

How to build a gospel culture in your church

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1. What is gospel doctrine?

The biblical message of divine grace for the undeserving: God, through the perfect life, atoning death and bodily resurrection of Jesus, rescues all his people from the wrath of God into peace with God, with a promise of the full restoration of his created order forever – all to the praise of the glory of his grace.

2. What is gospel culture?

The shared experience of grace for the undeserving: the corporate incarnation of the biblical message in the relationships, vibe, feel, tone, values, priorities, aroma, honesty, freedom, gentleness, humility, cheerfulness – indeed, the total human reality of a church defined and sweetened by the gospel.

3. Why does this matter? Why *must* our churches preach gospel doctrine and embody gospel culture simultaneously, by God's grace?

Because *faithfulness to the gospel* requires more than doctrinal purity in our churches. It also requires relational beauty in our churches. But it is possible sincerely to preach true doctrine while, at the same time, utterly deny that doctrine by an ugly anti-gospel culture:



Every church culture is communicating *something*. If a church is not positively communicating the gospel both by what it says *and by what it is*, then that church risks un saying by its reality what it is saying by its theory. Isaiah alerted the people of God in his generation: “How the faithful city has become a whore!” (Isaiah 1:21). Their problem was not what they believed officially; their problem was what they were personally, and they didn’t even see it. Similarly, Peter in Antioch was not preaching a false gospel by his words; he was subverting the true gospel by his deeds (Galatians 2:11-21), and he didn’t even realize it. When Paul said to Peter, “I do not nullify the grace of God” (verse 21), he was not implying that Peter’s teaching was nullifying the doctrine of God’s grace; he was implying that Peter’s behavior was nullifying the culture of God’s grace – *which, in effect, did deny the doctrine!* Paul saw what Peter did not see – that Peter’s behavior was deconstructing nothing less than the doctrine of justification by faith alone. If our churches today are not easy-to-read, in both doctrine and culture, as living proof of God’s grace, we too risk betraying the gospel without even realizing it.

The urgency of this is why Francis Schaeffer spoke of “orthodoxy of doctrine and orthodoxy of community” together as equally significant. Do we consider a culture of beautiful humaneness so essential to our integrity before the Lord and our witness to the world that we too are compelled to speak of *orthodoxy of community*, worthy of the same attention, prestige and authority as our doctrine?

4. How can we build a gospel culture in our churches?

If you are planting a church, the task is easier. If you are pastoring or helping to lead an established church, the task might be harder. But all of us can make a contribution, by God’s grace.

4.1. Set a pervasive tone of *need with expectancy* throughout your church.

We experience need as negative, exposing our inadequacy. We experience expectancy as positive, looking to the Lord. Both attitudes together are warranted by the gospel. Need: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Expectancy: “For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Ben Reynolds, the music leader at Immanuel Nashville, was not with us in the early years. But he said to me recently, “Ray, my impression of you guys who were in the original core group is that you all were so wounded, so broken, so exhausted, you didn’t even have the emotional energy for selfish agendas.” I said yes, that is probably so. Ben added, “And I think the Lord looked at that and said, ‘Well, there’s a church I can use.’” I agreed with his assessment.

It is clear throughout the Bible, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:8). The challenge, for which we need divine wisdom especially in an established church, is to help the people embrace need with

expectancy without their feeling shamed and invalidated. But there is only one place of blessing:

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,
 who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
 “I dwell in the high and holy place,
 and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
 to revive the spirit of the lowly,
 and to revive the heart of the contrite.” Isaiah 57:15

Some churches who have gospel doctrine but not gospel culture might have difficulty stepping down into that low place of blessing. Some churches feel too successful, too significant. Such a church might already be in a death-spiral. But other churches are open. Here is what they can expect: “He has filled with hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty” (Luke 1:53). *May all our churches fail often enough, obviously enough, painfully enough, to stay hungry and poor before the Lord!* We who lead cannot build gospel culture, even with gospel doctrine, where there is no felt need. But the Lord will enrich any church of any denomination that embraces poverty in spirit before him.

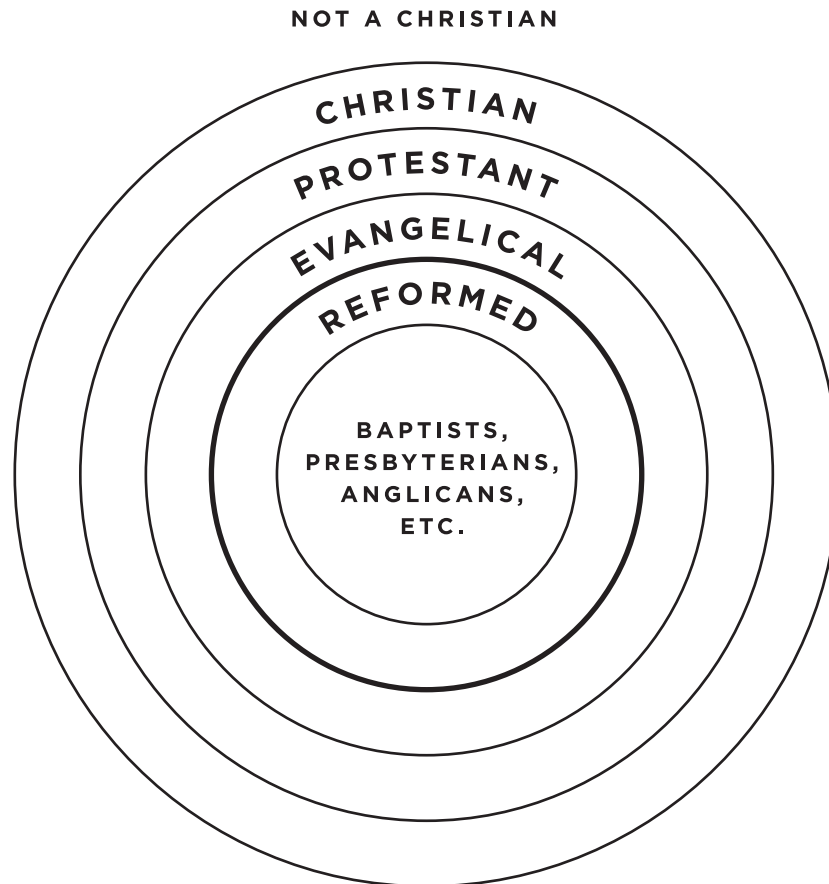
4.2. Define your doctrine as “Reformed inclusivism,” according to Scripture.

By “Reformed inclusivism” I mean the historical flow of Reformation theology that includes a range of Reformed convictions – Reformed Baptists, traditional Presbyterians, faithful Anglicans, Calvinistic charismatics, and other theologically responsible positions in alignment with, say, the Confessional Statement of The Gospel Coalition. This biblically robust unity rallies around the “of first importance” gospel itself (1 Corinthians 15:3), exalting Jesus in his death, burial and resurrection as the center of our message and the focus of our emotions. In this kind of theological/social environment, we don’t assume the gospel while we give attention to lesser things; we lift high the gospel, celebrate the gospel, feed on the gospel, as we gently submerge valid but secondary doctrines below the Christ-centered gospel itself.

Let’s take baptism as a practical example. The Confession of TGC affirms a classical Protestant view of baptism, without taking sides. It may be that your church is denominationally committed to a particular view and practice of baptism. Not every church is free to practice “Reformed inclusivism” to the degree I am proposing. But at Immanuel Nashville, I explain in every new members’ seminar that, for the Lord’s sake, our Presbyterian members rejoice over the convictions and practice of our Baptist members and, for the Lord’s sake, our Baptist members rejoice over the convictions and practice of our Presbyterian members, and we don’t even debate the matter with one another. What unites us is the “of first importance” gospel of Christ. We then enjoy together a win/win theological environment, giving one another the space to cherish our own convictions as acceptable within the flow of Reformation

theology. *Why not build out our churches theologically so that both John Piper and Tim Keller could join, be equally honored, serve fully, and rejoice over one another, for the Lord's sake?*

I use this chart in our new members' seminars to make the matter clear:



4.3. Conduct your services as a total experience of gospel reassurance in the Lord, requiring of *everything throughout the service* that it communicates the beauty and gentleness and shalom of a gospel culture.

Our ministries must be accessible to weak people. We must not be so demanding that only the mighty can participate. I recently proposed to a frustrated pastor friend, “Why not serve your people for a whole year without ‘challenging’ them even once? For one whole year why not communicate only grace, reassurance, joy, confidence, non-crisis, non-demand? Why not take that risk?”

As I conduct our services at Immanuel Nashville, we begin with a call to worship adapted from the former website of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia:

To all who are weary and need rest,
 To all who mourn and long for comfort,
 To all who feel worthless and wonder if God cares,
 To all who fail and desire strength,
 To all who sin and need a Savior,
 This church opens wide her doors with a welcome from Jesus Christ, the
 Ally of his enemies, the Defender of the guilty, the Justifier of the
 inexcusable, the Friend of sinners. Welcome!

I pray for the filling of the Holy Spirit as I bring this welcome to the people. I often have to ask the Lord to check my rising emotions and help me get through this greeting, as I stand before the people with an awareness of their desperate need and the Savior's massive love. But this powerful moment, defining the entire service at the very outset – I never masterminded it. I don't remember how it got started. But this welcome, along with other aspects of our worship services, has become definitional of our gospel culture. One man even told me he broke the speed limit driving to church one day because he wanted to be there in time for the welcome. The most life-giving things about any church are the simple gifts of the Lord. We keep stumbling into green pastures and beside still waters, and it's only after we get there that we look around and realize where we are. Then we know it was the Lord who led us there.

Our services at Immanuel, like yours at your church, include a variety of human experiences, ranging from good-natured humor to weighty solemnity and much in between, all of it sincere and unforced. But we leaders at Immanuel require of ourselves that moment-by-moment we stay in the zone of gospel culture with unmistakable clarity, so that the gospel doctrine gains credibility and impact.

4.4. With non-dramatic emotions appropriate to the moment, frequently admit sin, weakness and need, not to distract from the Lord but to increase everyone's admiration of the Lord. Then every sinner present can be sure, "I too can stumble toward him."

The most important personal trait in a gospel culture is *honesty*: "But if we walk in the light, as he in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). In the context, "walking in the light" is *an honest relationship with Jesus and one another, so that we're free to grow*. And the apostle John is arguing that this honesty is a mark of orthodoxy, as opposed to heresy. It isn't optional. It is apostolic. In too many churches today, nobody admits anything. The social environment of a church can become infested with shaming, posing, blaming, finger-pointing, faultfinding – the opposite of gracious acceptance. That social environment is functional heresy. But in a gospel culture, sinners are safe to own up to their problems and grow together in the Lord. That alone is apostolic Christianity in the world today. We

are always one generation away from losing it. Every generation must rediscover afresh the original Christianity of the early church and rebuild it again both conceptually and relationally in our churches today.

As part of the First Great Awakening, Peter Bohler and John Wesley drew up guidelines for their small groups, including this one:

10. That everyone in order speak as freely, plainly and concisely as he can *the real state of his heart*, with his several temptations and deliverances, since the last time of meeting.

Who wouldn't thrive in that gentle environment of gentle honesty? We pastors can lead the way. I try to include in every sermon some admission of weakness, without making a big deal of it. For example, here is a journal entry, describing the real state of my heart one morning when I was far from resting in the Lord, which I shared with the people at a point relevant to the sermon:

Anxious that the blessing of God will pass me by.
 Anxious that I am a failure.
 Fearful about my life, my stewardship. Pervasive self-doubt.
 I feel unreal, inconsequential.
 A crushing sense of futility, and of the huge task ahead.
 A longing for the glory of the Lord to be all over my life.

The deal-breaker in a gospel culture is not sin, failure and weakness but words or behavior making the church unsafe for other sinners. The greatest threat to a typical church is not the adulterer but the gossip, who may be outwardly blameless but is inwardly ravenous. It is the sexual sinners who are commonly disciplined by the elders, while the gossips get a pass. But churches rarely go into meltdown through an adulterer, while they easily go into meltdown through a gossip. A church that would never tolerate being turned into an orgy of sexual sin might make huge allowances for an orgy of verbal sin. *But in a gospel culture any sinner can bring in any sin and find some level of relief in the Lord simply by walking in gentle honesty and harmony with the other sinners there, sharing this spirit: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13).*

There are two religions constantly competing for the soul of every church: the wondrous cross of divine sacrifice, and the hideous cross of human sacrifice. If we are not settled and subdued and healed by the wondrous cross of Jesus, where he offered himself as our scapegoat for our real moral guilt before God, then we will go looking for a human victim as the scapegoat for our own guilty anxiety. We will sacrifice someone on a cross of our own grotesque invention. There is a reason why the Bible says to every church, "Keep yourselves in the love of God" (Jude 21). Honesty about our own sins helps us stay inside God's felt love, where we all can live again.

4.5. Shepherd disciplinary cases at a low level of visibility, using informal relationships rather than formal procedures as much as possible, taking care not to increase anyone's embarrassment. All correction and firing should strive to preserve human dignity.

“Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). On the other hand, an elder must also “rebuke those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). How do we know when to cover and when to confront? Most sins should be gently covered by love, mercifully ignored, as we cheerfully move on. But what sins should be rebuked – like Paul confronting Peter in Galatians 2? The difference is, falling short of the gospel *versus* contradicting the gospel – whether denying gospel doctrine or deconstructing gospel culture. All of us all the time fall short of embodying the gospel with the visible grace and glory of Jesus. Those shortcomings should be quietly submerged by love. But behaving in a manner opposite to the gospel, demeaning a person, insulting a person, humiliating a person, and so forth – such sins are so egregious, so harmful, they must not be covered but confronted. It is not a question of which sins irritate me personally but which sins change the face of Jesus in the world.

It is not unthinkable that Christian leaders, pursuing their duty as they see it, could bungle a relationship so badly that the person on the receiving end of their ineptitude walks away thinking, “If they truly represented Jesus as he is, then I would be conscience-bound to stop being a Christian and devote the rest of my life to the destruction of Christianity as something brutal and inhumane.” It is not hard for us Christian leaders to become the photographic negative of Jesus. That is when a rebuke is appropriate.

Brutal Christians, if they can be restored at all, must be restored by gospel confrontation. “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Galatians 6:1). Luther comments: “This is a very necessary warning for answering the sharp dealings of pastors who show no pity in raising up and restoring again those who have fallen.” Luther is concerned “. . . lest those who have fallen are swallowed up with depression.” And Calvin comments: “Great harm is often done by excessive severity. . . . For very many harass their brethren violently and cruelly, as if their faults were something to taunt them with. . . . No rebukes are godly and Christian which do not savor of meekness.” But I wonder how many of our experiences of church discipline have left us thinking, *That was the touch of Jesus himself!*

Even in relation to heretics, “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone . . . , correcting his opponents with gentleness” (2 Timothy 4:24-25). I remember hearing Francis Schaeffer say that, if he had a conversation with a liberal theologian, he would hope that his theological opponent would walk away with two equally dominant impressions: Francis Schaeffer really disagrees with him, and Francis Schaeffer really cares about him. We can make that impact only as we trust in the Lord for wisdom and strength moment-by-moment.

4.6. Establish Romans 12:10 as your church’s dominant pattern of relating to one another, starting with the men: “Outdo one another in showing honor.”

In a gospel culture, the people do not eye one another with negative scrutiny and merciless comparisons and guarded aloofness, but they move toward one another with rejoicing, acceptance and honor. Why? Because in every true Christian, Christ is there, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27). David wrote, “As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight” (Psalm 16:3). There is excellence in every true Christian, and it isn’t hard to find. About two questions into a conversation, and the excellence will start pouring out of that person. And then the gospel calls us to make a significant emotional commitment: “. . . in whom is all my delight.” That language – “all my delight” – is almost idolatrous! Our churches tend to live on a starvation diet of personal affirmation. Let’s risk a more generous tone of delight in one another.

The honor of Romans 12:10 is not flattery. It is the practical outworking of the doctrine of glorification. It is gospel obedience to honor another Christian with, “Here is how I see Christ in you. Here is how I see his glory appearing in you. Last Tuesday when I had a need and I called you, . . .” That discourse among the people of God is highly conducive to a joyous gospel culture. I have never met anyone too encouraged in the Lord!

At Immanuel Nashville, every Tuesday evening is Immanuel Theology for Men. We gather in our café for three purposes: doctrine (we are going through Romans right now), walking in the light, and honoring one another. What we call “honor time” starts out like this. I say, “Okay, men, Romans 12:10 says, ‘Outdo one another in showing honor.’ So this is competitive, but everybody wins. So, who’s first?” Typically, hands go up immediately as men start honoring one another openly and sincerely. A culture of honor strongly excludes all sarcasm and jocular put-downs, which are common but destructive. The Lord has so helped us in this way that, by now, it would feel obviously weird and clearly wrong if any man started playing the usual games of undercutting and foolishness. A cheerful giving of honor is so attractive, so life-giving, so manly, that it sweeps aside the alternatives.

God be with you as you build the beauty of gospel culture with the power of gospel doctrine in your church. May it accelerate into historic revival!

Appendices: “Seven ways we can guard and repair relationships,” and “My all-time favorite post” (regarding gospel + safety + time)