise—Literally!

**Scripture:** *Mark 7:24, 31; 8:22, 27; 9:2, 30, 33*

Jesus and the disciples sure walked a lot! If we want to be Christlike, this may be part of it. Walking slows you down. It clears your mind and gets the kinks out of your body. Walking gives you time to think about bigger things than grocery lists, shrieking toddlers and when-can-I-run-the-to-the-post office? Walking gives you time to pray. Walking can become prayer. So let's try a literal prayer *exercise* today. Marathoners, cane-walkers, swimmers, dancers, weight lifters, wheelchair athletes, basketball players—pick your sport!

Get to your exercise place, outside or in. Drink some water. Feel it filling you up. Ask God to “baptize” the time. Then start moving slowly. As you move, think about your breath. Breathe in and feel as if you're breathing in new air that will expand you, that will clear you out, get the buildup out of your system. Exhale and imagine the old ideas, obsessive thinking, stale opinions, frustrations leaving your body and soul.

After a while you may want to pick up the pace to fit what your body needs. Inhale and ask the Spirit of Christ to come into you and to heal you. Exhale and let go of more gunk!

Later in your exercise time, you could ask God to give you images of people or situations that you could pray for. They could be the other people in your gym, or in the park where you're walking. Stay attuned to how *you* pray with *your* body. One way you might pray is to imagine surrounding the person or situation with the same Spirit that is cleansing you. When you're done, walk slowly. Look at everything around you, notice the sounds and smells, the people. Bless them all. Do some stretches as you thank God.

**Notes, lists, drawings, ideas:**

**Prayer:** Oh God, renew my strength. Let me run and not be weary, walk and not faint. Amen.

## Encouragement in Christ

***Genesis 2:18; Mark 6:7; Philippians 2:1–4***

What do these scriptures have in common? Read them again — do you see a common thread? God says it isn't good for Adam to be alone and makes Eve, Adam's partner. Jesus sends the 12 disciples out into ministry — in pairs. Paul tells the Philippians that because they are Christians, that they should be like Christ. They should be of the same mind, be humble, serve each other, and look to each other's interests. Have you ever heard anyone say that you can't be a Christian alone, that being a Christian has to do with relationships, both with God and with other people? These readings are a few of the places where the Bible says it!

There are times when we need to be alone with God, alone with our souls. Other times, we need to be able to talk with a trusted friend about our faith.

In ancient Irish monasteries (during the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries), the brothers and sisters each had a “soul friend.” Soul friends, in the deep and mysterious love of Christ, listened, held confidences, prayed together and talked about the deepest spiritual matters. Would you be willing to invite someone to be your prayer partner for this 40-day prayer journey? You could ask your spouse, your best friend, your dad, or someone at church whose faith you respect. Your *Unbinding the Gospel* group could choose prayer partners at your next meeting. Will you sit quietly and reread the scriptures? In the silence, think about serving someone else by being their prayer partner. Think what it would be like to have someone with whom you could talk for real, in absolute confidence. Ask God to show you anything you need to see.

***Notes, lists, drawings, ideas:***

***Inspiration:*** “Our method of proclaiming salvation is this: to point out to every heart the loving Lamb, who died for us, and although He was the Son of God, offered Himself for our sins .... to name no virtue except in Him, and from Him and on His account, to preach no commandment except faith in Him; no other justification but that He atoned for us; no other sanctification but the privilege to sin no more; no other happiness but to be near Him, to think of Him and do His pleasure; no other self denial but to be deprived of Him and His blessings; no other calamity but to displease Him; no other life but in Him.”

*Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf, founder of the Moravians (1700–1760). Early Moravians sold themselves into slavery to evangelize the West Indies.*

## Reflection Day

**REVIEW.** Think back over your week of prayer. Reread your favorite scripture from the week. Review your notes, lists, insights. How is your prayer going? Review the introduction to Part Four, beginning on page 149. Which ideas from the Introduction do you need to pay attention to this week? Take some notes.

Then, answer two questions:

***Question 1: What are the most important things I've learned/discovered/remembered this week?***

***Question 2: God, what one insight would you like me to share with my study group when we meet?***

***Insight:*** “But not only faith, perfect and in every way complete,  
But all right knowledge of God is born of obedience.”

*John Calvin, French/Swiss theologian, founder of Presbyterian and Reformed churches (1509–1564)*

## Group Meeting Day

Enjoy your time together! Tell each other what you've learned. Talk about your *Unbinding the Gospel chapter*. Pray together.

*Notes & insights from your group time:*

### *Hymn*

REFRAIN: It's me, it's me, it's me, oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

It's me, it's me, it's me, oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

VERSES:

Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, oh Lord  
Standing in the need of prayer. (*sing twice, then refrain*)

Not the preacher, not the sinner, but it's me oh Lord  
Standing in the need of prayer. (*sing twice, then refrain*)

Not my mother, not my father, but it's me oh Lord  
Standing in the need of prayer. (*sing twice, then refrain*)

*Traditional African-American Spiritual*

## Afterword

I went to my doctor this morning. It was a routine checkup. I need to see him every quarter to make sure that the medications that are supposed to help my blood pressure and cholesterol aren't damaging my liver. Our visits are usually very brief—you know, blood test results, blood pressure, temperature, pulse, followed by, "How are you feeling? Any problems?" to which I answer, "I feel fantastic. No worries at all," and he tells me to come back in three months.

But today was different. My doctor knows that I am a Christian, because it came up in an earlier conversation, maybe a year ago. So today he comes in and says, right off the bat, "I have a question for you. You know, I'm getting older, and that makes any sane person think about their mortality, their spirit...you know what I mean. But any time I begin to feel closer to God, I hear some wacko on TV say something absolutely outrageous in the name of God or religion, and it just smothers my interest. It pushes me in the totally opposite direction."

He said he had a question, but it was left unexpressed. It didn't matter, because with or without a specific question to get us started, we ended up having a good conversation. Three things are still kind of vibrating inside of me from that conversation.

First, people like my doctor—intelligent people, thoughtful, honest people—really want to talk about God and the spiritual life. In spite of the important statistics Martha Grace Reese presents in chapter 3 (don't skip that chapter!), in spite of the fact that generation by generation, fewer Americans identify themselves as religious, everywhere I go I find people like my doctor who are thinking about life, its meaning, its destiny, their soul, their purpose, God. And they want to talk. They need to talk. And they need a conversation partner.

Second, there are plenty of religious wackos around who talk about God a lot. Whatever the religion, there are people who abuse it and say "absolutely outrageous" things "in the name of God or religion," as my doctor said.

And third, there are plenty of sincere and generous people of faith around too who would be great conversation partners for people like my doctor. But here's the problem: so many of them are so afraid of sounding like the wackos that they keep their faith to themselves.

Their silence, of course, makes the strident and outrageous voices seem all the louder, and so their silence ends up being complicit in smothering the interest of the spiritual seekers.

That's why Martha Grace Reese's book is so important. That's why when you turn the last page, you can't just let this be another book you read. You need to let her message affect you, and your faith community, and through you, people like my doctor.

Her image of the pitcher being filled to overflowing is worth the price of the book. Her insight that there can be many sources of motivation and inspiration for faith sharing—many ways to fill the pitcher to the brim—rings very true to me. The statistics she gives sober me, and they motivate me too. And her stories of vibrant congregations give me hope.

Especially today, after my conversation with my doctor.



On my way home from the doctor's office, I turned on the radio and caught the news. More violence. More bad news about global warming. More political division and rancorous name-calling. More stories of people abusing people sexually, kids with guns, crooked politicians, corrupt business executives.

I thought to myself, "What can change this vicious cycle of viciousness?" I switched the radio off as I drove along in silence. I remembered the famous quote from the nineteenth-century British statesman, Edmund Burke: "All that the forces of evil need to win in this world is for enough good people to do nothing," or something to that effect.

I thought, "Somebody should start an organization that would mobilize people—recruit them, train them, support them—so they could be good people who do something so that the forces of evil don't win in this world. This organization would need to accept people just as they are, infuse them with hope, give them a vision of a better world, give them a vision for themselves becoming agents of making that better world a reality. It would need to both practice and preach. Why hasn't somebody started an organization like that?"

And of course, about a quarter mile down the road I realized that somebody had done just that. In fact, it had cost him everything to do so.

But that organization can become so preoccupied with lesser things—including its own institutional survival—that it forgets why it's really here: to recruit people to switch sides and opt out of the vicious cycle and join a cycle of healing, to infuse them with vision, to send them out as change agents, to help them experience transformation and sustain them so they can be lifelong catalysts of transformation, to give them good news to share to counter the bad news that is being reported every hour on the hour.

When you close the covers of Martha Grace Reese's book, I wonder if you could say a prayer asking God to empower you to help your faith community become the kind of organization that Jesus intended it to be, the kind of organization that helps people like my doctor, the kind of organization that brings good news in a bad-news world.

And if your faith community is hopelessly stuck in the mud—let's face it, some are—then don't let that get you down. You have a kitchen table, right? Then invite some friends over and get them talking. Ask them about their faith stories. Ask them about their beliefs about God. Ask them about what kind of world they see, and what kind they dream of, and what they're doing about it, and how God might fit in. Make it clear there aren't "right answers"—just honest answers—and see what happens. See what God does around your table.

If you don't have a kitchen table, invite a friend out for coffee, or take a walk. Don't preach. Just do what Martha Grace talks about in this book. And pray that God will somehow use you to be a blessing to somebody by being an available conversation partner about the things that matter most in life.

You don't need anyone's permission to do this. You don't need a committee or a budget. You don't need a degree in theology or (God forbid) sales and marketing. You just need a pitcher full of motivation—and Martha Grace has given that to you in this book. Let it overflow. Let it pour.

Brian McLaren ([brianmclaren.net](http://brianmclaren.net))

# The Unbinding the Gospel Series

by Martha Grace Reese

*In more than  
12,000 congregations in  
50 states, 49 denominations,  
8 countries...*

*“Evangelism” is anything you do to help someone move  
closer to a relationship with God, or into Christian Community*

## What’s Your Church’s Question? *WHY*, or *HOW*?

Evangelism books presume everyone *wants* to do evangelism, so they tell you *how* to do it. Six years of national, Lilly Endowment-funded research in nine denominations have demonstrated conclusively that most people would rather get a root canal than think about evangelism. You can tell people to “go be missional” until the cows come home. They just won’t do it until they *want* to.

*If we answer the “WHY share my faith” question, we’ll start wanting to know “HOW can God use me to help people move into faith?”* Our churches can’t share their faith until they’re loving, relational communities where people (1) pray, and (2) talk comfortably with each other about their own faith experiences. Once our churches make this shift, we’ll want to know *HOW* to share our faith. The *Unbinding the Gospel Series* addresses both the *Why* and the *How*.

**Take a Quiz.** You decide where *your* church should start. Think about your congregation. Imagine that your great leaders – the 20% who do all the work – aren’t there. Take this quiz as if you’re answering for the other 80%. Check all statements that apply:

- ☐ **You** do evangelism! I’m going to alphabetize the Sunday School closet.
- ☐ Evangelism’s why I left my old church. I don’t want to embarrass friends.
- ☐ Nobody’s going to make **me** pass out tracts.
- ☐ Evangelism is theologically inappropriate. It’s not our ethos.
- ☐ Whoa! God’s doing exciting things in my life and through our church! How can I help my friends connect with this?

*WHY* churches check boxes 1-4. *HOW* churches check only box 5. So, are you a *WHY* church, or a *HOW* church? [Martha Grace Reese, author of the *Series* and director of the *Mainline Evangelism Project* and the *Unbinding the Gospel Project* (the Lilly studies), estimates that 90–95% of U.S. churches are *WHY* churches!]

*WHY* churches can become *HOW* churches if they start with *Unbinding the Gospel*, then do an all-church saturation study with *Unbinding Your Heart*. *HOW* churches can move into joyful faith sharing with *Unbinding Your Soul*.

## “WHY” Churches START with *GOSPEL/HEART*

**STEP ONE— Church Leader’s Study:** *Unbinding the GOSPEL* (red ribbon). Start with a “test” small group study with leaders who you think will like it best. Optimal group size: 8-10 members, pastor leads. (*DON’T preach or write newsletter articles – you’ll only create resistance! Remember: In people’s heads, “Evangelism” = “Root Canal.”*) Pastor: read the introduction and chapters 1 & 4 of *Unbinding Your Church* and skim *Unbinding Your Soul* now. They will help you lead your *GOSPEL* studies effectively.

- **Study GOSPEL** in small groups over eight weekly sessions
- **Do the exercises** at the ends of the chapters
- **Pray** with 40-day prayer journal after discussing chapter 3

If **Gospel** helps, keep going! Move on to more small-group studies of **GOSPEL** with your church leaders and teachers (20% of your worship attendance).

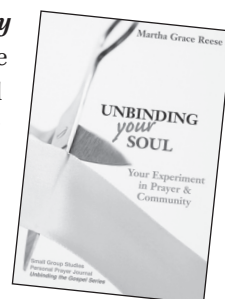
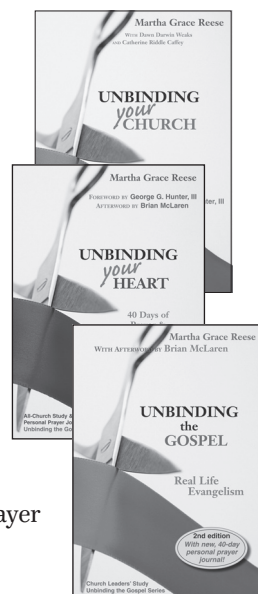
**STEP TWO—All-Church Saturation Study: *Unbinding Your HEART*** (purple ribbon) is a six-week version of *Unbinding the Gospel* with a different individual prayer journal. We see significant changes in churches that bring the “unbinding” experience to at least 85% of worship attendance. Each week, for 40 days, people will:

- **Pray** each day’s scripture and prayer exercise & work with a prayer partner
- **Study** a chapter with their small group
- **Worship** — sermon, music & prayers centered on the week’s chapter

**SUPPORT FOR STEPS ONE & TWO—Pastor’s and Leaders’ Guide: *Unbinding Your CHURCH*** (green ribbon). *Unbinding Your Church* offers “best practices” for small group leaders, prayer teams, youth leaders, pastors. It provides comprehensive organizational aids, coordinated resources for children and youth, worship, full music plans in four styles & 7 sample sermons.

## “HOW” Churches Move to SOUL

***Unbinding Your SOUL: Your Experiment in Prayer & Community*** (yellow ribbon). Many people who aren’t connected with a church would love to try a no-obligation experience of substantial spiritual discussion, prayer and community. *Unbinding Your Soul* prepares church members to invite their friends into a 4-week small group experience with short study chapters, an individual prayer journal, prayer partner activities & group exercises. Groups could opt to continue for additional four-week segments. Groups should double. Some may double again. (Divide to maintain small group dynamics.) **Includes facilitators’ and pastors’ guides.**



**Thinking of using the Series?** Review all four books at the beginning. *Unbinding Your Soul* will help **WHY** churches see a trajectory toward becoming a **HOW** church. **SOUL** is laced with 70 stories and direct quotes from a huge range of churches that have worked with the Series. See [www.GraceNet.info](http://www.GraceNet.info) for more info & resources.



In more than 12,000 congregations in 50 states, 49 denominations, 8 countries...

“...with clarity and sound theological grounding, we are invited into a grand adventure.... could be a watershed book for mainline Protestantism.”

ALBAN INSTITUTE, *Congregations*

“Martha Grace Reese gently but persistently lures the Mainline back to the ministry of evangelism that is the heart of the church....the *Unbinding the Gospel Series* can convert even the most ‘evangelism-cautious’ Christians into eager disciples who love others enough to tell them why Jesus is the Answer.”

JOHN H. THOMAS, General Minister and President, United Church of Christ

“I expect the *Unbinding the Gospel Series* ‘E-vents’ to move at least 20,000 churches into their first invitational foray into the community in anyone’s memory.”

GEORGE G. HUNTER, III, Distinguished Professor of Evangelism & Church Growth, Asbury Theological Seminary

“This should be required reading in all our mainline churches. Our continuing existence may depend upon it.”

RICHARD PEACE, Professor of Evangelism & Spiritual Formation at Fuller Theological Seminary

“The statistics Reese gives sober me, and they motivate me too. And her stories of vibrant congregations give me hope.....when you turn the last page, you can’t just let this be another book you read. You need to let Reese’s message affect you, and your faith community, and through you, other people.”

BRIAN McLAREN, Author of *Everything Must Change*

“...the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ evangelism program will not reverse the trend. Humor, whimsy and joy in the faith will serve us better. Reese’s book is written to provoke, to tease and to charm us back into telling our story.”

*The Christian Century*



MARTHA GRACE REESE, MDiv, JD, embodies the experience of a researcher, corporate attorney, congregational pastor, middle judicatory minister and church consultant. She has initiated and given primary leadership to four national Lilly Endowment projects in evangelism and congregational transformation. The *Unbinding the Gospel Series* is grounded in two of these initiatives. The *Mainline Evangelism Project* studied highly effective evangelism in mainline churches across the country. It included 1200 interviews. The new *Unbinding the Gospel Project* will provide coaching support to, and learn along with, 1000 congregations as they work with the *Unbinding Series*. Reese serves as president of GraceNet, Inc. (See [www.GraceNet.info](http://www.GraceNet.info).)