

Developing A Culture of Grace
A Vision for Small Groups
Grand Avenue Baptist Church
Ames, Iowa
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This is our third and final session of hospitality workshops. We started last October with our first one, and we studied what hospitality looked like in our small groups. We drew from Rosaria Butterfield's book *The Gospel Comes with a House Key* to help us think through hospitality. The Greek word of hospitality is *philoxenia* and means love of the stranger. Biblical hospitality means we will make room for strangers in our groups through the love of Christ. In our second session, we emphasized the fellowship. The Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia* and means we strive for intimate spiritual communion and participative sharing of life in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ in our groups. Some of our groups developed Table Fellowship Groups and some of them even became their own small group after a while.

We talked about our groups living life in light of the gospel by moving seamlessly from first-hour conversations to third-hour conversations. In other words, we don't just talk about who the Cyclones are playing on Saturday and how they performed, but we move to matters of the heart and how the gospel shapes the issues of our lives. This last one is third-hour conversations, and they take time to get there. This was our vision for 2018-2019 year of small groups.

I. Developing a Culture of Grace in our Small Groups and Church

This coming year we want us to keep pressing our small groups through the sieve of the gospel. We need to keep striving to live life in light of the gospel. *Everything we do as a gospel-centered church in Ames is to build our church on gospel-doctrine that works itself out in a gospel-culture for the glory of God.*

In the last two Sunday Morning sermons, you heard me make some application with the phrases "*gospel-doctrine*" and "*gospel culture.*" What I want to do this morning is unpack these phrases to help us develop a culture of grace in our small groups and our church.

I took the phrases gospel doctrine and gospel culture from Ray Ortlund and his book *The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ*. His terminology gives us some *excellent mental hooks* on which to hang our small group vision and the vision for the culture in our church at large. We have always talked about developing this kind of culture in our church and Ortlund's language expresses what we aim for so wonderfully.

A. What is the Gospel? Before we begin, I must define the term what I mean by the word—gospel.

- The Broad Definition of the Gospel: All of the Bible is Gospel Doctrine

When we talk about the gospel here at Grand, we sometimes talk about the storyline of the whole Bible that is portrayed in *Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration/Consummation*. This means that all of the Bible is gospel doctrine. From cover-to-cover, it is all about Jesus. Since creation and the Fall in the Garden of Eden, God's plan has been unfolding and culminating in the redemptions of sinners through Jesus Christ and will end with the restoration of creation. This is the what we call the metanarrative of Scripture or the redemptive storyline of Scripture. All of the Old Testament points to Jesus and the New Testament looks back at what Jesus did and teaches us how to live life in light of what Jesus did.

- The Narrow Definition of the Gospel: The Person and Work of Christ

So, while all of the Bible is gospel doctrine, there is also a very narrow definition of the gospel that I am referring to here, and that is the specific person and work of Jesus Christ. The essential message of the gospel can be:

“God, through the perfect life, atoning death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, rescues all his people from the wrath of God into peace with God, with a promise of full restoration of his created order forever—all to the praise of the glory of his grace.”¹

This is gospel doctrine in the narrow definition, but we also need to hold it with the larger redemptive story in Scripture because every road in Scripture leads to the cross.

II. What is Gospel Doctrine and Gospel Culture?

To help us get our minds around gospel doctrine and gospel culture, I want to use the formula that I used as an application last Sunday morning. The gospel doctrine of Jesus life, death, and resurrection does not just hang in thin air. It was never meant to be just a set of teachings or a set of beliefs on a sheet of paper. Gospel doctrine must flesh itself out in gospel culture or a culture of grace in our relationships in our small groups and church. Look at the equation on your handout.

Gospel doctrine – gospel culture = hypocrisy

Gospel culture – gospel doctrine = weakness

Gospel doctrine + gospel culture = power² (the glory of God seen in a culture of grace)

Let me unpack these equations:

1. Gospel doctrine – gospel culture = hypocrisy.

Why is gospel doctrine – gospel culture hypocrisy? It is hypocrisy because truth without grace is harsh on people. We love strong doctrine and robust theology at Grand. We want that, but doctrine was never meant to hang in thin air. Doctrine was never meant to be a cold intellectual study with sharp edges. Gospel doctrine is not intended to be something we beat people up with in the church.

Perhaps you love to study and are a Wayne Grudem fan or a John Frame fan or a Martin Luther fan or a John Calvin fan. The love of doctrine is not a litmus test of whether you love and accept others. I have seen people who love the doctrines of grace be the least gracious people I have ever met.

Francis Schaeffer once said, *“Biblical orthodoxy without compassion is the ugliest thing in the world.”*³ A church like this is brutal on people. We want us to be strong doctrinally but not at the expense of grace. If strong doctrine does not humble us then we are hypocrites. The doctrines of grace should result in a culture of grace. It is meant to be fuel for the heart and soul.

2. Gospel culture – gospel doctrine = weakness.

Why does it result in weakness? When a church neglects or rejects strong orthodox doctrine in order to *build* or *save* relationships, the church will drift toward liberalism. It will become weak.

Its doctrinal foundation will erode. A church that values compassion over doctrine says, *“Relationships are the most important thing. It does not matter what you believe as long as we love each other.”* This may sound good but this belief has been baptized into culture’s doctrine. It matters what you believe and the belief that says, *“it does not matter what you believe”* will not develop much less sustain a culture of grace in small groups or a church.

¹ Ray Ortlund, *The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ*, 16.

² Ibid, 23.

³ Ortlund,

3. Gospel doctrine + gospel culture = power (It is the glory of God seen in a culture of grace).

Gospel doctrine and gospel culture must be held together. When a small group or a church hold gospel doctrine and gospel culture together, then outsiders stand a chance of coming into that small group and church and thinking, "*God is here.*"

III. How Gospel Culture Leads to a Culture of Grace

Let's break down Gospel culture with one more equation: Gospel culture = gospel + love + patience

1. Gospel:

*"God, through the perfect life, atoning death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, rescues all his people from the wrath of God into peace with God, with a promise of full restoration of his created order forever—all to the praise of the glory of his grace."*⁴

The gospel is good news. What do you do with good news? You believe it. You receive it. You proclaim it. You don't work it. The gospel is not a plan. It is not a program—it is good news that we herald. We all must learn how to be heralds of the good news. Christians are paperboys, and mailmen who bring the good news of Jesus. We are not delivering junk mail. We are delivering good news.

So how is the gospel applied to our small groups and our church? It is applied with love

2. Love = The gospel must be applied in love.

When I say love, I do not mean good vibes or good feelings in our small groups or our church. I mean love that flows out of gospel doctrine. In John 13:34-35, Jesus said, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" If we are not loving like Jesus called His disciples to love then we are destroying gospel doctrine.

How did Jesus love us? He laid down His life for us on the cross. Jesus' love for us was active. He said, "*He had loved us.*" He pursued us. His love was costly. He *laid down His life for us when He died on the cross*. His love was constant. He didn't let our sin keep Him from loving us and pursuing us. His is love grounded in the gospel.

What does gospel love mean for our small groups? First, what gospel love is NOT. Think about gospel love this way. If our understanding of the gospel is that Jesus loves us and accepts us when we get our act together and stop sinning, then we will believe He loves us and fellowships with us based on our ability to measure up. This misunderstanding of the gospel results in of living our lives with the fear that we are always at risk of being rejected by others.

If this is our understanding of gospel love, then we will create a "small group culture" and "church culture" that requires people to stop sinning before we will welcome them. We will only love and accept people as long as they stop doing bad things. Then we will keep them in suspense as to whether they are in or out of the small group. We will continually judge them just waiting for them to screw up. Then when they don't measure up to our standards then we will alienate them. Friends, this is a false, legalistic gospel culture.

So, what IS a culture of gospel love? A *gospel culture of love* or a *culture of grace* believes the gospel. It is humble and gentle with people because we are continually reminding one another of what Jesus did to save us.

A culture of love and grace results in a couple of things: First, it moves toward people on the fringes and accepts them at great personal cost to ourselves. Second, it helps people feel safe so they can let down

⁴ Ibid, 16.

his or her guard. They feel safe enough to expose their hearts to others because they know they will not drift from the hearts of those in their small group.

Our small groups need to be havens of non-accusing sympathetic cultures where a person can admit his or her problems, mistakes, screw-ups, and sins and not be blasted or rejected or alienated. It is in a culture of grace where people are *continually reminded of the gospel* from one end of the Bible to the other and exhorted to not give up. Hebrews 3:13-14, "*But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.*"

3. Patience = gospel doctrine and gospel love must be applied with patience.

A culture of gospel patience in a small group and church is where people are given time to change after they expose their hearts. People usually do not change fast. Sanctification is a long slow process for many of us. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 says, "*Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends.*"

Remember I said at the beginning: *Gospel doctrine + gospel culture = power*. It is power because the glory of God is seen in a culture of grace. When gospel doctrine and gospel culture come together in a church, it is beautiful. It is a display of the glory of God in that church, and when God's glory invades a church, people flourish.

The church that flourishes and thrives because of gospel doctrine and gospel culture is an oasis in the scorching hot desert of a worldly culture. When people see and taste a culture of grace in a small group and a church, they want to drink it in and they will tell others where to find this life-giving water. When people taste and see gospel doctrine and gospel culture then, as Jesus said, "*All people will know that we are Jesus' disciples, because we love one another.*"