

The Gospel-Centered Church

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[0 : 0 0] So, I remember back 20-some years ago, I was right around 20 or so, and I was not a Christian, but I remember going through this period of time where I was looking at various religious traditions. I resented the fact that I had grown up never really knowing about any other options out there other than Christianity. I grew up in the South, and I remember after I spent time really trying to compare what a different religions teach and believe, I began to realize that as reluctant as I was to admit it, Christianity is utterly unique. The first time that it ever really occurred to me how different the Christian religion is from all other religions and philosophies, and the reason that Christianity is different is the truth at the heart of the faith, which is the gospel. The gospel makes Christianity unlike any other faith or worldview out there, and the gospel is essentially the good news about Jesus and what he's done and the kingdom of God. And when we talk at Church of the Advent, some of you are newer to the church, we talk a lot about this church about wanting to be a gospel-centered church, and that kind of has a buzzword feel to it, so it's easy to say that a lot, not really know what it actually means. But what we mean by that is that we want to keep the gospel at the very center of all we do. If you're around here for any length of time, you'll hear us say things like this. As we look at the city of Washington, D.C. and the surrounding region, the DMV as many of us call it, as we look at this area, we want to see loneliness eradicated. We want to see neighborhoods become more vibrant and more communal, where people know each other and are involved in each other's lives. We want to see systems, both local and national and international, become more just.

We want to see workplaces become more humane. We want to see racial healing accelerated. We want to see institutional corruption cease. We want to see people becoming more and more truly human.

If you want to know what kind of city we envision, that's what we envision. To be gospel-centered means that we keep at the very center of that, the belief, the conviction, that all of this is only possible through the gospel. It's not possible as a result of mere human effort. The reason that it's important to come back to this again and again and again is because it is alarmingly easy for individuals and churches to veer away from the gospel. To reach a point where we continue talking about the gospel, but in practice, we begin to veer away from it. And history is actually filled with examples of churches that have done just that. You'll never hear of these churches because almost all of them died.

So the question that we're asking this morning is, how do you know if a church is gospel-centered? How do we know that this church is truly gospel-centered in practice? And for the answer to that question, we're going to look at Acts chapter 15 and what is commonly called the Jerusalem Council.

You don't often hear this text preached on because it's pretty convoluted in some ways, but it's very important. This is a gathering that happened around 48 to 49 AD of early church leaders to really decide the future course of the church. And it's a defining moment. The question on the table is this, will this growing movement of Jesus' followers continue as a gospel-centered movement, or will it become just another religion, just another sect within Judaism? And so first what I'm going to do is unpack the issue because, as I said, you really need to understand what's at stake here to get why it matters. And then after I do that, we're going to look at three hallmarks of a gospel-centered church. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we come to a passage like this, and it would be easy just to skip right over it and to think that it doesn't matter or that it doesn't matter for me right now with everything I have on my mind. And yet so often, Lord, what we think we need and what you know we need are two very different things. And we pray for your agenda this morning to be preeminent. We pray that you, through your Holy Spirit, would lead and guide this time, these

words, our hearts. We pray this not only that we would benefit from it, but that you would be glorified. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

[4 : 57] So first of all, let me unpack the issue of the Jerusalem Council. The first Christians were almost all Jews. Because of that, almost all of the early Christians had been circumcised, if they were men, and they had all grown up following the ceremonial Levitical law, what some of the people in this passage refer to as the law of Moses. It's the ceremonial Levitical law. And so what happened is they would grow up following this law, getting circumcised, they would become Christians, and then they would just keep following the ceremonial law, because that's what all proper people do. That's what anybody who's civilized does. But then the gospel begins to spread beyond the Jewish borders. It begins to bring in more and more Gentile, meaning non-Jewish, converts. And so the question arose in the church, do these people also need to get circumcised? Do they also need to abide by the ceremonial cleanliness, the Levitical law? And so in Acts 15 verse 1, that's the context for these men who come down from Judea, and they're teaching the brothers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. A lot of people thought that. In other words, if you want a secure relationship with God, if you want to know that you know that you know that God loves and embraces you, it's not enough to believe in Jesus, you also need to get circumcised and come under the Levitical law.

You want to be clean, don't you? This is how to be clean before God. And you say, well, what's the big deal about circumcision? What does that even mean? What a weird thing, and what a frankly brutal and upsetting thing to require of your people. What's the big deal? If you know the history of circumcision back in Genesis chapter 15, God makes a covenant with Abraham. He says, I'm going to make a covenant with you and all of your descendants, all of your offspring. And the way that you made a covenant in the ancient world is that you would reenact the penalty that would befall anyone who broke the covenant, right? So you take animal, and it was very bloody. And in fact, making a covenant in the Hebrew actually is literally translated to cut a covenant. Because what you would do is, you would cut an animal in half, you would lay the pieces down on the ground, and you would walk between them.

And you were symbolically saying, if I fail to uphold my end of the covenant, may this happen to me. May I be cut off. May blood be spilled. May I be cut off from you. May I be cut off from any future relationship or benefits that I might gain from you. It's over if I break the covenant, right? And so then God in Genesis 17 commands that all Moses' male descendants be circumcised. And of course, what is this a symbol of? Blood being spilled. Being cut off, right? This is the meaning of the symbol. If I break the covenant with God, may I be cut off. May blood be spilled. And so along with circumcision then, there comes this whole array of ceremonial laws and cleanliness laws that they had to keep in order to be faithful to the covenant. A circumcised person who's a covenant person keeps themselves clean, ritually clean, through doing all of these things. You can read about it if you want in Leviticus. And in fact, at some point, I would love to do a series in Leviticus. And I'm not even kidding. It's fascinating. That's not a joke. I would love to. And so at some point, we're going to do it. Maybe

Jeff's going to do it. But it's a fascinating book. There are all kinds of regulations in Leviticus about food, what you can eat, what you can't eat. You know, shellfish, pork, things like that.

All kinds of regulations about clothing and certain fabrics that you had to stay away from and mixing fabrics and lots of regulations about things that you can touch and things that you can't touch.

Things that you can do and things that you can't do. There are all kinds of regulations for every aspect of life. It feels very OCD to read it. It's like everything is regulated, right? And there's this obsession with cleanliness. And there are all kinds of things that would make you spiritually unclean. And if that happened, you had to go, you had to purify yourself again before you could rejoin the assembly. So it's very important. It dominated Jewish life. So the message was, if you want a secure relationship with God, if you want to make sure that God will never cut you off, then you need to believe in Jesus, but you also need to get circumcised and you need to stay clean by keeping the ceremonial law. Right? So that's why they say in the midst of this debate, the party of the Pharisees says, yeah, it's great that they're converting to Jesus, but we need to make them get circumcised. We need to make them keep the law of Moses. Peter stands up and says, no, you've misunderstood what's happening. Verses 10 and 11, he says, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

[10:05] He says, listen, I have seen these Gentiles. I have seen them receive the same Holy Spirit that we have received. Now, why are you after the fact wanting to put this? Isn't the point of that covenant faithfulness to get the blessings of the covenant? And yet they're getting the blessings of the covenant, the Holy Spirit, without even keeping the covenant. He says, why are you going to put a yoke on their neck? And he says, let's just be honest about this yoke. He says, God never blessed anyone. This is the implication of his words. God never blessed anyone because they kept the covenant. Our ancestors, let's just be honest about it, they were covenant breakers. They couldn't bear this.

He's like, I know the truth about you when you go home at night. You're a covenant breaker too. We can't bear this yoke. And the message is, if we try to get these Gentile Christians to come under the law and start trying to keep themselves clean in all of these ways, we're setting them up to fail. We're setting them up to be covenant breakers as well. So here is the real question of this passage. How could God save and bless and pour his Holy Spirit out on covenant breakers? How is that possible? You know, you can imagine these Jews saying, well, I thought circumcision mattered. I thought having a clean heart mattered. Are you telling me that none of this matters? And Peter would have said, no, you've got it all wrong. It actually matters more than you can possibly imagine. And it matters to God more than you can fathom. This is why the gospel is such good news.

[11:48] Right? All human beings, essentially, he's saying, are covenant breakers. No one can ever live up to these standards of cleanliness. And because of God being a just God, blood does need to be spilled.

Somebody does need to be cut off. But the good news of the gospel is that blood has been spilled. Right? That someone has been cut off. And he would have pointed to the cross. On the cross, Jesus' blood was spilled. Jesus was cut off. You say, why did the cross have to happen? Why did his blood need to be spilled? Why did he need to hear his father or sense his father turn his back on him? Why did he need to go to this experience of crying out and saying, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And hear nothing in response. It's because he was fulfilling the requirements of the covenant on behalf of all the covenant breakers. Dying a bloody death. Being cut off. And so what Peter is saying is, if you understand the implications of the cross, you would understand that circumcision is no longer necessary. It's pointless. The thing that it was pointing to has happened. It's obviated. It's irrelevant at this point. Likewise, the Levitical law, the ceremonial law, it was all about being clean, but the water never made you clean.

And he says, faith is what makes you clean. Faith has made these Gentiles' hearts clean. And it's the kind of cleanliness that we can't even dream of. Right? This is the gospel. The only way to become spiritually clean and to know that your relationship with God is secure is by believing and receiving the grace of Jesus Christ. That's the gospel. That's the gospel. Now, this passage goes on, and, but what I want to do is I want to, I want to kind of draw out from what we just said, three implications, three hallmarks, if you will, of a gospel-centered church. In other words, how do we know that here we are 2,000 some years later? How do we know that we are still in line with what happened at 48 or 49 AD among these church leaders? How do we know that we are in that stream of truth? Three hallmarks of a gospel-centered church. The first hallmark is that there is a culture in the church of spiritual freedom. A culture of spiritual freedom. At the beginning of this, I said that I had discovered that Christianity was utterly unique. It's unlike any other religion and worldview. And here's why. Every other religion, every other worldview, every other philosophy out there gives you a way to achieve your salvation, a way to prove that you are worthy. So whether it's the eightfold path or karma and reincarnation or doing more good works than bad works, all of these are ways to achieve your salvation. And you say, well, I'm not a subscriber to the secular, to the traditional religions. You know, I'm actually not really a religious person, and so that's why I'm not a religious person. I don't need somebody else to tell me how to live my life. Oh, yes, you do. Don't be so quick to exempt yourself, right? The secular culture also does this. And it's every bit as religious, right? So even the most non-religious person, right?

We live in a culture, and it has certain assumptions about what life is about. And our culture focuses not necessarily on self-salvation, like the traditional religions. We would call it something more like self-actualization, right? There's a tremendous pressure in our culture. I was just talking to somebody about this a few weeks ago. There's a tremendous pressure in our culture to identify and express your authentic self to the world. This is who I really am, and I'm getting it out there.

[15 : 38] In fact, I would say that in our culture, you are, we are all morally obligated to discover who we truly are. Now, we don't talk about being clean and unclean. That sounds very archaic. But the message in our culture is, you need to cleanse yourself from all external influences, right? Who have clouded or obscured your true self, right? You need to cleanse yourself from influences like tradition, like parents, like other institutions, right? Like the church or various other religions, these things that have really oppressed you and oppressed your ability to be true to yourself. And the message is that unless you do that, you are inauthentic, which is one of the ways that our modern culture says unclean, right? To be inauthentic is to be unclean. You're a sellout.

And so what we are called to do is to cleanse ourselves from these pressures, these external influences, and then to construct a true identity that is based solely on our own inner world. That is the only way to know that it's really you. And what that means is you need to go out and then find the right labels to describe who you are. You need to find the right groups to identify with. You need to then find ways to express that identity boldly to the world, hopefully gaining some amount of affirmation in the process. And this is what I would call the kind of post-modern hero's journey, right? The modern hero's journey is the journey of self-liberation, liberating your true self from oppressive outside forces, decolonizing your identity. It's entirely up to you to construct an identity and a life that is meaningful and fulfilling. And the person I was talking to said, yeah, that's exhausting, right? She's not a believer. She's not a Christian. She's kind of been immersed in this world. She goes, I just feel crushed by this pressure. And we were talking about how even though she completely disagrees with what I believe is a Christian pastor on almost every issue, she would be the first to say, this is as oppressive, as legalistic, as rigorous as any religion. Right? It's the same. And the problem with all of this is the same. It's all up to you. You have to bear the burden of your own salvation, your own self-actualization, your own self-liberation. You have to construct it all. You have to make it happen.

Only the gospel says that salvation, identity, meaning, purpose, that those are not things that we have to achieve. And the reason is that Jesus has already done all of that on our behalf. He's accomplished salvation on the cross for us all. And because Jesus has accomplished it, it's secure, it's done, it's finished, it's complete. So it's not something that you can achieve. It's something that can only be received. And so when I say a culture of spiritual freedom, what I mean is a culture where people know and you are reminded on a daily basis that your relationship with God is secure, no matter what, through faith. Right? Knowing that you are loved and accepted by God, that you are infinitely valuable, that you are infinitely worthy to God. Because that's why Jesus went to the cross. That's why we spend so much time talking about the cross, looking at the cross, meditating on the cross. It's all because of the cross, all because of grace. The problem is, I'll say this last point before we move on, even if a church says they believe in this, even if you hear great gospel preaching every Sunday, it's easy for other things to slip in. And it's easy for there to be a disconnect, right? It's on the flyer, it's on the website, it's on the promotional lit, it's in the sermons. But in the day-in, day-out life of the congregation, there are other things at work, right? So in some churches, they preach the gospel, they preach grace. But everybody knows, anybody who's anybody knows, that if you really want God to love you, you also need to avoid drinking and smoking and dancing and gambling and R-rated movies, right? Some of us grew up in churches like that. In some churches, they preach the gospel, you hear the gospel every Sunday, but everybody who's really in the know in the church knows that if you really want God to love you, you need to be passionate about social justice, right? Somebody told me about a church that they used to attend down south, and I won't name it because that's not the point, but it was a church where the pastor would regularly say things like this, if you drive into our parking lot and you have a Clinton sticker on your bumper, I'm just going to tell you right now, you're probably not going to feel very welcome in this church. So he preached the gospel. This is a gospel-centered church. It was on the website, gospel-centered church. What's the underlying message? True Christians, real Christians, right? If you really want to believe in God, if you really want to be welcome in the church, you need to be a Republican, right? So there are all kinds of ways on both sides of the aisle that that kind of thing plays out.

Gospel-centered churches cultivate a culture of spiritual freedom where grace and grace alone sits at the center of our spiritual life. That's the first implication.

[21 : 12] Implication number two, what's the second hallmark of a gospel-centered church?

Cultural openness. Cultural openness. And this next point is really related. It's a kind of an outgrowth of the point that I just made. Gospel-centered churches are culturally open because they

are spiritually free.

By this, I mean that the gospel is not tied to any particular culture, right? It's what you might call transcultural. So the gospel is meant to be planted like a seed in all different kinds of cultures. Ajith Fernando is a Sri Lankan missionary and Bible teacher, and he makes this point. He's looking at this passage and he says, you know, just as some of the leaders in Jerusalem thought that the Gentiles should become culturally Jewish in order to become true Christians, he says there are many missionaries and evangelists who have made the same mistake throughout history, right? Expecting the converts to adopt the culture and the language as well as the religious beliefs and the gospel. And this is the, you know, we often talk about confusing Christian missions with cultural imperialism. And, you know, this is true of our own tradition, and we have to admit and fully own that, right? That often in other parts of the world, you had missionaries who are coming from the same country and culture as the colonial rulers in a given area, right? Now, there's a way of seeing that where you say that amidst all of the evil and the brokenness that may have been happening, God is not hindered by those things. And amen to that.

Absolutely believe that. But we also don't want to whitewash that. We want to recognize the reality of that, the damage that it does when you associate a particular theology or a particular religion, right? Especially the gospel with colonial rule, slaveholding, right? The damage that that does. Gospel-centered churches understand that the gospel is like a grapevine. You know, and I use this illustration a lot because I think it really makes the point clear. You can plant the same grape, the same variety, in different places, in different regions, and that same grape, it's the same grape, will produce very different wines with distinct qualities that result from the specific locale, right? The quality of the soil, the climate, right? The humidity, how much sun it gets, right? So you'll have one side of the hill versus the other side of the hill, same grape, producing different wines based on the sun exposure alone. And this is in the wine world called the terroir, right? And in the same way, when the gospel is planted in different cultures, it is meant to produce culturally distinct forms of Christianity. Versions of Christianity that have a kind of terroir to them, right? So there's not just meant to be American Christianity, there's meant to be an African Christianity, there's meant to be within African Christianity all different sub-varieties, right? Depending on the country and the culture you're in, and there are many of them, right? There's meant to be a Chinese Christianity, Korean Christianity, Arab Christianity, there's meant to be all of these different versions of Christianity. Christianity. The theology is hopefully the same. The gospel is at the center of all of them.

[24 : 43] But the terroir, the feel, is different. The expression is culturally distinct, all rooted in the same vine of Jesus Christ, right? So this is the vision for the gospel going out to the world, right? And it's part of what makes it so beautiful. Right now, we are recognizing and talking a lot about the fact that Church of the Advent is a culturally white church. And, you know, that's to some extent unavoidable. I mean, it would be very, you know, people say, well, why can't we just undo that? It's like, well, you know, every church has a dominant culture, you know? And so there's no way to not have that, right? And so no matter what you do, you're going to make cultural choices that are going to appeal more to some people than other people. The conversation that we're having, though, is recognizing that this is true about the gospel, are there unnecessary barriers that we're creating, right? Are there ways that we are unnecessarily creating barriers for people who live in and around this community that are, and are there changes that we can make to reach more people with the gospel, right? Are we blind to things that are creating barriers for the gospel to go out? That's the question that I think a whole lot about these days. But this is the second thing. You have spiritual freedom and you have cultural openness. And then the third and the final quality of gospel-centered churches is this. They are marked by compassionate orthodoxy. Compassionate orthodoxy. To me, the most moving section of Acts chapter 15 is the place where you see the concern that these Jerusalem leaders have, the apostles have, for these Gentile converts and for the Jews who are feeling such attention over circumcision and the law, right? They're concerned, and they write the letter, they're concerned that they're being troubled, that their hearts are being troubled, that they're being thrown into distress, and that they're questioning their salvation. And under that concern is tremendous compassion. You know, they say in verse 28, it seemed good to me, it seemed good to the

Holy Spirit and to us, which by the way, can you even imagine saying that? You know, it seemed good to the Spirit and to us. We were talking with the Spirit, we all agreed. That's an amazing thing to say, and they're not being flippant. So it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. The Holy Spirit

is leading this, right? To lay on you no greater burden than these requirements. One of their main, so they have two concerns here. Two main concerns. Theological orthodoxy, compassion. Theological orthodoxy, compassion, love, tenderness, understanding, empathy. On the one hand, they know that if these Gentile Christians start going to the same church as the Jewish Christians, and they live wildly different lifestyles, that's going to scandalize many of the Jewish Christians. And they know what's down the road from that, Gentile churches and Jewish churches. They know that's coming, unless they intervene, right?

So they know that's a concern. On the other hand, they don't want to impose anything on these new believers that is going to be unnecessarily burdensome and discouraging for them, which is an amazing thing for them to be caring about. You know, you would think they would just say, oh, you need to get with the program. If you really appreciate what Jesus did for you, then you will blah, blah, blah. They don't say that. They say that the point of the gospel is that you would be free, and we would be very sensitive to any burden that we put on you. Jesus, after all, says, my yoke is easy, my burden is light. They want to make sure that's true. So they agree to give four basic prohibitions at James' suggestion. And what you need to understand about these, we don't have time to get into them in depth, but these would have been very reasonable to the Gentile Christians. These would have been things, if they read them, they'd be like, oh, oh yeah, okay. Okay, well, we thought it was going to be a longer list. Oh, yes, absolutely. That's how they would have reacted, right? If you look at these four items, there's some quibbling over how exactly to translate and understand them. But what's most likely is, in part, they're prohibiting some of the pagan temple practices that these people would have already given up after their conversion.

Right? Blood, like drinking blood, right? Or, you know, kind of blood rituals, right? Most of these Gentiles would have already given that up, right? But they're saying, hey, just make sure that you don't go back and do that anymore, because that's going to really, really scandalize your Jewish brothers and sisters, right? Meat or eating food that had been ritually strangled, don't do that.

[29 : 31] That could also refer to infanticide, a common way to practice infanticide and abortive practice would have been to strangle, right? So it could very well mean that as well. They say, that was very common in the ancient world. They're saying, Christians, don't do that. We don't believe in that. We don't believe in that. So don't do that, right? That's going to scandalize people.

Now, they're not saying you're going to lose your salvation if you do this. Their concern is, even though you will technically not lose your salvation, that is, if you're a Christian, this is something that you don't do, right? And then if we look at the other two prohibitions, right? You look at the other two prohibitions of idolatry, eating food sacrificed to idols, which is essentially idolatry, and then sexual immorality. These are just basic, almost summative aspects of God's moral law, which does still apply to Christians. You say, wait, I thought that you just said that we were free from the law. And I want to get into this. It's a bit of a side point, but it's worth it. We've got an extra minute or two. It's worth it, okay? I don't know when we're going to come back to this. A lot of people accuse Christians, and listen, I can't tell you how many times people have said this to me. Often it's in a conversation around sexuality and sexual ethics. And people will say, this is the thing I hate about Christians. You guys pick and choose what laws from the Old Testament you like to follow. You're obsessed with sex, and so anything in Leviticus that talks about sex and what you can and can't do. You're willing to apply that. But what if I want to eat shellfish?

What about mixing fabrics? Why don't you apply those laws as well? And there have been entire books about these issues written from that frame of reasoning, right? The problem is that people who are reasoning that way don't understand the difference between the ceremonial law and the moral law, right? The ceremonial law, these are all of the ritual cleanliness laws. These are the ways that you would keep yourself clean ritually. And following the death and resurrection of Jesus, they're no longer necessary. So all that stuff about shellfish, mixing fabrics, or whatever, all of that is no longer necessary because of the cross, right? That's what we're talking about here. That's what the council is all about. The moral law is a different category. The moral law, when it talks about things like, you know, the Ten Commandments, idolatry, sexual immorality, the moral law, that is a reflection of the character of God. It is not a reflection of the character of God to say, don't eat shellfish, right? It's a reflection of the character of God to say, don't worship other gods, right? Be faithful. And by the way, the connection between sexual immorality and idolatry is so strong in the Bible, they're so related, that actually in the Old

Testament and the Hebrew, it's the same word. The Bible uses the same word to describe both things, right? So it's very easy to understand why then they would put this in the list. Oh, and of course, no longer practice idolatry, no longer practice sexual immorality, right? And there were lots of instances in the early church where you'd have Gentile converts come in and they'd have two, three, four wives. And that's why they had to write in places like 1 Timothy 3, hey, if somebody's going to be a leader in the church, they can't have multiple wives.

They need to only have one wife. It was this whole process of re-enculturating Gentile converts. And the Jerusalem council in this decree that went out played a big role in that.

[32 : 39] How do you enculturate pagan Gentiles who have become Jesus followers into the Christian community, right? So it required an enormous amount of discernment, right? So the reason the moral law still applies to Christians is because this is a reflection not only of God's own character, but it's a reflection of the kind of character that God desires for all human beings to have.

The point of the gospel is that we would then be able to be sanctified and one day be able to fulfill the moral law, exceed the moral law, make the moral law no longer necessary.

That's the point. And that's the difference. To go further would be to go in a different direction homiletically. I'm not going to do that. The main point I want you to see is the combination of orthodoxy and compassion as a mark of the gospel. Francis Schaeffer, who has deeply formed me, in the God who is there, says this. He says, there's nothing more ugly than orthodoxy without compassion. And I fully agree. You know, the gospel is a lot like a song.

I know I've probably said this before, but, you know, a song is really words and melody. If you have just the words, not really the song. If you have just the melody, put any words in, it could be a different song, right? You need both words and melody for a song to really be a song.

And in the same way, there is such a thing as gospel truth, the words, and a gospel tone, right? The melody, the melody of the gospel. The truth is the message itself. Here's what Jesus has done for you. The tone, which is the way that message is delivered, is a tone of compassion.

[34 : 24] It's a tone of sincerity. It's a tone of humility. It's a tone of love. I would go so far as to say, if you speak the words of the gospel without any love, without any compassion, there's a point at which I question whether or not it is the gospel that you're proclaiming. You're singing a different song at that point, right? It's vitally important that we have the right theology. I don't want you to go away and say, Tommy said that the theology doesn't matter. No, it's vitally important that we have the right theology. But if we wield that theology like a hammer, which is so common, and forgive me, I'm conservative theologically, but man, a lot of my conservative brothers and sisters, they wield their theology like a hammer. If you use it to crush people, then you have lost something essential to the gospel. Gospel-centered churches are marked by at least these three qualities. They have a culture of spiritual freedom centered on grace and grace alone. There is no implicit, if you really want God to love you kind of stuff going on. Grace. Cultural openness, meaning we are constantly asking, is the gospel being communicated, being celebrated in a transcultural way? Or are we creating unnecessary cultural ties and barriers? Right? And then finally, compassionate orthodoxy, not wielding it like a club, but extending it with love, grace, and compassion. The reason for that is that the greatest thing about the gospel is not what Jesus did, it's why he did it. He did it for love. He did it because of his unfathomable, infinite compassion for you and me.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for the gospel, and we thank you that the power of the gospel is not limited by us. We can't get in the way of it. Your word goes out, and it never returns to you empty despite us. It does everything that you intend it to do.

Lord, I pray that we would be a church that is on board with that and not thwarting it. I pray that we would be a church that is aligned with this gospel, aligned with the church as it was in 48 or 49 AD, aligned with the decree that went out, aligned with this vision and this truth, the gospel truth, that is literally transforming the world under our feet. Lord, I pray for this in the power of the Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.