

What is a Gospel-Centered Church?

As scripture is unfolded the drama of redemption is told and retold climaxing in the person and work of Christ (Luke 24:44). To embrace the gospel means that we are daily being transformed by the 'good news' that we are accepted and loved by Christ not on the basis of what we do or don't do, but rather on the perfect and complete work of Jesus Christ through His life, death, and resurrection. It has been said that the default mode of the human heart is religion. Religion operates on the principle that to the degree that I obey God, I am accepted. Every religion outside Christianity operates on this basic belief. Even after we are converted the heart continues to operate in this manner. We continue to pursue multiple avenues of self-salvation, which lead us to spiritual burnout, pride, arrogance, depression, and instability in our ministry. Jesus was said to be full of 'grace and truth' a man that truly lived out a gospel centered life. The gospel is neither legalism (truth without grace) or relativism (grace without truth). The gospel is completely and perfectly grace and truth and as God's spirit is at work in our lives we are transformed to be a people reflecting that life.

Likewise *Grace and Peace* seeks to be a church (not the building, but the people) who are being transformed to reflect such a life. A life that seeks to live out the implications of the gospel of which there are many. When the apostle Paul confronted Peter for his prejudice against Gentiles in the book of Galatians, he called him to live a life of conformity to the gospel. To live our lives in line with the truth of the gospel is the call and command of all who follow Christ. What does that look like when a church is obedient to that call?

Let us consider the 5 main areas of ministry given in scripture that should reflect the ministry of the church. The following are some explanations and examples of how we believe that works itself out in those five areas of Worship, Evangelism, Growth in Grace, Community, and Mercy.

It is characterized by:

Empowered corporate worship (Worship) As the gospel seeps into our lives it changes our relationship with God. As the old hymn declares, "To see the Law by Christ fulfilled, To hear His pardoning voice, Changes a slave into a child And duty into choice." This transformation comes to us through the inner working of God's Spirit. It doesn't occur all at once but rather reveals itself progressively over the days, months, and years of your life. As this transformation intersects our daily lives it also directs us to the core element of gospel centered ministry. The element of worship and prayer are entered into with joy and genuine neediness. We are no longer motivated by guilt or manipulative ploys, but rather compelled and moved by His enormous love. Worship is an expression of His worth. Worship always includes the ministry of His revelation to us, His word. It will be expository preaching (unfolding the text) and Christ-centered interpretation (Luke 24) of every text. We certainly learn and grow spiritually as we are exposed to such preaching and interpretation, but worship should first lead hearers (individual and corporate) to celebrate the truth of who God is and what He has done. There is no greater privilege we have than to give ourselves fully to worship our God who has given us our Redeemer.

Provocative Evangelism (Evangelism) Because the gospel (unlike religious moralism) produces people who do not disdain those who disagree with them, a truly gospel-centered church should be filled with members who winsomely address people's hopes and aspirations with Christ and his saving work. We have a vision for a church that sees conversions of rich and poor, highly educated and less educated, men and women, old and young, married and single, religious and irreligious, as well as all races and nationalities. We hope to draw highly secular and postmodern people, as well as reaching religious and traditional people. Because of the attractiveness of its community and the humility of its people, a gospel-centered church should find people in its midst who are exploring and trying to understand Christianity. It must welcome them in hundreds of ways. It will do little to make them "comfortable" but will do much to make its message understandable. In addition to all this, gospel-centered churches will have a bias toward the formation of new churches possessing the same commitment to the gospel revealed in scripture. Church planting and ongoing renewal in existing congregations is the chief evidence of a life changing God, to a watching world.

Counter-cultural community (Fellowship) Because the gospel removes both fear and pride, people should get along inside the church who could never get along outside. Because it points us to a man who died for his enemies, the gospel creates relationships of service rather than of selfishness. Because the gospel calls us to holiness, the people of God live in loving bonds of mutual accountability and discipline. Thus the gospel creates a human community radically different from any society around it. In this sense the community of faith (church) becomes a sign post for God's kingdom, a 'pilot-project' in God's world of God's values.

* Regarding the family, the church should affirm the goodness of marriage between a man and woman, calling them to serve God by reflecting his covenant love in life-long loyalty, and by teaching his ways to their children. But it also affirms the goodness of serving Christ as singles, whether for a time or for a life. The church should surround all persons suffering from the fallenness of our human sexuality with a compassionate community and family.

* Regarding sex, the church should avoid both the secular society's idolization of sex and traditional society's fear of it. It is a community which so loves and cares practically for its members that biblical chastity makes sense. It teaches its members to conform their bodily being to the shape of the gospel—abstinence outside of heterosexual marriage and fidelity and joy within.

* Regarding power, it is visibly committed to a renewed understanding to the way we use power and influence. It calls us to live differently among races, classes, and generations that are and have been traditionally alienated outside of the Body of Christ. The practical evidence of this is that our local churches increasingly welcome and embrace people of all races and cultures (the nations). Each church should seek to reflect the diversity of its local geographical community, both in the congregation at large and in its leadership.

That means that **Grace and Peace** should reflect the demographic of Bowling Green in increasing fashion. This does not occur because we have a campaign emphasizing diversity. This occurs when the message of the gospel begins to penetrate our lives in such a way that we love and serve those God brings into our lives. We repent of our prejudices and move towards all peoples in love and service. We are convinced that the message of Christianity is far more than a message of simply tolerating people different than our own selves. It is a message that calls us to love as we have been loved by Christ himself.

The integration of faith in our life and profession (Growing in Grace) The gospel has implications for our life in the present. It is not a static faith but very much active faith. Growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ means that we are continually seeking how we integrate our faith into our daily life and professions. We don't want to live our lives from a pedestal over-spiritualizing our existence, but rather we want to be involved in the lives and public arenas of life. We must be incarnational (willing to enter into others lives) in our lifestyles engaging the social structures so that change can come. In a culture and world where hope is offered and rarely delivered, the gospel declares to us that even the most broken and shattered life has hope. We fight for the individual lives and we labor alongside those in the community who are doing kingdom things by equipping and getting our hands dirty as well. Our faith is a faith that labors not for the approval of God but for the things that matter most to our God. We want to value what He values which means that we fight for justice, the care for the poor, and the prosperity of His life changing message. Grace and Peace will not only provide support for the Christian's engagement with culture, but will also help them work with distinctiveness, excellence, and accountability in their respective callings. Developing work environments that prioritize the value of the human being, creativity, and quality is part of what it means to apply the gospel to our lives. Further it means that we glorify God through our respective jobs and professions—all of which work for God's glory and for the good of the city (Jeremiah 29). We believe that all callings in life be it a musician, homemaker, plumber, educator, government, farmer, doctor, businessman, artist are all legitimate and valued in God's economy of kingdom extension. There really isn't one square inch that

doesn't fall under the reign and rule of God's authoritative rule and dominion. Biblical Christianity teaches that God is concerned to bring healing to all of God's creation by the power of His Spirit, converting individuals and restoring creation to its original form (Revelation 21:1-8). We labor for the healing in these areas, the restoration of all things mindful that only when our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ returns will all things then be truly made new.

The doing of justice and mercy (Mercy) At the very heart of the gospel is the message that at who claim to follow Christ have received an undeserving and unearnable favor. As we understand this favor and it begins to melt our self-absorbed lifestyles then it finds outward expression. That outward expression is at the heart of our call to be concerned with matters of justice and mercy. This is justified because God has created humanity body and soul, and the resurrection of Jesus is a clear call that He is concerned to redeem both the spiritual needs of man as well as the material needs. Concern for the relief of poverty, hunger, and injustice stands squarely in line with the gospel message (Matthew 18, James 1, Matthew 25). The message of Christ's love, when he gave all He had becoming poor, so that we might be rich directs our hearts to consider His gift of life. It opens our eyes to the fact that all our wealth (even wealth for which we have worked hard to get) is ultimately a gift 'coming down' from God. That means that the person who does not give away his or her wealth to others is not merely lacking in compassion, but is unjust. Christ secures our salvation through giving away, achieves power through weakness and service, and receives wealth as He gives generously. Salvation is not for the strong and it isn't for those who have it all figured out but instead mercy and grace come to those who are in dire straights, unable to get a hand out anywhere and who readily confess this reality exists in their lives. In light of this we don't look upon the marginalized or oppressed callously demanding that they pull themselves up by their own boot straps. We have not been treated that way. We understand message of Christ's radical love to move us to respond with mercy and compassion when we see another image bearer in need. Attitudes and actions of superiority and indifference are not in line with the truth of the gospel.

Conclusion

Grace and Peace has a vision to reflect a church with the above discussed elements. We are not a seeker-driven church but we will be mindful that there are seekers present in our midst. We are not culturally engaged through political activism, but we do long for the established rule and reign of our King. Our worship will be real, relevant, and reverent. We will be concerned to read God's word and understand how it calls us to reflect God's truth in our missionary context.

It is our conviction that there is always a need for more individual churches that embody the full, integrative gospel balance outlined above. Such churches will be empowered by God's Spirit and providing Biblically grounded preaching. Evangelism will be provocative and respectful. It is our hope that growth will be 'mustard seed like' as we trust God to form a community dependent on the presence of Christ, united in Christ, and centered on Christ.

We believe that there is always need for more congregations that emphasize the need of ongoing repentance, personal renewal, holiness of life, and love for others. Such lives have a preserving and provoking effect upon the social strata of life and culture. This radical Christian community called the church is a place where its members love and serve each other and their neighbors. The vision of *Grace and Peace* is to reflect such a place.

This article is adapted from an article produced by the Gospel Coalition. It has been contextualized for *Grace and Peace*.