

one church's story

It's Sunday morning and a congregation of five hundred is making its way to services at Lake Glen Presbyterian Church. There are families, singles, the elderly, and loads of young children heading toward the sanctuary. In many ways it looks like a typical Sunday at a typical evangelical church, but LGPC was in the midst of a significant revolution.

There would be no new theology, and the worship service would look pretty much the same. Children would still attend Sunday school and the youth groups would continue their weekly meetings. Evangelism and missions would remain strong emphases and midweek home fellowships would keep multiplying around the city. There would still be a commitment to a clear exposition of the Word and the discipling of new believers. Yet in a real way, LGPC was changing at its very core.

Since it was founded, LGPC had only had two pastors. The founding pastor had stayed for twenty years, and the second pastor had served for a little over a decade. The founding pastor and the original members were committed to a church with a strong teaching ministry, and this brought many to LGPC over the years. The church continued to grow, purchased land, built a building, expanded the staff to three full-time pastors, and multiplied its ministries. In many ways it was a history of healthy beginnings and solid growth.

Yet the current staff had become concerned. As they took an honest look at the church, they saw signs of ill health. There had been a series of all-too-public separations and divorces within the congregation that made the staff question the relative health of the marriages at LGPC. They seemed to be losing their teenagers, and a smaller percentage of members were joining home fellowship groups. The men and women's ministries remained vibrant but lacked direction. In terms of evangelism, well, there simply wasn't much of it going on. But what got the staff's attention more than anything else was the overwhelming counseling load that all three pastors were carrying.

All of these things caused the leaders to take a long, hard look at the ministry culture of LGPC. Such an intensive corporate study had never been done, but there were clear signs that it was needed. Despite all the positive things God had done in and through LGPC, the leaders knew that they

could not be complacent. If the church was going to be a place where people could grow, a revolution needed to take place. But what would that revolution be and how would it happen?

A Quiet Revolution

In chapter 1, we met Phil and Ellie and their “hole in the middle of the house.” They illustrated the gospel gap that many believers live with unawares. We live with some sense of the past forgiveness of our sins and the future promise of heaven, but without understanding or experiencing the power of the gospel in the present. The monotony of life lulls us to sleep, and we miss the miraculous presence of Christ.

The same thing can happen to a local church. On a corporate level, the present power of the gospel can be forgotten.

But Scripture says that the opposite should be true for the individual Christian and for the church. We should not—and need not—live long seasons of life with “gospel amnesia.” God has placed each of his children within the body of Christ, where we are meant to be constantly reminded of the value of the gospel for our daily lives. When the church is functioning as it is supposed to, the message of grace permeates every facet of the community. Wherever they turn, believers are challenged and encouraged to be transformed by the gospel’s power. When the leaders at LGPC realized that this was not happening as it should, they took action.

Six Inescapable Facts

The leaders at LGPC were motivated by six basic facts of life in the local church.

- Fact 1: Each week, there are people in local churches with a multitude of problems.
- Fact 2: The Bible says we have everything we need to help these people (2 Peter 1:3).
- Fact 3: People usually seek help first from a friend, family member, or pastor before going to a professional counselor.
- Fact 4: These people will get no help, bad help, or gospel-centered help from that friend, family member, or pastor.
- Fact 5: If they don’t get meaningful help, they will look elsewhere.
- Fact 6: They will seek to help others with whatever they found helpful.

The leaders at LGPC saw the significance of this progression. Do you? If a local church is not providing meaningful, gospel-based help, people will go

elsewhere. Their experience will either encourage them (and others) to see the power of the gospel or convince them that the gospel is not enough to deal with life's problems. If the latter happens, the local church becomes a place of confusion. The impact and influence of the gospel is weakened significantly, or totally replaced by another message and method of change. In other words, people will find other means of change that are not built on the solid foundation of God's redemptive work in Christ. The apostle Paul was concerned about this when he wrote to the Colossian believers in Colossians 2:6–8:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

For Paul, this was no small matter. It was a compromise that robbed God of his glory and the people of God of their only hope for change. There is no room for compromise when it comes to what is available to us in Christ.

The Goal of Our Ministry

In Colossians 1:28–29, we find a clear, uncompromising goal for building a culture of grace within the local church:

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.

Paul's goal was to see church communities singly devoted to the message of the living Christ. Notice that he says he teaches everyone so that everyone may grow to maturity in Christ. Paul affirms this commitment in other passages, including 1 Corinthians 2:1–2:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

For Paul, it is inconceivable to have a community of Christians who are not immersed in the grace of God in Christ. To the degree that Christ is not

central, that body of believers will function at a deficient level, because some other message is at the center.

Our Vision for Community

The leaders at LGPC realized that the lives of individual Christians are reflected in the corporate life of the church. Individual Christians must constantly struggle against gospel amnesia. Our hearts, though made new in Christ, still have a layer of sinful resistance that deflects the truth of the gospel while subtle lies remain and new lies are absorbed. We are duped into thinking that we can change without God's grace, or that we need

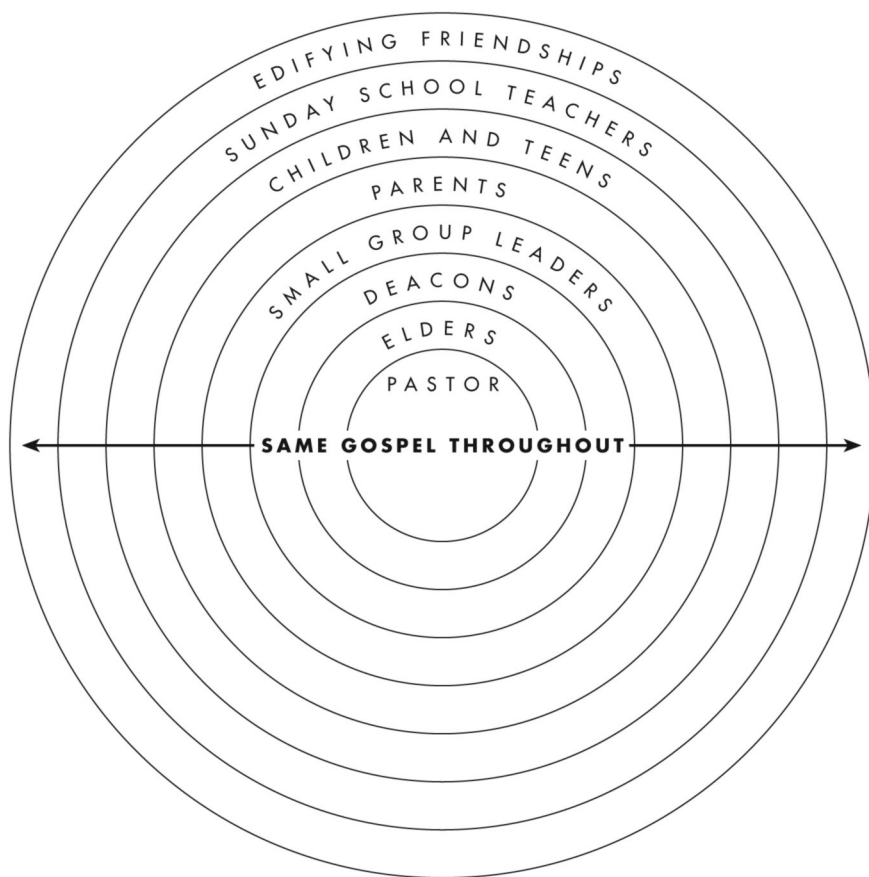


FIGURE 16.1 A Gospel-Centered Ministry Culture

something in addition to Christ to fight the good fight. There are many counterfeit gospels that can rise to a place of supremacy in a believer's life.

The same thing happens in a community of believers. The larger group must also unite to fight gospel amnesia. A church's gospel identity can be replaced by external emphases that direct the church, even while the church theoretically affirms the centrality of grace. Formalism, legalism, mysticism, activism, biblicism, and psychological and social emphases can slowly gain prominence and influence the entire community. These replacements represent an aspect of truth, but ultimately they only emphasize part of what the Christian life is all about. They rob the church of its primary focus on Christ and weaken and impoverish its life.

In light of these realities, the LGPC leadership realized that they needed to guard the church from subtle gospel replacements and strive to saturate the church with the message of Christ-centered change. We too must be after nothing less than entire bodies of believers who keep the Cross central in every area of church life. For some churches, this will involve a complete paradigm shift. For others, it will involve refining and clarifying what it means to keep the grace of Christ primary. Figure 16.1 depicts what we are striving for.

In every layer of congregational life, a consistent message of gospel change is present. From pastoral care and preaching to redemptive friendships, the gospel is the primary message and ministry.

In light of the trends they were seeing, the leaders decided to assess the life of LGPC. They knew that Luke 6:45 was true when it said, "Out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks." A person's functional identity will drive his behavior. What you worship will influence how you act. This is true for church communities as well. Figure 16.2 shows how a local church's identity will shape the way it functions.

The church's functional—not theoretical—identity shapes the way it thinks and acts, what it teaches people and how it equips them to live. In some churches, sociological identities, such as race, class, education level, and age, are what drive the ministry. The question every church must ask is not, "Do we have an identity?" but, "What is our identity?" How does it shape the way we behave as a church? Is Christ at the center? If not, what has replaced him? Remember, even good things can displace Christ as the source of life and the head of the church.

In the case of LGPC, for example, the church started in a community where few if any churches proclaimed biblical truth. The people who started the church made every effort to plant a church that was doctrinally sound. This is a good thing, but it can also be dangerous. At LGPC, theological correctness (a good thing) so drove the preaching that the sermons became theological lectures to keep the faithful safe from error. The Christian life was reduced to affirming right doctrines that were not adequately applied to daily

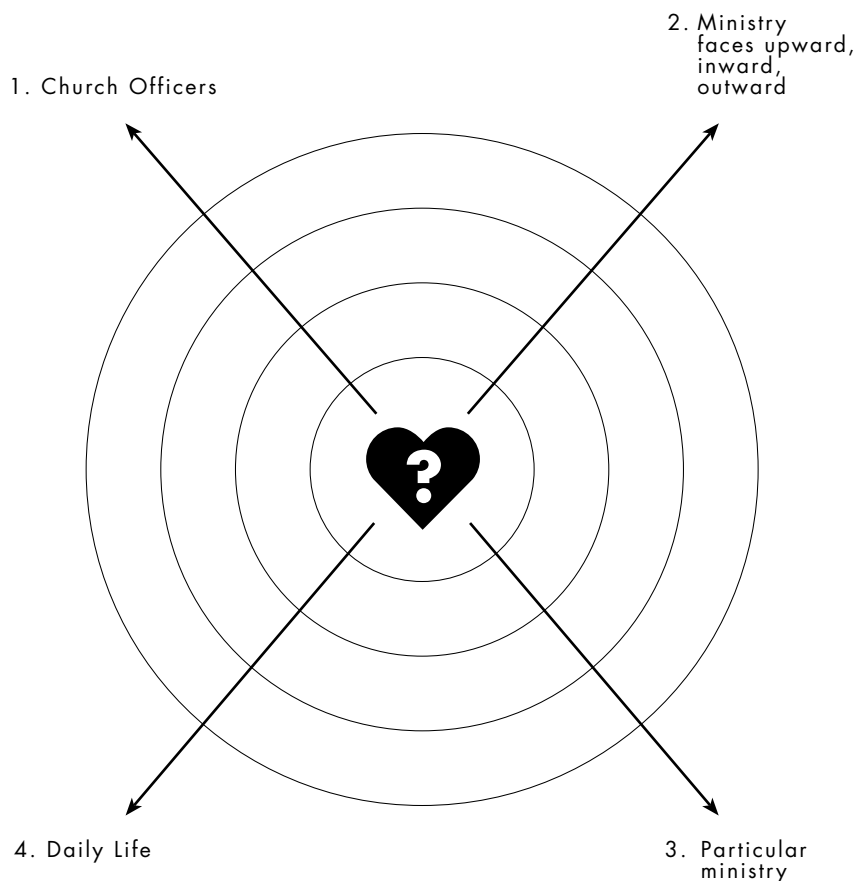


FIGURE 16.2 What Drives Your Church?

life. Soon people thought they were growing because they were acquiring more knowledge; they could agree with the specific doctrines of the church. But soon the cracks began to emerge. Scandals were revealed in the lives of leaders and congregants even though they espoused all the “right” things. The various ministries of the church were also designed more to guard against theological error than to show people how these truths should empower their lives. And Christ, the person with whom the believer and church are to be in relationship, was slowly turned into an abstract system of thought, although nobody realized it was happening. This is a sad but common example of how a good thing like sound doctrine can supplant Jesus Christ from the center of

individual and church life. (Chapter 1 discusses other gospel replacements that rob individuals and churches of life and power.)

What about Your Church?

In light of these dangers, it is crucial to assess what is happening in your local church. Leaders cannot afford not to do this. Some other identity is always competing to become the dominant identity of the church. Individuals and churches are never neutral! When Christ is supplanted, whatever replaces him will usually allow us to remain in control, independent of him. When this occurs, churches become unwelcoming toward struggling people. They become places where like-minded, well-adjusted people pat themselves on the back for how well they are doing. The church loses its ability to help people grow in the joys of daily repentance and faith while rejoicing in Christ.

Examining a Church's Ministries

When you examine the culture of your church, be sure to assess its various ministries and levels of leadership. The following categories, though not exhaustive, will stimulate your thinking.

Church Officers

What shapes the way we define the roles of the pastoral staff, elders, and deacons? It is easy for churches to move in one of three directions that diminish the centrality of the gospel. First, leaders are expected to function as CEOs of the church, casting vision and issuing directives. A second alternative treats leaders as managers in charge of structure, systems, and order. A third alternative sees leaders as those who set goals and objectives. Success is evaluated in terms of the bottom line and productivity.¹

While all of these can legitimately be a part of a church officer's role, they can also blind leaders to what is most important: the growth in grace of people, people who are not your employees or customers! When the gospel is at the forefront, church officers are driven by a biblical emphasis on people and their spiritual formation. A sanctification agenda colors church life at all levels. When the Cross is central, both the individual and the community grow in grace and God is glorified.

The Upward, Inward, and Outward Faces

Every church has these three aspects to its life. The upward face involves the worship and preaching of the church. The inward face involves the fellowship

and equipping of the church. The outward face involves the evangelism, mercy, and mission of the church to the world. If anything besides the Cross is at the center, the ministry of the church will be unbalanced.

When the upward face of the church is emphasized to the exclusion of the inward and outward faces, the church tends to become a preaching center, a large group gathering where the “experts” do all the work. This usually means that ministry and growth are limited to the stated formal meetings. When the inward face takes precedence, the church can become insular and self-congratulating. When the outward face is most important, the church places an emphasis on how non-Christians need the gospel to enter the Christian life. This can minimize the fact that the Christian also needs the gospel to continue in the Christian life. The gospel becomes something for “them,” not “us.” In each scenario, a good aspect of church life is dangerously overemphasized. Too much of a good thing can ultimately become a bad thing!

Let’s consider the Cross-centered alternative. When the gospel functions at the core of each facet of ministry, the balance and health of the church is safeguarded. If the gospel is central in worship and preaching, people will be humbled as they are reminded that they are not superior to others, but needy recipients of the same grace they are called to share with others. The inward face is protected because the gospel reshapes the ways we think about our relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ. We exist not primarily for one another’s happiness, but for one another’s holiness! Relationships are seen through the lens of mutual service and ministry. The gospel also propels us outward to the world with mercy and compassion. The outward face is strengthened by the gospel because our calling to love the world is not driven by self-righteousness or attempts to merit God’s approval. We move outward because God first moved toward us. Once again, people’s spiritual growth is central when the grace of Christ is central. There is ministry balance because the humility-producing grace of God keeps us honest about our own sin, as well as hopeful and confident in God’s commitment to use us in others’ lives. Gospel worship continually reorients us to the living God in the vertical dimension, which moves us outward to others with a redemptive agenda in the horizontal dimension.

Particular Ministries of the Church

LGPC used a Cross-centered focus to look at all of its ministries. You can do the same with the particular ministries of your church: nursery, children, youth, adult, singles, families, small groups, new members class, leadership development, evangelism, mercy, missions, worship, shepherding, counseling, to name a few. Does the gospel propel these ministries? If you were to

survey the entire life of the church, would you see a consistent emphasis on the gospel in each area?

One area that is often sorely lacking in gospel awareness is children's ministry and literature. I cannot count how many times my children have come home from church with a lesson that simply tells them to be kind to others and to obey their parents! While these are both biblical precepts, the emphasis on external obedience is often divorced from a basic understanding of the grace of Christ. This is the only thing that can change our hearts and sustain us when we fail. Unfortunately, many more graceless examples could be given. Does the message of the Cross consistently equip the leaders of these ministries, as well as the content they teach each week?

Daily Life

When the gospel is not central to our understanding of everyday life, self-examination, repentance and faith are minimized. Marriage, parenting, work, leisure, citizenship, temptations, and struggles are not seen primarily as places where God wants us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (see Phil. 2:12–13). We will miss the daily implications of living in communion with Christ. If Christians are not being taught how the gospel works at this level, they will more easily succumb to temptation in the bigger moments of life. The purpose of this book is to get individuals and churches to think deeply, consistently, and biblically about the gospel's significance for the everyday matters of life.

Examining Your Church's Message

Although LGPC was known for its solid preaching, the leaders found it helpful to examine the message being communicated from the pulpit. This goes on to influence the message communicated by all the other ministries of the church. Let's examine the message being communicated by the various ministries of your church in terms of heat, thorns, cross, and fruit.

Heat (chapters 7 and 8). Does your church take the Heat of your people's lives seriously, or are their struggles minimized, with change made to seem too easy? At the other end of the spectrum, do you place undue emphasis on people's struggles and communicate hopelessness? The gospel helps us maintain a realistic optimism. Life is challenging but the gospel gives us everything we need for life and godliness (see 2 Peter 1:3). Change is rarely easy but always possible. Change is rarely quick, but it happens over time as we depend on Christ's power at work in us.

Thorns (chapters 9 and 10). Does your church help people engage in Christ-centered self-examination as they reflect on their sinful responses to

life? Do you help people move beyond worldly sorrow to godly sorrow by helping them see what is going on at the heart level? Or are you satisfied with external behavioral change? If the gospel is central, people will grow less and less satisfied with external change, and more willing to ask why they do what they do, rather than simply resolving to change their behavior. The gospel liberates us to look more closely at our lives, and to face the things we treasure besides Jesus. The Christian life is more than just saying no to bad behavior. It is about being renewed from within with a growing spiritual passion!

Cross (chapters 11 and 12). Are you helping your people engage in honest, confident, humble, and intelligent repentance and faith grounded in the gospel? Do you err on the side of repentance and just tell people to change? Do you err on the side of faith and just tell people that they are loved in Christ? Or do you combine heart-searching repentance with a faith that brings people face-to-face with God's holy love for them in Christ? When the gospel is central, people can look honestly at their sin—not just behavioral sin, but the heart sin beneath. Real repentance looks deeply at the ways we have forsaken Christ. This produces sorrow and humility for allowing something to displace Christ from the highest place. Faith then lays hold of the grace and love offered to the repentant person. When repentance and faith are joined in this way, the person's heart is recaptured by Christ. This is what produces lasting change from within.

Fruit (chapters 13 and 14). Do you offer people hope by showing them what they can be and do through Christ? Do you show them what specific good Fruit will look like as they grow in practical godliness? When the gospel is central, you are not afraid to call people to specific acts of godliness. The more you ground them in their identity in Christ, the more you can confidently call them to change in the details of their lives. Because we sin specifically, the gospel intends us to grow in grace specifically. Every thought, action, attitude, and response to the pressures of daily life is of concern to our holy God, who desires to free us from every evil desire.

Summary

As you look at the ministries of your church, you must also examine the message being taught in those ministries. The questions that were helpful for the leaders of LGPC may be helpful to you too.

- What is being proclaimed each week in the preaching, teaching, and worship of the church?
- Is Christ central?
- How are we equipping current officers and ministry leaders? How are

we training future leaders to minister in a way consistent with the gospel?

- Do we tend to stress doctrinal orthodoxy and skill to the exclusion of life-liberating, Christ-laden change?
- Are our ministries functioning with a Christ-centered view of change?
- What are we doing to insure that this is happening?
- Is there regular evaluation? Are we willing to make changes?
- Are all the members of our church being helped to live their daily lives out of the power of the gospel?
- Are our efforts to reach the unchurched guided by humble gospel outreach? Or do we tend to be content with techniques, programs, guilt, or false promises of a happy life?
- Do our members read their Bibles, pray, and participate in the sacraments in a Christ-centered way? Can they make specific connections between their hearts and lives and the promises and blessings that are theirs in Christ?
- What obstacles hinder this kind of culture? Where can we do a better job? How and where should we begin?

A Strategy for Change

Begin with Yourself!

Their season of evaluation convinced the leadership of LGPC that change was needed. While they affirmed the many strengths of the church and God's blessing over the years, they also wanted to face weaknesses that existed and do the hard work of addressing them. However, the pastor and staff were so committed to providing leadership and direction that they sometimes forgot that they, too, needed to change! Whenever this happened, they ceased to be useful to the church, their staff, and their families. This is a common temptation, so we encourage you to start at the beginning. Start by applying what you have learned in this book to yourself! Hebrews 10:19–25 helps us in this.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on

toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

This passage ends with a familiar call to ministry, but this must not be divorced from the earlier verses. Before the passage calls us to minister to others, it reminds us to ground ourselves in the gospel. Verses 19–21 provide the gospel foundation for the commands that follow. We have been cleansed by the blood of Christ and have free access to God because of our great high priest, Jesus. He has opened a new and living way for us to know and be known by God. Once we have applied these truths to ourselves, we are invited and commanded to worship God (23), witness to those who do not know him (24), and engage in redemptive friendships in the body of Christ (24–25). When we do not begin with ourselves, we are of little help to others. Our efforts are skewed by self-centeredness.

Humbly Pursue Change in the Church

After you have examined yourself, ask some honest questions about your church. Systematically and prayerfully evaluate the various areas of church life. Begin by examining an area where you serve, and ask how you can be an agent of change there.

Level One: Pastoral Staff

The leaders of LGPC saw that there were ways they needed to grow in their gospel-centeredness as a staff. If you serve on the pastoral staff, how can you grow in your relationships with other staff members? How can you spend time thinking, sharing, and applying the gospel to your own lives? What gospel-based resources are you using to shape the way you live and serve together? You may want to read this book together or use the discipleship course that corresponds to it.² Staff leaders need to live out the gospel as part of their ministry to the church. Don't skip this level! It is key to shaping the church's identity.

Level Two: Elders and Deacons

LGPC took time to determine the primary focus of their gatherings as leaders. You too need to ask, "What drives the agenda when elders and deacons meet?" There are always plenty of decisions that need to be made when leaders gather, but is there any sense of excitement about what Christ is doing in his people's lives? On one occasion in a church I pastored, someone suggested

that we go around the room and share where we had seen the gospel change a situation or a person's life. Every leader could think of at least one example from the previous week. What an encouragement this was! The leadership of a church needs clarity about its mission and purpose. We must take our lead from the apostle Paul, whose sole passion was for Christ to be central, and for everything else to be driven by Christ's grace and power for his glory. Does this dominate your meetings and ministry as leaders?

Level Three: Key Ministry Leaders

Wisely, LGPC did not stop with its elders, deacons, and pastoral staff. They also thought about their key ministry leaders, who in many ways are just as important. They may very well become tomorrow's elders and deacons, and they have tremendous influence in hundreds of people's lives now. These are the people leading small groups and serving in the various committees and ministries of the church, from nursery to missions and everything in between. How are these midlevel leaders being equipped in your church to think about their ministries as means of God's grace?

For example, when your worship team prepares for Sunday services, do they bring a sanctification agenda to the structure of the worship, as well as the content of the songs, confessions, prayers, and words that will be sung and spoken? How can the simple categories of heat, thorns, cross, and fruit inform the way they lead in worship? While it may sound spiritual, the common practice of telling people to forget their lives over the past six days so that they can truly worship God for the next hour smacks more of Greek dualism than a biblical view of a spiritual person. Our lives over the past six days are what God is most interested in! A recognition of the Heat we all face will lead us to bring our messy lives before him. This is a simple way for our worship to become more real and meaningful. Think about worship and the other areas of church life through these categories (Heat, Thorns, Cross, Fruit) to see whether the message of grace is prominent.

Level Four: Attendees and Members

Finally, LGPC thought about what every person in the church was hearing and learning. They wanted a gospel-centered culture that was more than a top-down movement; they wanted it to be a bottom-up, grass roots movement as well. This is important for your church too. Below the midlevel leadership is the vast majority of your congregation. They are participants in the church's ministries and potential future leaders. Where besides the pulpit are they reminded of the centrality of the gospel? What contexts do you have to shape the way they think about the Christian life? Your answers will

include the obvious places like small groups, Sunday school classes, new member classes, church sports teams, and informal conversations. The rest of the list will vary with every church. The primary question to ask is how these areas of church life help or hinder attendees to understand what it means to be changed by the gospel. Do they understand the basic dynamics of the Christian life? What resources are available to your people at this most basic level, so that they hear and see what it means to grow in grace?

An Action Plan to Celebrate Grace

Their evaluation completed, the leaders of LGPC devised an action plan. This chapter can assist you to do the same. Begin as LGPC did, by thinking more broadly about the culture of your church. Step back to assess where change needs to occur, and then plot out a two- to three-year strategy to equip your people. You may want to consider the four levels discussed above and think of ways to involve each one in Christ-centered change. If you are a pastor, preaching a series of sermons on this subject is a good way to cast a vision. But don't stop there! Look for existing programs and structures where the material in this book can be taught, absorbed, and applied. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Have your church officers read this book and discuss it during your meetings.
2. Train small group leaders with this material.
3. Gather your key ministry leaders and show them how their ministry area can be guided by this material.
4. Identify the people in your church who are regularly sought out for help. Come alongside them to train them with this model of change.
5. Incorporate some of the material in a new members' class.
6. Teach a Sunday school class several times over the next three years so that this material is introduced to new people in the church.

A Quiet Revolution Begins

Today, those five hundred people gather each Sunday at LGPC. The same pastoral staff provides leadership. The same ministries, with many of the same leaders, organize the church's everyday life. The church's doctrinal statement remains the same. In fact, appreciation for it has increased! But underneath all of the apparent sameness, a significant revolution has taken place. In ways that were intentional and meant to be obvious, Christ has become more central and prominent in the ministries of the church. They are seen as means to an end, not ends in themselves. They are now truly means of grace. A Christ-centered view of the Christian life has begun to

shape conversations between husbands and wives, parents and children, and brothers and sisters in Christ. A once passive congregation has become more active, since they have been equipped to explain and experience change as they live together in the body of Christ.

Be prayerful and patient as these ideas permeate the life of your church. As they do, it will become clearer to your people that change is possible and that God's grace is sufficient for all circumstances. The Bible emphasizes change within the community of faith as people apply the gospel to their lives and the lives of their friends, spouses, and children. Our desire is to see individual Christians and entire churches participate in a ground swell of gospel celebration—a celebration of the amazing grace available to us in Christ. Father, Son, and Spirit are at work to make the church a radiant bride, purified and glorious, ready for his appearing. This vision pulls us upward, beyond our personal happiness, so that we might enjoy his blessings and offer them to others.

Our hope and prayer is that this book will help you grow in grace as an individual within a community of faith. May you grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen (see 2 Peter 3:18).