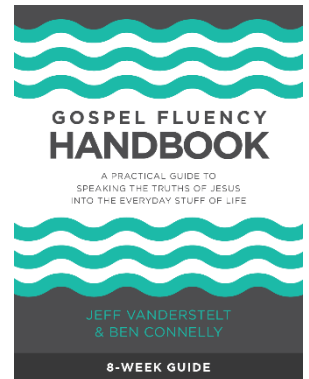


An interview with Jeff Vanderstelt and Ben Connelly, Authors of *Gospel Fluency Handbook: A Practical Guide to Speaking the Truths of Jesus into the Everyday Stuff of Life*

Every Christian has moments of unbelief. Author and pastor Jeff Vanderstelt admits, "I'm an unbeliever. So are you. We slip in and out of believing God's word about us and trusting in His work on our behalf. We forget who He is, what's He's done and, in light of that, who we are."

Vanderstelt and his co-author, Ben Connelly, wrote *Gospel Fluency Handbook: A Practical Guide to Speaking the Truths of Jesus into the Everyday Stuff of Life* (Saturate Resources/September 15, 2017) for those who've realized they disbelieve God, His goodness and His gospel in areas of normal, everyday, busy life. It is also for those who are keenly aware and weighed down by a failure to connect the way gospel truths actually matter to everyday life.



Q: You open *Gospel Fluency Handbook*, a book written for Christians, with a quote from Jeff's book *Gospel Fluency*, which reads, "I'm an unbeliever. So are you." What do you mean by this broad statement directed to readers?



Jeff Vanderstelt: I struggle with unbelief on a daily basis. I slip in and out of believing God's word about me and trusting in his work for me. Jesus gave his life to make me a new creation. He died to forgive me of my sins and change my identity from sinner to saint, from failure to faithful, and from bad to good and even righteous and holy. However, I forget what He has said about me. I forget what He has done for me. Sometimes it isn't forgetfulness. Sometimes it's just plain unbelief. I know these things. I just don't believe them.

I am an unbeliever. Not every moment, of course, but I have those moments. So does everyone. I'm certain of it.

Q: What does it mean to be gospel fluent? What is the first step in the process of improving our fluency?

JV: When I think about fluency I think about unconscious competence. I am answering this question in English not consciously trying to think through a vocabulary list or stumbling over how to put together thoughts. I am fluent in English. To be fluent in the gospel is to know it so well it becomes like a mother tongue. I am able to filter all of life through the truths of the gospel and am readily able to speak those truths into any situation or struggle we are facing at any time.

Ben Connelly: As with any other use of the term "fluency," gospel fluency is a growing ability to see all of life and consider the many situations in our day-to-day through the lens of the promises of God and the good news of Jesus. Just like learning a new language, most of us start with an unawareness of how the gospel can apply to the hard and mundane aspects of daily life and conversation; in this way, the gospel is "unnatural" to us. As we rehearse basic truths of the gospel, as we practice different disciplines and as we ask God to give us more and more knowledge of Himself, His promises and His truth, the hope is the gospel becomes more and more "natural" and automatic. A first step must be asking if we believe the gospel (the life, death and resurrection of Jesus for the glory of God and the building of his kingdom) and if we believe this "best news in all of history" not only applies to our future/eternity, but to our present reality of this life.

Q: How do Christians often misapply Paul's instruction to speak the truth in love?

BC: It seems that misapplication typically happens in one of three ways. In the first two, we miss one half of God's charge; we speak the cold, hard, objective truth (at least our perception of the truth) without love

(without listening to or considering the heart of the person we speak to and, in this sense, devaluing the person). Or we prioritize "love" (or again, our perception of love) without truth (downplaying God and His calls to godliness and obedience, thus valuing the person too highly and not wanting to hurt feelings, reputations, etc.). Neglecting either half can leave a conversation without wisdom or fruit. The third misapplication of this verse, though, starts with a wrong definition of "truth." While we hold to the entire Bible as God's truth, the specific "truth" referenced in this verse is the gospel. If we simply declare biblical commands to people — if we tell them what to believe and do or what not to believe and do — we miss the point of this verse altogether. A biblical view of humanity says we cannot know or obey God on our own; we must rest in the good news of Jesus even in our (failed) attempts to know and live for him. Just spouting off Bible verses or correctives misses the point of God's instruction in this verse.

JV: In Ephesians 4:15, the place where we find the phrase "speak the truth in love," Paul says it is by speaking the truth in love we grow up in every way into Christ. Then, in verse 21, he clarifies the truth is in Jesus. In other words, as Ben said, if we are going to help people grow up into Christ in every way, we will need to practice speaking the truths of Jesus into everything. That's very different than just confronting people in their sin or just loving them regardless but never directing them to Jesus.

Q: As we work to become fluent in the gospel, what are some of the vocabulary words in which we need a refresher course?



BC: Grace. That's the first and primary word we need to remember; it's the word that defines Christianity. It means we don't have to prove anything because for the Christian we've already been proven to God through the blood of Jesus.

Other concepts that form a foundation for gospel fluency might be:

- God's faithfulness: His promises are always true
- His goodness: He alone satisfies
- His glory: He alone is worth living for
- His sovereignty: He alone is in control, always and in everything
- Our identity in Christ: by which we remember we're formed, named and defined primarily by God.

Without knowing and believing these concepts, there isn't an ability to see God or ourselves rightly, and it will be hard to become increasingly fluent and to see the gospel as the hope and solution to every situation we face in life.

JV: I would also add grace is not only unmerited acceptance and favor from God, which it is. It is also divine empowerment granted to us by the Spirit. I often hear people speak of grace regarding God's posture toward us. Yet it is God's grace that also empowers us to live a new life, which leads to another word: salvation or saved. Most people see salvation as primarily a past action ("I was saved"), but in 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle Paul clarifies we are also *being* saved through the gospel. In 1 Peter 1:3–5, Peter speaks of a future salvation. The gospel is the power of God for salvation for all who believe (Romans 1:16) — salvation from the penalty of sin (past), salvation from the power of sin (present) and salvation from the presence of sin (future).

Q: Why is it hard for many people to talk to others about Jesus? How do we grow our love for Jesus?

BC: There are many reasons it's hard to talk about Jesus. Some are ill-motivated: we don't want people to think us weird or to be offended by the cross (which God promises through Paul *is* offensive!). On the other hand, sometimes we hold back from seemingly good motivations; we don't want to misrepresent God, or we feel inadequate to answer questions fully we might receive. Both sides of this present an opportunity to practice gospel fluency. In the ill-motivated reasons for holding back, we're asked to consider who we're esteeming highest. Do we care more about God and His ways or others' view of us? There are implications in that answer, displaying our belief, hope and rest in God. Even in the better motivations, we have a chance to consider whether we're relying too highly on ourselves and our abilities. After all, the Bible promises humans *are* inadequate; we *can't* know the depths and riches of the glories of God! When we remember the gospel, even

in our own non-sharing of it, God gives us a right view of Himself and ourselves, and those right views can give us the freedom to talk to others about Jesus.

JV: It's also a matter of affection. We talk most about what we love most. We will sacrifice most for what we love most. I have no problem getting people to talk about their children or grandchildren, favorite sports team or hobby. We also talk about what we believe works, and we share that with people we truly love. If our hearts are affected deeply by the love of God in Christ Jesus, we will talk about it. If we love Jesus, believe he can change lives and love our co-workers, friend, neighbors and family, we will share whom we love (Jesus) so they can experience the transformation he brings.

I also don't want to leave out the reality we are in a spiritual battle, and anytime we are given the opportunity to share the gospel news that sets captives free, we should recognize the real battle going on to keep people in spiritual captivity. This isn't just a philosophical discussion. This is a spiritual war for souls. Don't be surprised if you sense internal and external opposition.

Q: How are our sins tied to our unbeliefs? Why is simply confessing the fruit of our sin not enough?

BC: Sin (captial "S") is a *theological* concept that undergirds the specific thoughts and actions defined as lower-case "sins." Being a theological concept, which by nature deals with belief in God, sins always call into question what we believe or disbelieve about God. We sin because we disbelieve God, or we believe something else more than God.

Adam and Eve believed Satan more than God and followed their own desires for greatness and position more than trusting God's definitions of greatness and the position He created for them. They walked with God and existed in a perfect utopia. It was a pretty good position, but they didn't believe God, and frankly we likely would have done the same! That pattern continues in each of us today. Sin doesn't start with action; it begins with believing something to be better, more satisfying and more fulfilling than God. Confessing our sin isn't enough because it's easy to acknowledge something and keep right on doing it. Confession is naming something; repentance is actually turning from it to something better. Repentance and belief are commonly tied together in the Bible, in part because true repentance is righting our wrong beliefs. In confession we admit our disbelief, and in repentance we turn from that wrong belief to a restored/renewed right belief in God as the pinnacle of whatever we were pursuing.

JV: Every sinful behavior is connected to a sinful belief — a wrong belief about God's word or work. We believe God's word is a lie or untrustworthy and God's work is insufficient. In some cases, we are ignorant of God's word or work, so we have put our faith in another. The problem with primarily confessing a sinful behavior is it is no different than identifying the symptoms of an illness. If I don't identify the illness causing the symptoms, I will only apply a topical treatment. To rid ourselves of the sickness requires properly diagnosing it and then appropriately treating it. Our sin ultimately isn't just bad behaviors but wrong belief about God, which ultimately is sinful rebellion against God in some way. When we sin against another we must recognize we have first of all sinned against God; we've turned away from Him to another, as Ben said. In order for sin to be dealt with in our lives we must get to the roots of our beliefs and then confess out loud our sinful beliefs about God. To repent, as Ben has said, is not just to stop sinning but to turn away from what we trusted in and turn to God both for forgiveness as well as for a renewal of our minds about who God is and what He has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Q: How can we display the work of God to the world without looking like we are trying to show off?

BC: This is a hard question. Posture may make all the difference in the world, as it relates to our outward expression of God's work. For example, we've all experienced two people carrying out the same task or accomplishing the same goal, and we can all tell the difference in a posture of humility versus a posture of pride. If we're fully honest, though, we each know we can fake a posture of humility, as well, to look good in others' eyes! At its core, this may be an issue of the heart and of integrity. We can pursue even "great things for God" from a self-focused motivation or from a God-focused one, and both can look the same outwardly. The answer may be a gut-check on our inward motivation and on our heart condition. It may be something God alone knows for certain. However, thinking and speaking less and less of ourselves and thinking and speaking more and more of God may be one step in the right direction.

JV: I think we should ask ourselves regularly, "Who is this for? Who do I want to notice?" The answer reveals who our audience is. The other question is, "Who or what is this in service to?" In other words, what am I hoping will be the outcome? What's driving this behavior? Brother Lawrence put himself in a position of washing dishes so he could learn to worship God in the mundane, unnoticed activities. I regularly check myself by seeing if I'm willing to engage in the activities that are so normal in my household our children forget it even happens (like cooking, picking up loose laundry, washing dishes, etc.).

Q: In a world so hostile toward Christianity, what advice do you offer readers for courageously proclaiming the gospel?

BC: Gospel proclamation can often feel like a big, scary, "one-shot-to-get-right-before-all-is-lost" reality. Certainly, some are gifted evangelists and see fruit in big, overt, even public gospel presentations. The reality is that many Christians aren't gifted as evangelists but are still part of God's great commission. For most of us, then, there are moments in many conversations every day to share bits of what we believe to be true about Jesus with those who don't believe. If the gospel truly is good news in the everyday stuff of life, then sharing how specific aspects of that good news applies to certain situations, even in small ways and throughout time, can be meaningful and fruitful. This may sound silly, but in our church we talk regularly about how the gospel is like a diamond; while there is one diamond, it is inherently beautiful. There are innumerable angles from which we can approach that one diamond, and each angle from which we view it gives us different, nuanced appreciation of its beauty. We can speak the good news of Jesus into one "angle" of someone's life, and while we haven't given them the whole gospel, we've shown a meaningful way the gospel applies to that situation. Throughout time as relationships build, we get to speak to multiple angles of their lives. As we do, and only by God's grace and Spirit's work, our hope and prayer can be that they get a fuller picture of the gospel in all its beauty and glory, that they one day believe it's the only good news worth believing and that they trust Jesus.

JV: I want to remind people that Jesus promised the Spirit would both witness to our hearts about the truths of Jesus needed in the moment, as well as bring words to mind about what we should said. We need to cultivate listening hearts to the Spirit's prompting and try not to force conversations where the Spirit is not leading or opening doors. Also, remember we don't save people. God does. We are called to be Jesus' witnesses about what he has done and is doing in our lives and in what he has done and is doing in the world. As we regularly speak of what Jesus has done to one another, it becomes more natural to do that with people who don't yet know and love Jesus. Lastly, we must speak in love. Sometimes people are offended not because of the message of the gospel, but because the messenger is offensive in how they bring it. I ask myself regularly, "How can I share the good news to this person so it actually sounds like good news?" If it doesn't even sound like good news to me, I have probably lost the heart of the gospel being good news for others. Remember the gospel is good news to those being saved and foolishness, not bad news, to those perishing. In most cases, the gospel should sound either too good to be true or not necessary because they don't believe they need it yet. However, it should not come across as bad news.

Q: This handbook is based on content from the book *Gospel Fluency*. Do readers need to have read *Gospel Fluency* to use this guide?

JV: While the content of the handbook accompanies my book *Gospel Fluency: Speaking the Truths of Jesus into the Everyday Stuff of Life*, published by Crossway earlier this year, the handbook can be used as an independent resource.

Content from *Gospel Fluency* is summarized in each week's readings, and for participants who want to go deeper, each week indicates corresponding chapters in *Gospel Fluency*, if they choose to read and study further.

Q: What do you hope for readers to gain from reading and working through the handbook?

BC: The first goal of the *Gospel Fluency Handbook* is to help readers become fluent in the gospel — in other words, to help them move from unbelief to belief, in whatever area(s) of their lives they find it difficult to believe God's promises and live according to that belief.

The second goal, which we hope naturally flows from the first, is to help readers speak the truths of Jesus into the everyday stuff of life as we together become a more gospel-fluent people. To that end, we've crafted this resource as an interactive guide to walk readers step-by-step into immersing their minds, hearts, souls and lives in the gospel. It's not a book; books are generally designed to give information and to be read cover to cover, often in just a few days. This is an eight-week interactive study.

Q: What is the format of *Gospel Fluency Handbook*, and how is it intended to be used? Can it be used for individual study, or should it be used in a group setting?

JV: Each week of the Handbook follows a simple format: three sets of personal readings and reflections, about the same length as this introduction, and then a weekly guide for group discussion and exercises.

The majority of each week is comprised of three readings, which are excerpts from *Gospel Fluency* and related scriptures, to read and reflect upon. Each reading is followed by a personal reflection: questions to answer prayerfully, thoughts to respond to and ways to help you practice the content of that reading. Each set of readings and reflections should take no more than 30–45 minutes to complete. After the third reading and reflection of each week, there's a blank page titled "Look Back," simply for you to reflect on what you've learned throughout that week.

A theme throughout both *Gospel Fluency* and this handbook is our need for others. After completing the three readings and reflections each week, the week closes with a guide for groups to discuss, help each other and practice that week's concepts together. We recommend your group meets weekly and that each week includes a meal. Each week's discussion and exercises will take at least an hour; plan well to give yourself ample time to walk through them well. One suggestion is to focus your time together on the exercises, rather than trying to address everything given in each week's group discussion. Pick a couple questions from those given each week, and move through them quickly enough to give yourselves plenty of time for that week's group exercise.

Q: Why is it important for readers to share their personal stories with the group?

BC: If a goal of gospel fluency is being able to speak and hear the good news of Jesus as it applies to the everyday stuff of our lives, then people need to know the everyday stuff of our lives! The way we tell our stories displays things that are important to us. Our stories give people lenses to see and understand us; they build foundations and explain some of the "whys" behind what they may experience in us. We all have quirks, fears, tendencies, gifts and needs. Our stories help lay out some of these things as a foundation on which relationships can be built and as a lens into our lives, through which specific areas of good news can be seen and spoken.

Q: There is a video series to go along with the handbook; how do they enhance the reader's experience with the material?

JV: This nine-part video series enhances and deepens the learning experience for groups using the *Gospel Fluency Handbook*. Week by week, I articulate and summarize key ideas, themes and principles as groups engage and process the handbook together. Additional concepts and training will enhance learning for groups as they move toward becoming a community centered on being fluent in the gospel.

Q: Can you share a little bit with us about Saturate the World? What resources are available from your website?

JV: Saturate is committed to seeing a gospel saturation movement happen in North America and beyond. We want to partner with God, like-minded churches and individuals as He brings about the vision of seeing every man, woman and child have a daily encounter with Jesus in word and deed. We believe our responsibility in this vision is providing gospel-centered training, resourcing and coaching for the purpose of starting, supporting and strengthening churches committed to gospel saturation. To this end, Saturate discovers and curates some of the best practices and learnings from proven practitioners and repackages them for the church at large. We also provide training events, coaching, church health assessments and platforms for learning communities to support individuals and churches toward accomplishing the vision of gospel saturation.

Learn more about more about *Gospel Fluency Handbook* at www.gospelfluency.com
or on [Facebook](#) ([SaturateTheWorld](#)) or [Twitter](#) ([@SaturateWorld](#)).