

A Renewed Church

Introduction

A Gospel-centered church is rare. Many churches begin with the core mission of connecting people to Jesus, but over time they drift into maintaining themselves or following a separate agenda. They do it all in the name of Christianity, but the heart of their message has gone. Something else beside the grace of Jesus Christ takes center stage.

Similarly, churches can either exist for themselves, focused on the needs of the members. Or, they can answer God's challenge to pour themselves into the city where they belong, bringing gospel healing to broken hearts, broken neighborhoods, broken societies.

These two main themes—a church centered on the Gospel and a church for others—capture the essence of Grace Toronto Church. How can we keep this essence and avoid the all-too-common drift toward institutionalism? How do we continually repent as a church and renew our core convictions?

The goal of these six studies is to expose us as a congregation to the core values of our church in a new way. Many of us have seen articles or heard discussions about these five values. But never before have we sat down, as a whole, in Scripture and prayer. Maybe they've seemed distant, something that a committee came up with. Now is the opportunity to become personally convinced by God about the nature of our church and to become personally challenged to find your part in His plan.

Dig into the core values that drive Grace Toronto's ministry. See how God captures your group's heart and helps each of you grow in your love for him and desire to serve his kingdom. Our community in Christ is our family, and our family is to grow into the likeness of our Father. Most of all, renew your group's heart and change your group's life, by soaking in the gospel hope which motivates us to live for his glory and to care for others.

How to Use this Guide

This series is made up of six studies exploring God's call on the church. They loosely follow the sermon series at Grace Toronto Church in January and early February but take on a different format. In each study, we will be looking at one of the five distinctive values of the church and using the final study to summarize and conclude.

Each study is made up of multiple parts. Each part should be brief (20 minutes maximum), but should allow you to read, reflect on what you've read, and apply. There are ideas for prayer at the end of the study.

We pray that wrestling with the values of our church together in small groups, will be used by God to change us. We pray that we will become people who personally own and live out these values so that we as a body can move forward into the vision of what God can do in this city through us.

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Study 1: Core Value: Gospel-Centered

Part 1

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Apply: Verse 21 in particular is one of the best summaries of the Gospel. It shows how God placed our sins upon Jesus (“be sin for us”) and gave his perfect obedience to all who trust in Him (“we might become the righteousness”). Salvation is a declared status, it is an act of God’s mercy which cannot be earned.

This simple truth is the foundational Truth that explains everything. It takes a moment to grasp and a lifetime to fully understand. It is the essence of Christianity. As followers of Christ and as a church we must carefully guard this truth—never allowing it to be pushed aside, forgotten, diluted, or hidden. All our joy, all our hope rests in this: that Christ Jesus died for his people so that they would have new life in Him.

1. Ask yourself, “Have I based my life on this truth?”
 1. How does this affect my schedule? How do gospel priorities shape it?
 2. How does this affect my finances? How do gospel priorities shape them?
 3. How does this affect my career? How do gospel priorities shape it?
 4. How does this affect my relationships? How do gospel priorities shape them?
2. What are some ways this truth may have become “dusty” or buried in our lives? Are there other things which have become too important?

Part 2

Read: Romans 8:12-17

Apply: Our sinfulness is so complete (Rom 3:23) that even our striving for God's favor is tainted with selfish motives, powerless to achieve anything (Phil 3:7ff). So, the best and the worst of us both need to lay down our effort of earning God's favor and instead receive his mercy in Christ Jesus. Salvation is not a project of self-renovation ("becoming good enough for God") but rather a complete rebirth.

Even our ability to place our trust in Jesus is a gift from God (Eph.2:9). Therefore, since Christians possess a new status they know that they are simultaneously perfect (by decree) and yet still a sinner (by practice). This knowledge is what makes the gospel so liberating. You can admit your terrible weakness and need of grace, but also possess a confidence in God's love.

1. Praise God for His complete gift of salvation in Christ. Take a specific area of your life that you're especially grateful for this truth and thank him.
2. How is your gospel freedom? Are you confident before God? What are some areas that you are not confident before God? Where do guilt and shame still have some real inhibiting power on your sense of joyful freedom before God?
3. Are you growing in your freedom to admit sin and weakness, knowing that you are forgiven in Christ? If not, why not?

Part 3

Read: Galatians 3:1-3

Apply: Christians will always drift back toward a legalistic, performance-based view of their relationship with God. It starts subtly: our spiritual fervor, or devotion, or ministry involvement, or consistency, or newfound obedience really are signs of our Christian vitality. Before long, however, we begin to think of them more and more as the cause of our vitality.

Being right with God slowly drifts from grace alone to grace plus achieving this standard. At this point, Paul tells us we have created a false gospel, a gospel of law rather than grace. The same grace that began our relationship with Jesus is what keeps us in that relationship. "Lay your deadly doings down, down at Jesus' feet/ Rest in Him, and Him alone, gloriously complete."

1. What else do you tend to 'add' to grace to feel accepted and loved by God? Consistency, zeal, obedience to certain morality, ministry? How are these barriers to your relationship with Him?
2. When you have a 'bad day,' do you blame yourself or God? Why? What about a 'good day'—do you give yourself credit for it?

3. Renew your hope in the grace of Jesus by repenting of using your good deeds as a means gaining his favor.

Summarize & Apply

1. What does a gospel-centered person look like in practice and how are you doing?
2. What does a gospel-centered church look like in practice?
3. How is Grace Toronto Church doing in being gospel-centered?
4. How can we improve or maintain our commitment to this value?

Prayer

Pray together for:

- For eyes of faith to remember the Gospel daily.
- For renewed hearts through knowing Christ, or knowing him better.
- For gratitude that you are God's child.
- For GTC to hold fast to its value of being gospel-centered.
- Against anything that would distract us from this value.

Study 2: Core Value: Merciful

Part 1

Read: Isaiah 58:6-9a

Reflect:

1. Describe the tone of this passage?
2. What do you think prompted it?
3. How would you characterize the church today? In what ways are we similar to or unlike, the people of Israel then?

Apply: God often has strong words for his people throughout the Old & New Testaments about their care for the poor and marginalized. How could the Israelites sacrifice and worship God and go through everything that looks religious, and simply walk by unaffected and not moved to action by those in need around them? How can love exist without being proven by actions?

In this passage in Isaiah, not only is there a strong command by God to his people, but there is also an unmistakable link to God's goodness and transforming power being known to those around us by how we respond to the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed.

1. Discuss what a gospel-centered view of those in need around us would look like?
 - a. How would we see *ourselves* in relation to those in need?
 - b. How would we see their need?

2. How can we live merciful lives without falling into the trap of a performance-driven motivation to love the poor?

3. How would a sincere, gospel-centered commitment to this value affect our lives? How would it change our schedule, our finances, our relationships?

4. How is Grace Toronto Church doing in living out this value? What are some ideas you have to improve in this area? How can Hope Toronto become more central to Grace Toronto's ethos?

Part 2

Read: Amos 5:7-15, 24

Reflect:

1. What specific things is the prophet denouncing here?
2. How is that different from or similar to the standard practices in our city?
3. How does God *feel* about things like extracting maximum rent? Building nice houses without concern for justice? Etc?

Apply: The gospel of the kingdom points Christians to a wise view of social change. The overly-optimistic humanist use politics to bring 'salvation,' and the overly-pessimistic moralists ignore the needs of the poor because they 'deserve it.' A Christian, however, sees that the gospel actively seeks to bring the transformation of Jesus to bear on the needs of society.

The gospel is in stark contrast to society's view on this issue. The gospel does not think that feeding the poor *brings* salvation but *points to it*. The gospel does not think the poor *deserve it* but that *we all deserve it*.

The real justice comes not by might or power, but by the Spirit. Social problems come from misunderstanding the gospel. So preaching the Gospel in both word and deed is the mightiest weapon against evil.

When the King went forth, he healed the land. Now as he goes forth through his people, he continues to heal the land. As Jesus enters into neighborhoods and areas of need, the gospel produces mercy, justice, and righteousness. The Kingdom confronts cruelty, oppression, injustice and always creates a shake-up of the status quo.

1. What are two of the main social problems in Toronto? Or alternatively, what is a social problem our culture overlooks? How has a misunderstanding of the gospel led to (or perpetuates) both?

2. Do you actively 'hate evil?' Do you promote justice?

3. What are some of the biggest obstacles for you in living out this commitment? How can we begin to take steps in dealing with these?

Part 3

Read: Matthew 8:1-4

Reflect:

1. How does Jesus heal the leper in this story?
 - a. Physically
 - b. Relationally
 - c. Socially
 - d. Spiritually

Apply:

1. What is generally the focus of mercy and justice in our culture? Why is that?
2. What should be different about a Christian's focus while doing mercy and justice? Why?
3. What will it take to have the kind of affect Jesus had on the leper's life?

Prayer

- Pray now for the chronically poor. Pray for them to find a way out of the trap of poverty and for Christians to become more involved in helping.
- Pray for Hope Toronto, GTC's greatest expression of this core value. Pray for its growth and impact in Toronto.

Study 3: Core Value: Missional

Part 1

Read: 1 Corinthians 1:22-31

Reflect:

1. What does this passage tell us about the gospel's reception among people?
2. What does this tell us about the gospel's power? It's purpose?

Apply: As we reach out to others with the hope that is within us, we do it with great respect and honor (1 Peter 3:15-16). Why? Because we know that we are no better than anyone else. Our

calling and relationship with Jesus came from nothing in our own merit. He drew us to himself while we were still blind fools.

We can affirm the value, wisdom, goodness, and insight of anyone, even those who fundamentally disagree with us. At the same time, we can point to something better, something more true - the cross.

We need to remind ourselves of the continued foolishness of the cross. It makes sense only to people whom God has enabled to see it. Our arguments will never convince anyone by themselves. We glory in our inability, knowing that God's power is made perfect in weakness.

1. What is the difference between winning an argument versus witnessing? Describe some instances of both arguing and witnessing?
2. How would a 1 Corinthians 1 view of yourself as "weak, foolish, and blind" change your view of those around you who don't know Jesus yet?
3. How do we practically "glory in our inability"?
4. List four people that you know who don't believe in Jesus. How can you begin to have a missional mindset towards them?

Part 2:

Read: Romans 1:16-17

Reflect:

1. What strikes you about Paul's attitude?
2. How would you interpret his lack of shame? Why, after all he had been through, would Paul not be ashamed?

Apply: Everyone who comes to Christ is a miracle. Just as no one is 'good enough' to avoid the need of God's grace, no one is 'bad enough' to be outside the reach of God's grace. Jesus ate with the outcasts: the wayward and lost, the scoundrel and sinner, the bitter and broken.

This makes us bold and direct because we don't rely on the approval of others. If people challenge the gospel, we can stand firm in our hope. We don't have to take challenges personally.

This also makes us hopeful and persistent because we don't write off people as impossible. God speaks to people through countless means. Our words may bring in the harvest, or they may just plant a seed, or till the soil, or water. We can pray, hope, and wait for years.

1. What intimidates you about telling other people about Jesus?
2. Are some people more intimidating to you than others? Why?
3. Is there anyone that you've given up hope about? Anyone you won't talk to about your faith because you're unsure of their response? Repent of that lack of trust and recommit that person to the Lord in prayer.

Part 3:

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Reflect:

1. What strikes you about this passage?
2. How does the writer speak of the gospel here? What kind of words does he use?
3. What words does he use for his motivation to tell others? What attitude does that speak of toward evangelism?

Apply: Christian evangelism is seen by many as proselytizing or 'winning converts,' a competition between the major religions of the world.

Reaching others with the Gospel is not a contest, it is an expression of love. We speak to people with the words of Life. A Christian must tell others about Jesus just like an inventor must share a cure for a deadly disease.

The means of evangelism, therefore, are important. Manipulation or emotional appeals might seem 'effective' looking at the number of responses. But such methods deny the truth of the gospel and the compassion of the gospel.

1. What motivates you to tell people about Jesus? Guilt? Aggressiveness? Love?
2. What seems phony to you when people try to sell you something? Do you inadvertently employ the same methods in telling people about Jesus?
3. How is your zeal for telling people about Jesus? Is it strong? Weak? Has it grown? Shrunk?

Summarize & Apply

1. How is your missional life? What would look differently in your own life if you were to grow in your missional living? (Think about your schedule, your finances, your relationships, your career, etc)
2. How is Grace Toronto Church doing in living out this value? How are we doing in boldness? How are we doing in effectiveness? What are some ideas you have that could help us improve in this together?

Prayer

- Pray for the list of 4 people you know who don't yet have a relationship with God. Pray for opportunities to build your relationship and witness about the hope inside you.
- Pray for humility and respect toward your neighbors.
- Pray for Christ's love to ignite your heart to love others.
- Pray for courage to live the Gospel before others
- Pray for GTC's missional effectiveness. Pray that we would become a church that God uses to win many people to himself. Pray for the various ministries and events at Grace, that they would become avenues for the city to hear the gospel and respond.
- Pray that God would bring spiritual hunger for him to Toronto and we would see many more seeking true life in him.

Study 4: Core Value: City-Positive

Part 1

Read: Number 35:15

Reflect:

1. What is the context for this verse? Do you know any history that leads up to God making this command to the Israelites?

Apply: The first city, and all cities, are designed by God to provide safety and refuge for people. The weak, (or the new, the deviant, the oppressed, the hurt, the outcast), all can be better cared for in cities. Cities are places where resources of healing are strongest.

In a fallen world, however, this good design is twisted by mankind. Cities, which attract the weak, can at times weaken them further. Cities can promote unhealthy deviations in culture. Cities can enflame class tensions when the 'insiders' resent the drain on resources that the 'outcasts' cause.

The gospel alone makes us humble enough to respect the weak and the diverse. Now that the barrier between God and his people has been mended by Christ, then Christians can mend and heal the barriers that cities promote. Christians can love the diversity of the city beyond human expectations.

1. How do you view the city? What emotions come to your mind?
2. Are you concerned about the needy, or do you see them as a burden?
3. How does your view of the city line up with God's view? Do you see both the goodness and the fallen nature of the city?

Part 2

Read: Jeremiah 29:4-7

Reflect:

1. What is the context for this verse? Where are the people? What are they doing?
2. Why would this be a command? What is different than what they are doing at present?

Apply: Cities are cultural laboratories. What is discovered, uncovered, and invented in the city spreads out to the rest of culture. Cities attract the best of many fields, who spur one another on toward excellence and achievement. This creativity and invention is design to honor God as we care for his creation.

The fallen nature of people, however, drive them toward self-glorification, workaholism, and competition. Culture itself becomes an idol instead of a means to worship God.

Christians, renewed by their approval in Christ, have a confidence to excel in this cultural enterprise. At the same time, they can do it with humility, thankfulness to God, and genuine encouragement to others. We want our home city (and then by influence our entire society) to become beautiful so that God would be honored.

1. What attracted you to live and work in Toronto? Were you challenged by your career?
2. What are some ways that Toronto is the cultural center of Canada? Why would that be a good place to transform with the gospel?
3. What does it mean to be a Christian 'good neighbor,' to be genuinely interested in the welfare of the city?

Summarize & Apply

1. What would it mean for an individual to live out the value of being city-positive? What are some of the implications for job choice, housing options, entertainment, time, and money?

2. How is Grace Toronto Church doing in being “city-positive”? Do you have any ideas for how we could improve?
3. How can you be involved in some of the ministries that really promote the peace and prosperity of the city? (eg. Faith & Work, Hope Toronto, Prayer Ministry, etc)

Pray

- For God’s peace and prosperity in Toronto.
- For God’s refuge made known in Toronto.
- For God to use Grace Toronto Church and its people to bring the gospel to our city and through us to change the culture of our nation.
- For some of the ministries that promote the peace and prosperity of the city – Faith & Work, Hope Toronto, prayer, etc.

Study 5: Core Value: Prayer

Part 1

Read: 2 Chronicles 7:14

Apply: Our Almighty God is a prayer-hearing God! Think on the beauty of that for a moment. We believe that only God can change our own hearts, our church and our city. There is no amount of great programs or skilled leaders or loving communities that can do any of that, only God can. We need God to move in a powerful way.

Here in 2 Chronicles, we have a promise of God that if we humble ourselves and pray and seek his face, he will answer and heal our land. What an incredible promise made! [Note: “Our land” in the OT means Israel. But post-cross, how does a promise on prayer like this change? There is no longer a *land* for the people of God, because we are from every tribe, tongue and nation. So *land* is not what God heals in this redemptive-historical phase, it’s the *church*, which “Israel” represents (God’s people)]

1. What is your view on prayer? What emotions or thoughts does the word “prayer” bring to mind?
2. What are some of your struggles in prayer? What are some of your joys?
3. From this promise of God in 2 Chronicles, what would a robust, faith-filled response of a believer look like?

Part 2

Read: 1 Timothy 2:1-4, Colossians 4:2-4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17; Romans 8:26-27, 34

Apply: The Bible is packed full of commands and promises about prayer. Here we have commands to pray all the time for all people in all situations and promises or reassurances that he helps us in our weakness, supplying our prayers and even interceding on our behalf.

1. What is your initial response to all these verses you just read? What stands out to you?
2. What would a person who responded to these commands and promises look like? How is your prayer life?
3. Why does this seem to be an area where we regularly feel only guilt or defeat?

Summarize & Apply

1. What would a prayerful church look like?
2. How is Grace Toronto Church doing in being prayerful? Do you have any ideas for how we can grow together in this area?

Prayer

- Praise God for his beautiful relationship to his people through prayer.
- Pray for a heart of prayer – for the dependence and humility and diligence needed to seek God. Pray for a conscious awareness of our own inability to do anything, unless God is at work.
- Share together and pray through some of your own obstacles in prayer.
- Pray for Grace Toronto Church to be a church of prayer. Pray that everything we do would be saturated in prayer. Pray for a stronger desire for prayer among our people.
- Pray for those who lead out in the prayer ministry at Grace.

Study 6: A New Perspective on the Church

Part 1

Read: Proverbs 11:10-11

Apply: Every church must ask itself, “who do we serve?” Is our church for its members or for others? We believe, based on all that we looked at previously, that our church must exist to enable Christians to minister to others.

Toronto is not here to build up Grace. We are here, with God's help, to serve the city. Our genuine concern as good neighbors reflects the honesty of our commitment to Christ. We need to live out what we claim.

This works itself out in daily decisions and major initiatives. Do we choose maintenance over advancement, tradition over creativity, inward focus over outreach? Do we seek out new ways of loving others and honoring our Lord?

1. How much change are you comfortable with? What about change that has an exceptionally good purpose?
2. What would make our church community stand out in the name of Jesus? How would we gain a reputation for good in a city as large as ours?

Part 2

Read: Exodus 33:12-23

Reflect:

1. What is the context of this passage?
2. Compare Moses here to the Moses you see at the burning bush in Exodus 3. What is different about his attitude? His words?
3. What strikes you about this passage?

Apply: No matter what plans we make, no matter what activities we follow, if God does not go with us they are worthless. We should never seek to do anything as a church that does not lift up Jesus Christ.

That takes discipline. It is far too easy to fit into some program, some contemporary issue, some great idea, and then completely miss Jesus. We like activity and action. Or, we idolize the church more than what that church stands for.

We love Grace Toronto Church; we must love the One who gives grace more. Whatever he wants, however he chooses to build, adapt, alter, even dismantle this institution, we should be eager to follow.

1. How can we be sure that our church's direction is in line with what God wants? How can each of us fit into that purpose?
2. How might we protect the vision of our church so that 10, 20, or 100 years from now we will be as committed to it as we are now?

Summarize & Apply

1. What will it take for our church to become the kind of church we have dreamed about in these last 6 studies?
2. In his sermons, Dan challenged us that it would take generosity, compassion, time, and prayer to see the kind of church we dream about come true. Do you agree? What is the biggest challenge for you?
3. What are some things you take away individually from this series?

Prayer

- Pray for God's presence to transform us, our church, and our city.
- Pray for God to be the leader of this church. Pray for his wisdom and direction.
- Pray for your involvement at Grace Toronto Church. Pray through any obstacles or struggles you have.
- Pray that our church would truly be a place in the city where these five values are lived out more and more fully.