

*“The Prodigal Evangelical is honest, humble and hopeful. Its message exposes the deep challenges, and at times the deep chasms within evangelicalism. It’s not just a book, it is a heart cry for a reclaimed evangelicalism that puts God at the centre. His book does what all good books do – it engages my heart, captures my imagination, challenges my assumptions, and stretches my thinking. I am privileged to call this man my friend, honoured to learn from him, and blessed to stand alongside him in ministry and service for Christ.”*

**Malcolm Duncan, author of *Risk Takers and Unbelievable*, and senior pastor of Gold Hill Baptist Church**

*“Gerard Kelly is one of the great thinkers in the Church. His definition of the Kingdom versus the Church has such clarity, and depth. What a fantastic book – destined to be a classic of Christian literature.”*

**Bev Murrill, speaker, author, leadership consultant, and director of Christian Growth International, Newcastle, Australia**

*“Gerard convinces us in this book that God cannot be contained, yet can be intimately known. What is enlightening and enlivening here are the glimpses into what can happen when our stories are interwoven into God’s story: when the prodigal turns on the spiritual Bluetooth to receive the gift of faith, life, and belonging. This is a great book of deep stories.”*

**Fuzz Kitto, Spirited Consulting, Australia**

*“Gerard Kelly is a prophet-poet-theologian-practitioner who has always managed to sense the existential issues of the age and to speak meaningfully about them. He calls us to faithfulness in a culture that rewards the lack of it. I am grateful.”*

**Alan Hirsch, author of numerous books on missional Christianity, and founder of Forge Mission Training Network and Future Travellers**

*“Gerard’s finest book yet. I found myself deeply moved as I explored its pages, and through it, my faith has been renewed and refined. Few writers can craft words, light the imagination, stretch the mind, and draw you in like Gerard. I am grateful for his honesty and for this extremely readable but profound reminder of the mystery and the wonder of God’s grace. Simply put, this book made sense in my soul.”*

**Cathy Madavan, speaker, writer, member of the Spring Harvest planning group and author of *Digging for Diamonds***

*“With wonderful honesty, humility, and insight Gerard tackles many of the questions we all face. Get this vital book today – it’s a work for our times.”*

**Gavin Calver, National Director, British Youth for Christ**

*“Biblical, theological, culturally perceptive, and above all disarmingly honest, Gerard Kelly casts for prodigal evangelicals everywhere a fresh vision of the unchanging riches of an evangelicalism released from unnecessary cultural and doctrinal baggage. A must read for anyone wondering if ‘evangelical’ is a word worth saving!”*

**Revd Canon Anna Norman-Walker, Canon Missioner, Exeter Cathedral**

*“Gerard is a prophetic voice preparing the way of the Lord – this book will challenge and inspire you to live out the actual good news in real life. I recommend this work as a catalyst for change from the inside out.”*

**Danielle Strickland**

*“In Gerard’s usual poetic way he draws us into a place of seeing ourselves for who we are and seeing Jesus for who he is. The Prodigal Evangelical should be read by everyone seeking a faith that truly fulfills their deepest longings.”*

**Cris Rogers**

*“In The Prodigal Evangelical Gerard Kelly focuses our eyes on the wonderful story of good news that is the beating heart of Christianity. The book is beautifully written, telling powerful real-life stories, and drawing on great art to make its simple but vital point. I hope it will be very widely read and enjoyed.”*

**Steve Holmes, Senior Lecturer in Theology, St Andrews University**

*“We are all broken people but Jesus offers a way out of that brokenness. Gerard Kelly’s poignant and vulnerable journey towards home and wholeness is compelling reading. I highly recommend The Prodigal Evangelical to all who have struggled with doubts and questions about faith and God.”*

**Christine Sine, Executive Director, Mustard Seed Associates, Seattle**

*“This beautifully honest and open book will make you stop and think again about your own journey in faith and cause you to reflect on your relationship with a loving God. Importantly it will help you find a language to explain your story in a way that makes sense to others.”*

**Dr Rachel Jordan, National Mission and Evangelism Adviser, Church of England**

A pastor, poet, and missionary, Gerard Kelly lives in Normandy where he and his wife Chrissie lead The Bless Network: a local church-plant and training centre with mission projects in France, Croatia, and the Netherlands ([www.blessnet.eu](http://www.blessnet.eu)). Gerard was formerly Pastor of Crossroads International Church in Amsterdam and a member of the Leadership Team of Spring Harvest. He blogs at [godseesdiamonds.tumblr.com](http://godseesdiamonds.tumblr.com) and prays on twitter (@twitturgies).

# THE PRODIGAL EVANGELICAL

Why, despite everything, I still belong to the tribe

Gerard Kelly

MONARCH  
BOOKS

Oxford, UK & Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

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Published by Monarch Books  
an imprint of

**Lion Hudson plc**

Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road,  
Oxford OX2 8DR, England  
Email: [monarch@lionhudson.com](mailto:monarch@lionhudson.com)  
[www.lionhudson.com/monarch](http://www.lionhudson.com/monarch)

ISBN 978 0 85721 626 7

e-ISBN 978 0 85721 627 4

First edition 2015

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK, November 2014, LH26

*For Chrissie, always...*





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## Foreword

As a lover of words, I have long admired (and occasionally been mildly envious of) Gerard Kelly. The man is multi-talented to the point of it being slightly unfair. As a poet, he possesses a rare ability, not only to conjoin totally unexpected phrases that surprise and sometimes shock, but he is accessible, entertaining, and has an uncanny knack of pointing out the proverbial elephant in the room. His prose is stirring, confrontational, enlightening, and comforting – sometimes all in the same finely-honed sentence. As a theologian, he has a nimble, informed touch, enabling him to throw open hitherto jammed windows, filling musty rooms with air and light. Impatient with flimsy slogans, he's fearless in pointing out superficiality, but is kind as he does, which is helpful. He's rather splendid at public communications too, and has wowed thousands with his inspirational Bible teaching. And if all of this wasn't enough, he's a missions pioneer, and quite good at prayer. How rude of him to be so clever.

But, despite his Joseph's coat-of-many-colours talents, I do believe that this beautiful book is his magnum opus, at least to date. We humans talk. A lot. But within us all there is an ongoing conversation, an inner dialogue where we circle

our fears, our hopes, our dreams, our faith. Inside our heads we form questions, and often dismiss them, bidding them depart without ever trying to answer them. Sometimes we send them packing because we don't know where to start; and then, at times, we refuse to entertain them, because we're fearful of their presence, anxious that, if we allow that question a few moments or hours of our mental hospitality, a few of his heavier, more thuggish friends might turn up in our heads, and who knows what might happen then?

Gerard has listened, not only to his own inner dialogue, but his years as an apprentice of Jesus have enabled him to tune into the hearts and minds of others. And I don't say this lightly, but I believe that, as a man of prayer, Gerard has sensed some of the whispers of the heart of God too. And so, in this book, I hear the sounds of dancing and music. Gerard's winsome, authentic and hope-laden words will warm the coldest heart, and bring us back to this core truth: the good news really is very, very good. So if you're just reading this foreword, and pondering a purchase, then go ahead, take the plunge. Buy it. Gerard may be unnervingly clever, but he's not rich, and your purchase will help him to carry on doing what he does so well. And, more importantly, as you take this book home and to your heart, you'll be enriched too.

*Jeff Lucas*

*International author and Speaker*

## Chapter One

.....

# The Dragon in the Station Buffet

So comes snow after fire, and even dragons  
have their endings.

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

It was snowing in Geneva the night I learned how deep the meaning of forgiveness runs.

My father left our family a few weeks before my eleventh birthday. It was a painful leaving for three reasons. The first was that we hadn't expected it. We'd been living in Canada and had agreed, as a family, to return to Europe. We would spend the summer in Ireland, where we owned a cottage, before re-settling for the new term in England. The deal was that my mother would go on ahead with the four children – I am the youngest – and that my father would settle his affairs in Canada, sell the car, finish off his job at the university and join us in a few weeks. Except he didn't. We waited, expecting him daily, and he didn't show. When he eventually turned up, for one evening, it was to tell my mother it was over. It turned out that while we'd been waiting for him he'd been on a tour of Europe with his girlfriend,

a postgrad student twenty years his junior. He showed me photographs of his trip that for some reason he thought I might like. There was a shot of him wearing the most ridiculous swimming trunks I had ever seen – the trunks of a playboy, not a dad. I didn't know him any more.

The second reason was that, once he went, he went completely. We didn't know where he was and apart from one cheque the following month he didn't send my mother a single penny in support. We couldn't stay in the cottage as there was no work locally for my mother. Schools were ten miles away. She didn't have a car. Overnight she went from being a senior teacher, the wife of a university lecturer and socially active in Newfoundland's expat European community, to being homeless, jobless and broke with four children to support. Financially, this never changed. He sent nothing. I saw him briefly for a misjudged holiday visit to Ireland when I was twelve. After that, nothing. I would be thirty-four before I spoke to him again.

The third reason his leaving was so difficult is, for me, the most painful to write about. Until I was ten years old I thought my father was the most amazing human being on the planet. I remember to this day being at school as a six-year-old and feeling sorry for the other kids who had such *ordinary* dads. Dads who worked all day then came home to fall asleep on the couch with the TV on. Dads who didn't sketch and draw and design buildings and carve driftwood and make sound sculptures on a reel-to-reel tape recorder. My dad taught me to paint with oils; let me help him rebuild our

Irish cottage; recorded my readings of the poems I brought home from school. In Paris, in 1968, when students were rioting in the streets and the government was on the verge of collapse, he took me to parties with his artist friends, where jazz musicians talked drunkenly to ballerinas, and painters showed their work while I fell asleep on the floor. In Ireland he made us a sand yacht for the low-tide beach, then when we tired of it he let us rework the fabric of the sail into superhero capes. He bought a donkey from a passing tinker, then from somewhere got hold of a cart for her to pull. He took us mussel-digging and taught us to soak them in a bucket of fresh water for forty-eight hours, on pain of death, to get the poison out of them. He collected old wine bottles and, with paraffin, string and a bucket of cold water, showed us how to convert them into vases. In the winter of 1963, the coldest in living memory and our first in the unheated cottage, he gerrymandered electric fires out of old biscuit tins and let us fill our rooms with the smell of burning dust.

I had no idea that all this time he was driving my mother up the wall. I didn't know he hit her. I wasn't part of the fierce and violent rows my brother and eldest sister had with him. I knew nothing of their frustrations with him, or his with them. I could have known, had I been looking. When I was five, at our first home in Canada, we had an Oldsmobile Super 88 and a caravan to pull with it. My brother, thirteen at the time and assumed to be in some way responsible, let us drink stale water from the caravan's tank. This constituted in my father's eyes a dereliction of duty. He took exception and

frogmarched my brother back into the caravan for a dressing-down. We could only watch from the house as the fragile vehicle rocked on its axle with the force and terror of their confrontation.

In Paris, when I was eight, I overheard a conversation I shouldn't have and realized there was some kind of disconnect between the date of my brother's birthday and that of my parents' marriage. The gap was apparently too short, though I didn't know what that meant. All this was swirling around me – the secrets; the tensions; the evidence of violence simmering below the surface – but this did not mean that I *understood*. In my world, he was god. My dad was *amazing*. His energy, his drive, his love for life defined my universe. His departure was the collapse of a star. A black hole where the sun used to be.

I shut down. My mother was preoccupied with holding down full-time employment; begging for housing from friends; gritting her teeth through the teen crisis the two eldest were passing through when break-up day came. She had no time for me; didn't even know I was being sexually abused. Rarely spoke into my world. I'm a little hazy on what a regular adolescence is supposed to look like because mine was in a kind of lock-down from the start.

I think my father wrote once or twice. I do remember the arrival of one entirely inappropriate birthday gift. For the most part, though, there was nothing. The minimal communication he did attempt was over by the time I turned fourteen. For seventeen years I lived without contact. I

counted, almost daily, the debt that he was stacking up. The only property we owned was in Ireland, where at the time divorce was illegal, meaning that my mother got nothing. We lost the cottage, and all its sweet memories. We were rescued in the first year by a communist couple my mother knew in Bath, who believed in sharing their possessions – and their home – with those in need. After this it was council housing; benefits; free school meals. Teachers who took on a wistful look when they spoke to me. In a relatively untroubled city I was *that* troubled child.

Fast-forward to 1993. I was married with children of my own. I had become a Christian; was growing in my faith. We had moved as missionaries to Normandy. At some stage I became convinced of the power and priority of forgiveness. I didn't want to live the rest of my life with this anger; this sense of disappointment and debt. My father had married Martine, the postgrad student he had met in Canada. The affair that had finally broken the spine of my parents' marriage. They were living in Switzerland. I can't remember how I tracked down his address – my mother had previously tried and failed – but somehow I did. I wrote to express a clumsy forgiveness; to let him know that I would not hold against him all that had happened in the past. I told him that he had grandchildren he might one day want to meet. We exchanged a few letters. And then he phoned me unexpectedly, and we set up a rendezvous.

We borrowed a flat from friends in Geneva and drove our three excited children down into the snow for the



Christmas holidays. I knew my father wanted to meet them, but I insisted that the two of us meet alone first. By the time this could be arranged it was the evening of Christmas Eve. We met in the restaurant of Geneva's Cornavin railway station. As thick flakes of snow piled up in the streets outside and the waiters wiped tables and prepared to head home to their families and festivities, we talked. We caught up. We filled in the years.

But here's the thing, and this is what I've spent this long back-story getting to. For the whole length of our conversation I was acutely aware of a burden, a weight sitting on the table between us. There had been few other customers in the place. The staff were ready to shut up shop. Just us, at our table, talking for the first time in two decades. The weight that squatted invisibly in front of me salivating like a barely tamed dragon was *the debt*. Everything he owed me. The money. The support. The companionship. All the times he wasn't there in my need. All the pains I had suffered in his absence; *because* of his absence. I had even added it all up, once or twice – worked out how much the debt would come to if you monetized it; how much I could buy for my family with that money. All of this was there, snorting and steaming on the table, and it was my choice. To claim it, or to let it steam.

Even as I walked into the restaurant I still didn't know if I would make the claim. Was that why I had come – to collect? A few minutes into our conversation I understood. There are times when a debt gets so big that it *cannot be repaid*. Yes,

he could have done something about it, years earlier, if he'd wanted to. But now it was too much for him. If I made the claim, the claim would crush him; this frail old man living with the turbulence of his regrets.

I withdrew my claim. Cancelled it. Declared it void. Because there was no other basis on which we could move forward. I had every right to make the claim, but I had to make a free choice not to. I had to forgive, with or without an apology to work from. I chose a conversation that made no reference to the compensation I was owed.

Even though I had understood years earlier that my journey of faith was important to me, it was that day – 24th December 1993 – that it went so deep in me that I've been unable since to dislodge it. Unless there is in our world a fulcrum of forgiveness, a place at which unpayable debt can be dealt with, we are lost. It was a good job, in the end, that I had seventeen years to rehearse for this forgiveness, because it took me that long to understand it. Forgiveness is not the gentle balancing of our small discrepancies. It is the cancelling of unpayable debt: the reducing to nothing of a burden too heavy to bear. It is the pressing on in relationship even though there is a steaming pile of manure right there on the table.

This book is about the worldview choices that brought me to that moment of forgiveness. It is about why I chose to forgive and why I am glad that I did. In my experience – which I do not claim as normative, but do claim as authentic – the model of such radical forgiveness is uniquely present

in the life and death of Jesus. It is this that has made me a Christian, and this that has persuaded me to keep the faith, despite the many incitements to abandon it: incitements that have surfaced cyclically through my journey of faith, which in recent years have taken on the potency and power of a snowstorm.