



Characteristics of a Grace-oriented Church

Many Bible-believing churches talk about grace. But are they consistent in their practice? Here are some things that should characterize a church that follows the biblical principles of grace. Relevant Bible passages are listed for further study.

1. *Free Grace is taught and preached consistently.* A grace-oriented church encourages gospel preaching that makes it clear that we are saved by grace plus nothing, through faith plus nothing, in Christ plus nothing. Their gospel message does not imply that we have to make commitments to God or do any good works in order to be saved, or do the same afterward to validate that we are saved. Assurance of salvation is available to all who believe in the promises of God. Likewise, our subsequent Christian growth is based on grace just as our initial salvation was. Ephesians 2:8-9; John 1:16; Titus 2:11-12

2. *People are encouraged to grow in grace.* Grace gives people both motivation to grow and room to make mistakes while it gently guides them into maturity. This is the process of discipleship. Growth in grace has as its goal Christlikeness. A church that is serious about making disciples will help people grow deep in the Christian life. Ephesians 4:7-16; Colossians 2:7; 1 Peter 2:1-3; 2 Peter 3:18

3. *Grace is the primary motivation for Christian living.* There is a positive approach to ministry which motivates people to grow by grace not guilt. Preaching and teaching does not make people feel unnecessarily guilty. Instead of emphasizing *what* we are or are not doing, grace emphasizes *who* we are in Jesus Christ. This motivates us to live up to who we are as God's greatly blessed children. Romans 12:1-2; Galatians 2:20-21; Ephesians 4:1

4. *People are accepted as they are.* A church should model God's own love and gracious actions toward all people. Though we are each different and prone to sin, God accepts us because we are His children in Christ. A grace-oriented church shows acceptance to people not only when they come to Christ for salvation, but also as they try to live the Christian life. Such a church accepts differences in culture, personality, opinion, giftedness, questionable matters, and personal preferences because God has accepted the person. Romans 14:1-13; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Ephesians 1:6

5. *The unbiblical extremes of license and legalism are avoided.* Grace is not perverted into an excuse to do whatever we please, called license. The Bible says that grace teaches us to live godly lives. The opposite perversion of grace, legalism, implies that we must adhere to non-biblical or man-made standards to be acceptable to God. A church can exert subtle or overt pressure to conform outwardly to such artificial standards. But a grace-oriented church holds to the Bible's clear teachings, is flexible in the unclear issues, and never allows human rules to supercede the authority of Scripture. Mark 7:1-23; Romans 6; Colossians 2:20-23; Titus 2:11-12

6. *Liberty is balanced by love.* Grace frees us to love and serve God, which means we should love and serve others also. A grace-oriented church will teach how to balance the joyful liberty of the Christian life with a love for God and others. This means that in areas of conscience or questionable things, we are encouraged to temper our activity by considering how it will affect others and by

continued on back



acting only out of love. We are encouraged to use our liberty to serve others. Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8; 10:23-33; Galatians 5:13-14

7. *There is an emphasis on being, not doing.* Busyness is not godliness; godliness is godliness. And godliness begins in the heart with the realization of who we are as God's children through faith in Christ. The grace-oriented church encourages godliness by emphasizing growth in our personal relationship to God. Ministry and service come from the joyful desire to honor God, not the mistaken belief that God is not happy unless we are busy. Luke 10:38-42; Ephesians 5:1-2; Colossians 2:6-7; 2 Peter 1:2-11

8. *There is a sincere desire to share the message of grace with the world.* Those who have been freely blessed should be willing to share that blessing with others. The "God of all grace" desires all men to be saved through His provision in Christ. If a church is seeking after God's heart, they will be active in reaching the world with the gospel of grace, because that is where God's heart is. Matthew 28:18-20; John 17:18; Acts 1:8; 1 Timothy 1:12-16; 2:1-7

9. *Those who sin are dealt with biblically.* The reality of sin in Christians is understood and addressed biblically. Personal confession and restoration is taught. Sins of a more public or blatant nature are handled by the church lovingly and prayerfully with the goal of restoring the offender to full fellowship with God and the church. The grace-oriented church reflects a healing environment rather than a critical and condemning spirit. Matthew 18:15-20; 2 Corinthians 2:6-8; Galatians 6:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

Conclusion

Some churches already model these characteristics of a grace-oriented church. Surely many more could. Christians who want a church home that consistently reflects the doctrines of grace will benefit by looking for these things. Christians already in a church should not use the above characteristics to ungraciously condemn that church's weaknesses. Rather, they should gently and lovingly encourage the church to strive for these goals. The best way to help a church become grace-oriented is to let the people see these principles at work in our own lives first.