

“This is a much-needed reminder that gospel Christianity thrives when it is out of power, and that Christian courage comes from trusting not in cultural power but in God’s power and grace.”

TIMOTHY KELLER, Founding Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Manhattan;
author of *Making Sense of God*

“We live in an age of increasing hostility toward Christianity in the West. These are days that will require courage, conviction, and clarity of vision. Matt Chandler’s new book, *Take Heart*, is a thoughtful, pastoral, and brave call for faithfulness in a trying time. These pages are filled with practical wisdom and sound theological principles that fuel courage in the face of opposition.”

R. ALBERT MOHLER, JR., President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In *Take Heart*, Matt Chandler offers both challenge and comfort to Christians in an age where both are desperately needed. He speaks with both a prophet’s urgency and a pastor’s heart, and this book will serve all Christians who are wondering how we navigate the troubled waters of our present age.”

MIKE COSPER, Executive Director, Harbor Media;
author of *Recapturing the Wonder*

“Fearing, agonizing, retreating, embracing. These are a few of the responses we see and might be experiencing in a ‘post-Christian’ culture. Chandler knows how many of us feel in our current cultural moment in the West. Through biblical truth, Chandler helps redirect our eyes to the One who can strengthen and encourage us so we might have courage.”

TRILLIA NEWBELL, author of *God’s Very Good Idea* and *Enjoy*

“As Christians, we are defined not as a people of fear but a people of hope. Matt Chandler has written a timely book that encourages, inspires, and equips believers to walk in that hope in our current culture. This is an excellent resource for every believer desiring to live as ‘salt and light’ in today’s world.”

MATT CARTER, Pastor of Preaching, The Austin Stone Community Church, Austin

“This is a deeply encouraging book. I mean that literally: it brings courage to the reader. It is also enjoyably punchy, readably short, practically wise, and pastorally insightful, with a warmth and winsomeness that books on this subject sometimes lack. Get hold of a copy, and be en-courage-d.”

ANDREW WILSON, Teaching Pastor, King's Church London

“Matt Chandler is a man of courage and conviction. He is gifted with a prophetic voice, pointing the church and the world toward the beauty of the gospel, and calling upon Christians to live faithfully in the world. *Take Heart* is a sign of that message—that Christians can live courageously because Jesus is alive.”

RUSSELL MOORE, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention; author of *Onward*

“How do we engage a culture steeped in secularism? A fear-based operating system invoking a fight-or-flight response has proven to be historically insufficient. Instead we need a cohort of winsomely courageous Christ-followers to show us the way forward: the kind of person Matt Chandler has proven himself to be, and that he writes about in *Take Heart*.”

**BRYAN LORITTS, Lead Pastor, Abundant Life Church, Silicon Valley;
author of *Saving the Saved***

“For many of us, these seem hard days indeed to be a Christian. But by reminding us of the church's long, rich history and of God's strong, constant love, *Take Heart* shows us that even in this difficult age, believers have every reason for courage and to be of good cheer.”

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR, author of *Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More: Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist*

“Matt is a voice I trust. In times of significant cultural shift in the world, we need courage. Instead of walking in fear and making false proclamations about the church's mortality, we must brace ourselves for a deeper sense of commitment to courageous engagement. Pick up this book to get pointed in the right direction, and walk in commitment to strategic courage in this time of shifting uncertainty.”

ERIC MASON, Founder and Lead Pastor, Epiphany Fellowship, Philadelphia

“Countless Christians today have simply given up or lost hope. If that sounds like you, Matt Chandler has a word to speak: it’s a great time to be a Christian; be courageous; take heart. If that sounds hollow and naïve, you need to read this book. Matt is keenly in touch with the troubles we face but even more so with the Lord of the universe, who ultimately wins. What he advocates isn’t a fleshly triumphalism but a courageous faith in a really big God. *Take Heart* speaks a hopeful and thoroughly biblical word that all of us need to hear. Highly recommended!”

SAM STORMS, Lead Pastor, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City;
President of the Evangelical Theological Society

“Do not be dismayed, for this is not the first time the very heart of God’s plan for his people and his world has been questioned, assaulted, and pushed to the margins. This is the central message of this timely book by my dear brother Matt. Yet there is more. Within these pages you will be challenged to think critically about where your hope is actually invested, how you view the church’s role with respect to the state, and if you indeed love you neighbor as yourself. Take heart: you are alive in an age ripe with opportunity and you can actually be integral to changing the world!”

LÉONCE B. CRUMP JR., Founding Pastor, Renovation Church, Atlanta;
author of *Renovate: Changing Who You Are by Loving Where You Are*

“What a wonderful, inspiring work! In a time where Christianity is said to be losing ground in the culture, our impulse may be to panic. But what if this were actually our most opportune moment to experience renewal, and to become the kind of life-giving, world-changing disciples Jesus has always intended for us to be? In characteristic fashion, Matt has done a terrific job of laying out such a vision. In so doing, he has gotten me excited about the many things God still wants to do in the world, and the part we can all play in his plan.”

SCOTT SAULS, Senior Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville;
author of *Jesus Outside the Lines*, *Befriend*, and *From Weakness to Strength*

TAKE HEART

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To The Village Church.

You were on our hearts when we were writing this book.

May we have many more years of ministry together.

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I. WE CAN THRIVE

For the church, the skies are growing dark in the West. But the sky is not falling in.

In fact, this is a great time to be a Christian.

I know it may not look like that. From terrorist attacks to racial injustice to political chaos to an increasingly secular world that seems to have lost its moral center, we find ourselves in some unique and challenging times. Fear runs rampant across our cultural landscape—and, especially and increasingly, fear sits in the pews of our churches. Talk to most Christians—or read most Christian blogs and social-media streams—and it’s clear that the church isn’t what it was. Or rather, it isn’t where it was.

What do I mean? Bernie Sanders will explain for me. In spring 2017, the Vermont senator, who came closer than anyone expected to winning the Democratic nomination

for U.S. President in 2016, discovered that Russell Vought, deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget, holds to the orthodox Christian belief on salvation—and that, therefore, he believes that Muslims are “condemned.”

Here is what Sanders said in Vought’s Senate confirmation hearing:

“It is hateful, it is Islamophobic, and it is an insult to over a billion Muslims throughout the world ... This country, since its inception, has struggled, sometimes with great pain, to overcome discrimination of all forms ... we must not go backwards.”

Welcome to the age of unbelief.

Unless you want to place your head in the sand and leave it there, there’s no denying the fact that fewer and fewer people are claiming to be Christians throughout the West, and that Christians are losing social status and favor more and more, almost by the day.

For those in the United States, we’re seeing “Christian America” pass away right before our eyes. Our “one nation under God” doesn’t look and feel that way anymore. Many European nations are way downstream from there. It’s the end of the age of Christendom.

Whether it’s legislation around issues such as gay marriage and transgender identities... or the debates around what religious liberty really is (and whether it even matters)... or the popularity of the “new atheists” like Richard Dawkins

and Sam Harris... or just the way our neighbors and co-workers look at us if we mention that we agree with what Christ said about salvation, relationships, or truth... we're in a new era.

It was one thing to move toward a pluralistic society, where we lived among those who looked and thought differently than us, and who believed differently than us on some of our closest-held beliefs.

Now that's not good enough. We're currently experiencing the intolerance of intolerance (hopefully you catch the hypocrisy in that). Christians with "traditional" convictions and understandings of sexuality and marriage are seen as "bigots"—churches are being viewed as "hate groups." Our beliefs are, Bernie says and millions of others think, "hateful." Our positions are, Bernie says and millions of others think, "backwards."

Welcome to the age of unbelief. What are we going to do in it?

I believe we can thrive.

Really.

WE WILL RESPOND — BUT HOW?

As we live in this cultural moment as Christians, each of us responds in one way or another. We have to. We may do it with great thought, or we may do it based on gut instinct

or on what everyone else at our church is doing—but we will respond. And I think that response will take one of four basic approaches. I want to lay them out for you, and I want to say first up that none are altogether wrong, but that the first three—two of which I’m borrowing as concepts from Andy Crouch’s book *Culture Making*—are problematic.

So first, we can take what might be called the *converting culture* approach.

In this mindset, what matters most is that our nation’s culture reflects biblical principles and values. Supporters of this view are willing to go to great lengths to make it happen, even if that means making alliances with corrupted politicians and political parties, or making what they might see as lesser moral compromises. Think the “Christian Right,” especially as of late.

But in a span of history where the church doesn’t have high cultural standing, this approach is going to leave a lot of people frustrated and bitter. It already has. It will only perpetuate what has been known as “the culture wars,” a frankly arrogant posture that pits the church against the world, and does not draw a healthy line between the kingdom of God now and the kingdom of God to come.

I’m not going to pretend that there aren’t some good aspects of “converting culture.” You can trace much of its roots to the work of amazing theologians like Abraham Kuyper and Francis Schaeffer. It recognizes the reality that

Christians should be engaged in all of culture, seeking to transform culture through the power of Christ, through whom all things were created and through whom all things are sustained. After all, Christ is not just the Lord of the church, but of the world.

And yes, Christians are called to seek the good of those around us, and to pursue justice and to love good and shun evil. But we get into trouble when we confuse the earthly city with the heavenly city. Until Christ returns, this world will never look as it should. You can't use politics to build the new Jerusalem, and you can't legislate people into the kingdom of God.

In fact, I'd argue that the compromises and unholy alliances Christians have made in pursuit of converting the culture have left many people more suspicious of and hardened to the message of the church. And I don't blame them.

Where do we go, then? Well, the next option is to respond to the age of unbelief by what I call *condemning culture*. This is the idea of removing ourselves from the world, retreating into a subculture, and staying well away from wider culture because society is sinful, corrupted and antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This stream has always been part of the church's response to the challenge of living in this world. You see it in the rise of the monasteries. You see it in various parts of the Anabaptist movement. You see it today in blogs and

books advising Christians to create their own sub-culture, withdrawing from the increasingly un-Christian and, yes, anti-Christian wider culture. There's certainly something admirable and beautiful in this. God does call his people to holiness. The Scriptures are clear about the church being distinct from the rest of the world. We are to be salt—we are to “taste” different.

My concern is that, by itself, I just don't think the idea is all that biblical. We are to be “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5 v 13)—and salt maintains its flavor while it is rubbed into the foodstuff it is being used to preserve.

Not only that: salt spreads its flavor too. There comes a point where we have to actually get our hands dirty and show and share the good news of Christ, and proximity and relationships are essential to making that work. It requires involvement in the local community and in the “public square.” If God's Old Testament people could be called to “seek the welfare of the city” of Babylon during their exile from their homeland (Jeremiah 29 v 7), then we should be seeking the welfare of ours, too.

After all, however ungodly your context, you're not in Babylon.

The truth is that whether we're talking food, technology, music or other entertainment, God gives us these things as good gifts to be enjoyed, as long as we keep them in their right place by not elevating creation over the Creator. We can be skeptical of them, but we shouldn't be fearful of

them. Culture is not the source of evil. That's the human heart (Mark 7 v 18-23)—and so closing out the culture won't close out sin.

The third popular response to post-Christian culture is in many ways the most attractive, the most widespread, and the most scary. It's to follow the trends—to *consume culture*. So wherever culture and historical Christian teaching disagree, the latter is accommodated to the former. After all, if we want to stay relevant in a post-Christian age, then some of the Christian stuff will have to go, right?

In most cases, those who take this approach start in a good place, with good intentions of seeing where the Bible speaks boldly and clearly about social issues that we often ignore, and embracing the connection between faith and culture. As the Manhattan-based pastor Tim Keller said in his critique of this position in his book *Center Church*:

“This model sees Christianity as being fundamentally compatible with the surrounding culture. Those who embrace this model believe that God is at work redemptively within cultural movements that have nothing explicitly to do with Christianity.”

But the problem comes when we start to put too great a focus on culture to the neglect of the gospel, and that even goes for social justice. What happens is that we start to want the implications of the gospel more than we want the actual gospel.

Those who take the “consuming culture” approach follow culture, first and foremost, before the Bible, neglecting and compromising on significant aspects of faith. These men and women begin to look more and more like the world and less and less like the church. When the voice of a culture, and not the word of Christ, is what governs the church, then it is no longer the church. It’s just a social club of people desperately trying to keep up with the cultural fashion. Ironically, that’s the quickest way to close your church. Why would anyone bother coming to a church that is indistinguishable from anything else?!

These three options—*converting*, *condemning*, and *consuming*—are all very different, but I think they all have something in common. They are born of fear.

Those in the “converting culture” camp fear they are losing their culture and that if they do not make the compromises necessary to continue the culture war, the church cannot thrive, or even survive.

Those in the “condemning culture” camp fear that culture will corrupt them and the church; that any connection will lead to contamination and the church will become sick.

Those in the “consuming culture” camp fear that the church will become unacceptable and therefore irrelevant to those who are steeped in post-Christian culture, and that if the church is to have a future it must get with the program.

WHAT WE NEED

You may have guessed by now that this book will not encourage you to convert, condemn or consume the culture. I want to give you something else: a fourth option.

And I don't want to offer you a strategy so much as a posture. I want to address the fears that grip our hearts and that drive so much of our responses as Christians to the age of unbelief.

I want to give you courage.

I want to give you a posture that allows you to look round and think, *This is a great time to be a Christian.*

That's what Christians most need in a post-9/11, post-Christian, post-modern, post-everything world. If our hearts are not in the right place, if our hopes are misaligned, anything we try to do will be shortlived and misguided.

So this book is about where to find real courage and how to live by it. I'm convinced that if we have a God-sized, God-given courage, then we will be freed up to be the people of God, living out the mission of God, marked by the joy of God.

With courage, this season of history can be viewed not with fear and trepidation, but instead with hope and a sense of opportunity.

With courage, our perspectives change, and we can be excited and encouraged about this cultural moment, and not intimidated, angered, or paralyzed by it.

Welcome to the age of unbelief. The church can thrive here.

All we need is Christian courage.

Take heart.