



# GOSPEL *for* LIFE

## Rediscover Church with Collin Hansen

### Season 2, Episode 5 Transcript

[Intro]: Welcome to the Gospel for Life podcast. We help churches make disciples and now here's your host Darryl Dash.

[00:00:16] Darryl Dash: Welcome back to the Gospel for Life podcast.

Today I want to talk about church. Since a global pandemic abruptly closed places of worship, many Christians have skipped church life, even neglecting virtual services, but this was a trend even before COVID-19. Polarizing issues including political and racial strife, convinced some people to pull away from the church and one another. Now it's time to recommit to gathering as brothers and sisters in Christ.

That's why Collin Hansen and Jonathan Lehman wrote the book *Rediscover Church*. They believe that the church is essential for believers and for God's mission. In an age of church shopping and live stream services, rediscover why the future of church relies on believers gathering regularly as the family of God

I'm so glad to have Collin Hansen on the podcast today. Collin serves as vice president of content and editor and chief for the Gospel coalition. He hosts the Gospelbound podcast and he co-authored the book *Gospelbound: Living with Resolute Hope in an Anxious Age*. He serves as an elder for Redeemer Community Church in Birmingham Alabama and also on the advisory board of Beeson Divinity School and he's somebody that I really trust and appreciate.

So Collin, welcome. It seems like this is a tough time to rediscover church. Why does it seem so hard right now?

[00:01:48] Collin Hansen: I think one thing that a lot of people misunderstand or don't realize about this moment is that say 25 years ago, before the ubiquity of

the internet, a church leader had an information advantage. Was seen as an authority in part because that person could bring to bear information people didn't have. Through their education, through their networks, but not their study. But now people come to church already with their views formed because of a Netflix documentary they watched. Or a podcast they listened to, a social media feed they followed, a Facebook group they participated in and so they expect their church leaders to simply reinforce those views that they already hold. And they're not really interested in adjusting those views in light of what a church leader might say. I don't think we've really come to grips with how big of a transformation that is.

And I think the only way through it is to rediscover church as the body of Christ, which is essential no matter what technological changes happened. That this ought to be our primary formative spiritual community and that we ought to be able to see these relationships and these lines of responsibility and sacrifice and care and authority as being primary in our lives. As opposed to simply being another place to reflect our biases, views, prejudices and everything else. So absolutely, this is the time that we need to rediscover church, but for these reasons and many more. It's actually the least likely time that people are going to want to rediscover church.

[00:03:38] Darryl Dash: You know Collin, you're highlighting two sides. So on the side of maybe Christians, there are all these factors that make church more difficult for them. But on the part of pastors, there also seems to be a little confusion about what church should be and how to adapt to new realities. I talked to an elder of a church over the weekend and he was talking about their need to pivot to become a hybrid church and to maintain an online presence permanently. So why is it so important that pastors get clear on some of the convictions about who the church is and what she should do?

[00:04:18] Collin Hansen: So yeah, a lot of people are talking about this pivot to virtual church or hybrid church like you're talking about there. I think the reason they're doing this is because they continue to think of the church as primarily an information dispenser, so a dispenser of experiences and information. And so given the fact that everybody seems to want to consume their information online and they want these experiences online, why wouldn't the church do that? And why wouldn't the church want to be flexible at this time? Oh man, I don't think they have any idea what they're getting themselves into because if all of a sudden the church is primarily viewed that way within the internet space, then all of a sudden...

Let's take The Gospel Coalition as an example, let's take Hillsong, let's take any group you want out there. The kind of teaching that I could marshal through the

Gospel Coalition or the kind of worship experiences that could be manifested through Youtube by Hillsong is vastly superior to what any kind of local church can do. There's simply no chance.

So all of a sudden, if you're unmoored from any need to physically participate in a congregation in a location where you are accountable and they're accountable to you. And all of a sudden you're subject to all of the same factors that apply across the board on the internet. Think about the newspapers that thought in 1999, they would be really great to be able to go online, and then within 10 years they were done because wait a minute, why would anybody then subscribe in person? I mean people will look at that and they think well see, the thing is, what they should have done is they should have just pivoted and they should have gone online to begin with.

No, no, that's not the point. The point was that they misunderstood who their audience was, they misunderstood the effect of actually reading something in person. They misread the entire situation altogether.

That's what I see happening to churches right now is they think well gosh, the physical gathering is an inhibiting factor to our growth. Well actually, no, it's the actual thing that keeps you in line with God's plan and keeps you distinct from everything else. Because if people can simply consume your church virtually, and I use that term very explicitly, they will quickly learn that they can find something themselves to consume that is far better than your church.

And for that matter, any church because why can't they just cobble together any kind of worship experience that they want at any given time with any music that they want, with any playlist, with any selection of sermons. And you've already thrown out all of the sacraments, you've thrown out the discipline, you've thrown out the community, all the things that don't translate into a virtual context there.

So yeah, this is a topic I'm very passionate about because I see pastors making the same mistakes that they have been making for some time. Thinking that the internet is a way of expanding their influence when they don't realize that in many ways, adapting to every internet change is precisely the thing that is already rendering them irrelevant.

[00:07:46] Darryl Dash: So we have a confluence of factors here. We have maybe poor ecclesiology within the church in general, including even among pastors and you have COVID-19, which has accelerated some trends. You have the polarization, you have the rejection of authority and the rise of technology that makes so-called online church even possible. It really seems like there's not just one or two things, it's all these factors that are coming together to create

what we're experiencing right now. Is this without precedent? Has this sort of thing happened before where there's been all these factors that have merged together that have made people need to rediscover church again?

[00:08:28] Collin Hansen: When you think about the grand sweep of centuries, at least in the western Church, where I'd be more familiar, then you can come up with any number of different upheavals. But the only thing I can think of and I vetted this with a friend, Andy Crouch, the only thing we could come up with in terms of a precedent was the Black Death of the 14th century. The reason we say that is, and I mean of course you think about being in France and World War I or Germany or England in World War II, of course those are a big deal. But those situations didn't necessarily ban people from gathering as the church, but a pandemic does. A pandemic has those effects of making each other the very threat. And for those people in the 14th century, they didn't really know exactly what was happening, but they knew that you could contract it from other people and hence why they did not gather. But that's of course a similar situation right now where the gathering is itself the threat, especially if it's indoors. Especially if people are unvaccinated, especially if there's no masks or distancing involved.

And so yeah, I mean that's not a parallel, you can't go back and say well just think about this disruption. No, it's not about just a disruption to the church, it's about a disruption that prevents us from being able to gather. And then you add in another factor which is that our ability to connect and access and delivery and everything from the internet is exactly what has made this shutdown not nearly as painful as it would have been otherwise.

In fact, I think a lot of the plans that have been made, a lot of the shutdowns, assume that well of course, it's still okay because most of us can still work from home. Most of us can still get our food delivered, most of us can still continue to function, most of us can keep ourselves entertained there. They have this variety of factors of okay, a pandemic unlike something we've seen in a really long time, which prevents us from gathering and the opportunity to be able to stay at home. And be kind of okay without seeing people because you can still FaceTime them, you can still podcast with them, you can still do all that kind of stuff. So you can see why the church would want to do the same kind of pivot to say well of course, we can't gather in person, so therefore let's take advantage of this online thing. And I'm grateful because it is better than not being able to see and keep updated with people at all.

The problem is confusing it as a contingency measure with a strategy going forward is almost like saying okay, well then why would we ever go back to schools in person again? Isn't it way more efficient, isn't it way cheaper to essentially just let everybody customize their own educational experience at

home online. There's a reason most people wouldn't do that, most people aren't suggesting that and I'm really not sure why church feels like it's an exception to that rule. I mean, you don't see colleges saying oh good, this proves that we are irrelevant, that we don't need to gather, that we can sell all of these campuses, which are hugely expensive being able to maintain. Why don't you see colleges doing that? Because there's still an educational element where being gathered together helps in community. Well, add it to the church.

[00:12:08] Darryl Dash: That's so helpful and perceptive.

So Collin, one part of the book, I think it was in your chapter on preaching and teaching. You do make the point that a lot of pastors you talk to are saying it takes longer to make disciples than it used to. You can't begin assuming very much. And I think the same is true when it comes to disciplining people about what church is and what it should look like. What advice would you give to pastors who have maybe a consumerist congregation with a set of assumptions about the church that might not be grounded in Scripture? How can pastors begin to teach them what church looks like and why it's worth it, even though it's sometimes inconvenient and costly?

[00:12:51] Collin Hansen: With the risk of shameless self-promotion, that was the whole heart behind this book. We were hoping and still hope that this book is exactly that means to be able to try to help people. My own congregation has some 1200 members of average age, somewhere in the twenties. Coming from a wide variety of church backgrounds, mostly Baptist, but some other ones as well. And there are not a lot of shared assumptions about what the church is for, and that's the people that we wrote this book to. It was just putting it in their hands to say hey, why do we do a sermon instead of just a dialogue? Why wouldn't we just have a small group discussion about something? Or church discipline, doesn't that sound mean? That mean concept or why do we even bother with the Bible? Why wouldn't we shift toward interviewing people doing cool stuff? Which a lot of churches do today. It was just all those basic questions. Who is supposed to lead, does the Bible say anything about who's supposed to run a church? A lot of different ecclesiologies there. So that really was the whole heart behind this.

And I would say to borrow a common phrase, when it comes to a consumerist mindset in a church, I think about it this way, sometimes we can complain a lot about younger generations and then you stop and say, but who taught the younger generations? Who taught people that they should come to church as a consumer? Well, churches, churches taught them that.

So I would stop and say in your congregation, are you making disciples whose faith can withstand a pandemic? Can withstand just an information deluge of confusion out there with discernment? The people who can testify to the goodness of Jesus Christ, even at a time when the church has a pretty low reputation. Is your church producing those people, or is the church producing people who are pretty dependent on emotional experiences week to week? Or the teaching of a particular person and that person's ability to apply the Bible. I mean if you're doing that, I would just say repent. That is not equipping the saints to do the work of the ministry that Paul told the church in Ephesus to do, and so that's where I would simply start.

I have to also say that you can get away with church consumption in a place like Birmingham Alabama where I live, one of the capitals of the American Bible belt. But have a hard time thinking you can get away with it the same way in Toronto, but you'd be the expert on that one.

[00:15:52] Darryl Dash: No, I tell people we make Portland and Seattle look like the Bible belt, so it just won't work here at all.

So you covered so much ground in this book and you've covered some of the topics about preaching and teaching. Why do we need to gather, why it's important to join a church and not just float around? And why church discipline is necessary and what it looks like? Managing tension in relationships, leadership, virtual church. You cover so much. What have you found that really resonates with people, and since the book has come out, what are you finding people are struggling with so far as they read the book?

[00:16:33] Collin Hansen: Certainly a lot of people don't love the concept of disagreement with virtual church. It is such a no-brainer because we've already made so many assumptions about what the church is, that the convenience aspects of virtual church are just so obvious to people. I mean just think of all the things that can come up in your life. You've got kids who are sick, you've got kids who are struggling with different behavior. You've got vacations that you want to go on, you've got lake houses that you want to visit. I mean the convenience is simply unmatched. And so for a lot of people, they really do struggle with some of the criticism of virtual churches because it just seems to be such a benefit given what they already assume about the church. Which I think well, if your church is this family community of people that you see, love and trust and you're serving and you're volunteering and you're taking the sacraments and you're baptizing your children, things like that. You get my point though, they've already relativized those views of the church, so just seems like a benefit there.

So that's one of the part of that people are certainly struggling with, which we expected, which was one point of the book.

But I would say that the part that people are resonating with...I was just in New York recently, meeting with a group and they were talking about their philosophy of ministry, which is 'just show up'. I pulled out the book and I opened it to the conclusion and I pointed to my subheading where I say just show up. And as I'm interviewing new members of our church, that's when I tell them hey, our system will work. You will make friends, you will grow in your faith, you'll grow in your knowledge, you will grow in church discipline. Spiritual disciplines will grow, your understanding of God's word, your prayer life, all of these things will happen if you show up and if you don't show up those things just can't happen. I know that sounds so basic, but that's the problem that I hear from church leaders consistently, those are the problems that I see.

We have a situation and I don't know what it's like north of the border in the same ways, but you just don't really have an expectation among even serious Christians of regular church attendance, it's just not there. It's I will go to church 1-2 times a month if I don't have anything better going on. But if I have anything better going on, I've got a bachelor party or I've got a vacation or I've got some friends visiting or something, it's just not a priority for them. So it's no surprise. Especially with kids, especially travel teams and things like that, that takes a lot of people away as well. So that's the part that I think resonated especially with church leaders to say, I don't know what I'm supposed to do to be able to make disciples if people don't show up and that's a good point. So I hope more people will read this or even just hear the podcast and think oh that makes sense. If I'm going to benefit from these things, I have to show up.

[00:20:05] Darryl Dash: I love that part. "What's now? What's the next step? We have good news. It's easier than you can imagine, just show up and ask how you can help. That's right, that's the big takeaway from the book." I love that, it's so basic and yet so foundational.

[00:20:19] Collin Hansen: Ask how you can help. People ask me about home groups. Okay, home groups are notorious, they're wonderful things, but they're flawed just like every small groups, community groups, missional groups, whatever you want to call them. But that's the basic thing that transcends the whole thing. If you show up and say how can I help, that's everything. Okay, so you're going to notice the person over here who needs to be encouraged, you're going to notice the person over here who needs to be taught something. My wife just texted me a few minutes ago and said hey, we've got two people coming to give us food. We had a baby a couple months ago and they got a

couple of people bringing us food today. Well why does that happen? Because we show up. Because every single week we open up our doors to people we love and they come in and we share God's Word, we pray for one another, we cry with one another, and we confess to one another. It's just what we do and it's just a given on our schedule. It doesn't matter how I'm feeling that day, I know there's gonna be 20 people who show up, they're just gonna show up at my house and that God is gonna bless it. Not because I have some elaborate plan because that's just what he does there. And so the people who benefit are the ones who simply say I'm here and how can I help? I think sometimes that basic wisdom is what we need to be able to live out and experience the profound biblical realities that were promised throughout scripture.

[00:21:55] Darryl Dash: I love the showing up idea because one, it builds that regular pattern of I'm not going to decide if I feel like it or not, I'm just going to do it. And it really undermines the whole idea of consumerism, right? I'm going to show up to get, it's showing up intentionally to serve others. So yeah, I just love that, that's so helpful.

Collin, we've been bombarded with so much bad news about the church. #ChurchToo, #MeToo hashtags, abusive leadership within the church. It isn't hard to find reasons to become jaded with the church. And in the book, you and Jonathan Lehman wrote, the two of us are not naive about how many churches fall short of this vision. You might think we underestimate the challenges on the contrary because of our positions. We know far more than most about the dark side of churches. How have you fought the temptation of becoming jaded against the church?

[00:22:47] Collin Hansen: Well, one thing is with a very robust sense of my own sin. I don't know if that's a spiritual gift or not, but the Lord over the last decade, especially has been persistent about exposing new layers of my sin, of my selfishness, of my arrogance, pride. And I can just go on and on and on if we would turn this into a confessional. And that helps when I'm looking at a situation in the church to say boy, I could see myself in that same situation if God had not brought this conviction into my life through this hardship.

Another way I put it is that I don't trust any church leaders who haven't failed. That doesn't mean Gary the church leader has to go through an abuse scandal, no, it's just that leadership is a crucible of exposing you. And you are lucky if God exposes your need to repent early before you can do a lot of damage before you become Mark Driscoll in the [Mars Hill podcast](#) there. And I would say the way I've avoided some of the jadedness is because I've had a front row seat to countless disasters. And yes, I've been able to learn some lessons from that, which has been good.

Another thing is it's just helped me to see that no matter how wonderful a church leader is, that leader still falls way short on some things. So there just isn't anybody who's remotely close to perfect out there, starting with you and me. Just pick whomever you think is the ideal pastor and I guarantee you that person falls way short in different ways and I've just been in a position to be able to see that and be able to experience that and be able to even in some ways to be hurt by that. So I think there's a difference between the kind of leaders who simply are normal people who have flaws, but they're aware of them and they're seeking repentance and they're open about that.

The leaders who are flawed, but do not have any interest in introspection, there seems to be no spiritual pursuit there. That's the difference and I'm plenty jaded and have no time for those pastors in that situation. And I saw that early on, I'm going to mention Mark Driscoll, Mars Hill podcast, I saw that early on in my career. Then you see everybody else and you just say, oh well everybody's got their own things, that's not a way of saying oh yeah, everybody is just abusing. No, not everybody is abusing, but there are people who disappoint, there are people who don't do what they should be doing, there are people who get scared. There are countless pastors who are simply overwhelmed with the leadership demands of the last 18 months and they are simply not good enough to be able to lead a congregation really well through this.

On the one hand, I guess I could just be super judgmental toward pastors and say how dare you not be good at X, Y, Z. Or I can stop and say yeah, it seems like almost everybody is struggling.

This just seems to be out of most people's depth right now. And being out of most people's depth is precisely the place where God seems to really do wonderful things if we are repentant and humble in that atmosphere. So no matter how bad it gets, I guess that's maybe it's the Old Testament talking there, but no matter how bad it gets in judgment, there's still the beckoning call of the Lord to say repent of your sins and turn back to me.

And so the opportunity I see for the church right now is certainly to repent and to come back to him. Also to trust his Word that discipline is necessary, authority is good when wielded in a biblical manner, but you don't just throw out everything the Bible teaches. In fact, those are the very means God intends to use to be able to help us through some of the crises that we see today in the church.

[00:27:29] Darryl Dash: This relates to a tweet I read this morning, somebody said we talk a lot about church hurt and the failure of Christian leadership. But

what's also true is that you, oh congregant, have the power of death and life in your words and actions and the lives of your shepherds. And then she said this and this got me, she said "I don't know one person in ministry right now who is okay." I don't know if that's true or not, but I get the sense that a lot of pastors are struggling right now. What would you say to a pastor who feels tired and discouraged at this moment?

[00:27:58] Collin Hansen: It seems to be nearly universal in my experience as well. I'd say it's not going to last forever, it's going to be okay. And I would probably give my standard Monday morning advice, which is don't make any decisions about your future on a Monday morning if you're a pastor. Probably things are not as bad as they appear and things are always changing. So you just don't know what's around the corner. So if possible, if you can hang on, if you can trust God to be able to take you to places of dependence, of places of even desperation then aren't you where David was in the Psalms? Aren't you where Jesus was in the garden? That's not the worst place to be, that's fully within the will of God there. It's a place where God promises to meet you. So maybe it's our ministry idols that are crumbling, maybe it's our pride that's being torn away. Maybe because this is setting us up for God to work in revival.

One of the things I did a lot this summer was study especially the years of 1968 - 1975 in the United States, and it's hard to be too much more tumultuous in those years. And yet, those were the very years of the Jesus movement. This is one of the more recent mass revivals in American history that has shaped today's church in ways that we would find it impossible to even categorize. Because it's been that profound in terms of how we pray, how we worship, the music we use, how we teach, everything was shaped by that.

So I would just encourage those pastors that if you can all hang on... Well first of all, Christ is hanging on to you, that's one thing to be completely confident in. But if you can hang in there, it won't last forever and you don't know what's around the corner. It could be a movement of God. If history is any indication it could be a movement of God, unlike anything we've seen in a long time. That's certainly what I'm praying for.

[00:30:29] Darryl Dash: Yeah, me too. Amen to that. I want to transition and ask you a couple of personal questions. What have you been learning recently?

[00:30:37] Collin Hansen: What have I been learning recently? I think when I do these interviews I'm often speaking about was on my mind at that moment. And so what I'm learning recently, it's simply how profoundly the world changed 25 years ago with the ubiquity of the internet. First the adoption of the personal computer, those old modems, but then also especially the iPhone in 2007. I'm

also reading a book right now about Luther and the rise of the printing industry and how that helped to launch this theological revolution called the Protestant Reformation. And I think it's because we're just at the dawn of something that's going to change basically everything and how we live with the internet.

And so I'm thinking about that and I'm trying to encourage church leaders to say while you're skimming the surface of a lot of the conflict you see right now, you've got to dig deeper to understand the technological revolution that is giving rise to so much of this conflict today. You've got to be dealing with it at that level, not at a superficial level.

[00:31:47] Darryl Dash: Do you have a book coming out on that topic?

[00:31:51] Collin Hansen: A lot of this is related to my upcoming teaching on cultural apologetics, and it's really just part of my job at TGC. Is to try to help church leaders think through those kinds of things. One of the things I'm going to do in this cultural apologetics class that I'm teaching based in Divinity School is each class period, the 10 class periods I want to consider a historical artifact that transformed society and transformed the church. So for example, people might not think much about the cotton gin, how would the cotton gin be related to the church? The cotton gin is one of the most profound things that has shaped the American church today. Why would that be the case? Well, when it was invented late 18th century, most Americans thought slavery was dying out. Instead the cotton gin by separating seed from the cotton, made cotton extremely profitable. That then dramatically increased slavery, which led to a theological appropriation of slavery as a good thing, which became endemic to southern evangelical Christianity and in various permutations actually continues to this day.

So that's kind of what I mean, I want to do that with a lot of different things, including the iPhone, the telegraph, the automobile. A simple thing that I've heard many people observed before, as soon as you had an automobile, there went church discipline. Because if there are no physical boundaries on attending church, then it doesn't matter if you get kicked out of a church, you just go to the next one. You can make up a story there. So that's how I'm trying to help prospective pastors think about things and it comes a lot from my work in online publishing of how in my 11 years, this job has changed dramatically, and in the next 11 years, there's going to be more change.

[00:33:51] Darryl Dash: Wow, that's cool. And what's encouraging you recently?

[00:33:55] Collin Hansen: Well, I would say I'm encouraged by a lot of different things. So the previous book that I wrote, you mentioned earlier, *Gospelbound*:

*Living with Resolute Hope in an Anxious Age*, that book is all about movements of God. And his people living out, especially the commands of the Book of Romans in incredibly encouraging ways. Let me just take a step back here and explain, that book has not been some sort of bestseller. And when you compare it to the books that have been bestsellers during that time period, it should tell you what you need to know about what's going on. Because the fact is good news right now does not sell, bad news from whatever angle it's coming from, that's the stuff that sells. That's not a coincidence there. So that's the difficult side of things.

But the other side of things is that if you actually just open your eyes, if you get away from their Twitter feed, you get away from the screen and you just start to look for God. Your neighborhood, your church, your family. Start to ask people, start to read books, all of a sudden your perspective really changes quite a bit. And so that was just something I learned to do years ago because of my job being so immersed online. I learned I had to look for God elsewhere. And when I did I just saw him doing amazing things everywhere that never makes it into a bestselling book and never makes it into a twitter thread there. I don't know how I could make it in this job if that weren't something God had taught me to do. So I always have sources of encouragement there and just going to keep plugging along that way. Even if it's not the thing that makes the money and not the thing that gets the attention.

[00:35:57] Darryl Dash: *Gospelbound* is such an encouraging book and your podcast as well. Just highlighting some of the positive stories and a lot of them really not well known and yet so encouraging, so I really appreciate that. I encourage everyone to read it and pick it up. Where can people find out more about you?

[00:36:14] Collin Hansen: Well thegospelcoalition.org would be the easiest place to be able to follow what I'm doing or Twitter @collinhansen. As much as kind of the shade that I cast on Twitter especially, I think it's important to be able to use the media where people are finding ideas. Try to redeem it of what you can that a lot of things the medium doesn't allow. Then to point people backward to something like the church, which is eternal and to get them to go there. So you can follow me on Twitter, but that's really what I do, I try to use those media to be able to point people back to books, people, God, church, all those wonderful things.

[00:37:03] Darryl Dash: Well Collin I really appreciate your book *Rediscover Church*. It's such a timely book for right now. Overall I appreciate your writing ministry, your editorial work, your podcasting. I benefited from your ministry over a large number of years now, so thank you and thank you for joining us today.

[00:37:19] Collin Hansen: Oh, it's an honor to be here.