

An Introduction into Gospel Community: Part 1 (Taken from cps. 1 & 2 of Dever & Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*).

Our sermon today is really a piggy back off of last weeks sermon from Heb. 8. And the 2nd point from that text was that ALL the members of the New Covenant will know the Lord. I do not believe the church will “essentially” be a mixed community. In other words, with Israel, throughout their history, the majority of the community did not have faith. And they were “mixed” with the remnant who did have faith. Well, in the New Covenant, ALL of them will know the Lord (8:11). This means that the ALL the members of the NC are Christians, ALL of them have been regenerated, ALL of them have the Holy Spirit. And these are the members of the Church of Christ. This means that we are a supernatural community. We are very different than other types of communities. And what unites us is not the things of this world, but Christ. Without Christ and his power, we have no supernatural community. With Him, we are the most powerful community in the world! We are the Church!

With this in mind, I want to consider the idea of “community” ask some questions like these: “What makes us a supernatural community?” “What does a supernatural community look like?” “What makes it different than other communities?” And then I would like to be very practical in our applications. And I must let everyone know that these thoughts are biblical, and I think of them often as one of your pastors. But, this sermon is taken from cps. 1 & 2 of a book the elders are reading together called *Compelling Community*. (See booktable.)

The book begins by describing two churches, both in the same city, both have been growing in numbers for many years, both care for the poor in their communities, both places have lots happening on Sunday mornings, both are tight-knit communities, both use the Bible, both have pastors who preach sermons, both call themselves a “church.” But, these two communities are completely different! Here the book describes what we call a “conservative” and a “liberal” community. And the author of the book tells us that the pastor of the “liberal” church doesn’t believe in the atonement or the physical resurrection of Jesus, and isn’t even sure he believes in “God.” But the other community, the “conservative” believes in the Word of God and that only through hearing his word, does faith come. Here, we have two different communities that are “thriving” as far as activity and numbers, but only one of them is a real Christian community. His point is that you don’t necessarily have to have God to “build community” and call yourself a church.

In our example we see that one church can thrive (at least in numbers) regardless of the Gospel. The author says that our churches build community without the gospel all the time. And he doesn’t say that we aren’t concerned with the gospel, or that we purposely neglect the gospel. But, we may be in danger of building communities without the gospel. So what does this look like when a church builds community without the gospel? One example: Let’s say a single mother joins a church. Who will she naturally build friendships with? It will be other single moms. So, we might encourage her to join a small group for single moms, and very quickly she integrates into that community and thrives. Mission accomplished right? Another person, another number, plugged in and going. But . . . what occurred is a demographic phenomenon and not necessarily a gospel phenomenon. Single moms gravitate toward one another regardless of whether the gospel is true or not. This is normal. And this community may be good and helpful, but its existence says nothing about the power of the gospel.

Let's think of other means we use to build community:

Similar life experiences (singles groups, newly married, young professionals, etc.)

Similar identity (Cowboy churches, motorcycle churches, arts churches)

Similar cause (Ministry teams for feeding the hungry, helping a school, combatting human trafficking, pro life ministries, etc.)

Similar needs (Program-based churches that organize community around similarity of felt needs)

Similar social position (Sometimes a ministry—or an entire church—gathers the “movers and shakers” in society)

You get the picture. And I must point out that none of these things are wrong in and of themselves. And many of these things line up with the ethics of the Bible. But, underneath these strategies for building community is not “primarily” the gospel or the power of the gospel. Again, there's nothing wrong with wanting to be with people of similar life experiences. But, if these things are our focus in our churches, our “communities,” we may be building something that would exist even if God did not.

Our tendency in the church is to do something because it “works.” People gravitate toward people like themselves. Brothers and sisters, with the right techniques and the right methods, we can grow a community, especially if they are based on similarities. In the book, he calls these churches “gospel plus” churches. In these communities nearly every relationship is founded on the gospel PLUS something else. “JIM” and “JAMES” are both Christians, but the real reason they are friends is because of their like interests. But, contrast this model with what he calls the “gospel revealing” community. In the gospel revealing community, many relationships would not exist if it were not for the power of the gospel. Why? Because the focus of their relationship is not their similarities, but the gospel. The gospel is what brings them together. And while natural affinities always take place in a church (I am NOT saying they shouldn't), the similarities are not the focus. Instead, church leaders focus on helping people out of their comfort zones and form relationships that would not be possible apart from the supernatural. And when this happens, the community displays the power of the gospel.

Have you thought about such things? If so, what does that look like here at Grace? Personally, I've/we've never been big on programs and “forced” service in the church. So, in this way, I think we are on the right track. But, as our elders are reading this book, we are forced to evaluate and look inwardly. And honestly, it is hard work to cultivate “gospel” relationships. It's easy to hang with and form relationships with those who are like us! Again, this will naturally happen. And this is ok, even inside the church. But . . . what is our focus? What is our aim? What is our underlying principle? Is it the Gospel, which is the power of God? Or, is it to do something that attracts and keeps members based on similar affinities? I cannot recall all the folks who have left Grace through the years because there is not enough _____ in the church.

I must ask, “*What is it that unifies us as a community?*” It is Christ! It is not our likes or dislikes. It is Christ! So, What is God's plan for the church? Look with me to Eph. 2. It begins with the gospel of Christ that brings salvation. In Christ, God looks down upon sinners in his mercy and saves us. Eph. 2:4-5: “**But God, being rich in mercy . . . even when we were dead in our**

trespasses, made us alive together in Christ . . .” This is the power of the NC community in Christ. ALL of them will KNOW me. Why? Because God gives us life. V. 10: **“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus . . .”** But, then as we continue in this chapter, we see an implication. Our salvation in Christ leads to UNITY. Look at Eph. 2:14-18: **“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.”** This truth could not be more clear. It is the gospel of Christ that brings unity. And the truth is that there is NOTHING in this world that can bring REAL unity between people of this world who have different histories, ethnicities, religions, and cultures than the cross of Christ. Consider a group of Jews and Gentiles who share NOTHING in common except a centuries-old loathing for one another. What can bring together liberal democrats and libertarian republicans. What could bring together the NASCAR crowd with the more upper class folks who spend their time at art galleries and wineries? Throughout history what brings unity between slaves and master, Nazi Germans and Jews, black and white, red and yellow, rich and poor, etc. In Kenya, I’ve some of the worst fights possible between Gikuyu and Luo. (The examples are infinite.)

Can you imagine a greater obstacle to overcome between such groups? This kind of thing doesn’t just happen in this sinful world we live in. It comes only in Christ. The New Covenant Community is a supernatural community. And if it is not supernatural, then what is it? It is a community of like-mindedness, or similar likes and dislikes. Again, it is not that we should do away with similarities. The difference is in the FOUNDATION of our unity. If our EMPHASIS is on similarities for growing and maintaining the church, we will eventually lose the gospel. But, if our emphasis is on the Gospel and the power of the cross of Christ to unify, then we display the glory of God in this world UNLIKE any other institution. If we have “cowboy church” or “motorcycle church” or “art church” etc., we may be preaching the gospel, but our focus will not be the power of the gospel itself. But, if our focus is the Christ and his gospel, we will have something supernatural! And when we do this, we will display God’s glory to bring about every tribe and people and nation and tongue into His New Covenant People, the Church!

At the end of the day, your identity is in Christ. It is not in your profession, or the color of your skin, or your social club, or the bridge club, or the car club, etc. Our identity is in Christ, who has broken down the walls of “Jew” and “Gentile” and made us “one” in him. In order to bring this sermon to a close, I want to ask some probing questions to get us to think inwardly. And as I do I hope I am bringing all of us into our elder meetings as we read *Compelling Community* together. And next week, I will go a little further as I hope to give us more to consider as we think about the idea of “supernatural” community.

At the end of cp. 1 the author asks these questions (which are for us). And I will others as they apply to us particularly.

1. How do you define “success” for the network of relationships in our church that makes up community? Eph. 3:10 says that the church (our community), and the unity it has in Christ is supposed to “display the manifold wisdom of God” to the world and to the “rulers and authorities in heavenly places.” Is the basis of our unity Christ? Or, is it similarities with other Christians?

2. Are our goals and targets for nurturing community in the local church consistent with something that only God can create? Or does the way we practice community push us to more of a “gospel-plus” community that we can manufacture on our own?

3. Do you find yourself having to “sell” various programs and initiatives to your congregation? Or are you appealing to them in such a way as to move them away from a consumer mind-set? We’ve never really been a program-church. However, I do wonder often about this idea of a “consumer mind set” creeps in? Often, when folks come to church, they come why?

So what do we do after hearing a sermon like this? This is not a “law” type sermon where I say, “*See what you’ve done wrong. So repent, trust Christ and don’t do that again.*” Of course every sermon should bring an awareness of sin, either in our thinking or in our affections or in our actions. Personally, whether we are like this or not, relies heavily upon your elders, me in particular as I am the one preaching week in and week out. And I would like to think that we are “gospel centered.” And from one perspective we are! But, I am afraid that how the gospel is worked out and applied may look different than what I have preached this morning. So, pray for your elders . . . that I/we would consider with the greatest diligence the implications and applications for supernatural community here at Grace. Please pray for us. And, for yourselves, I would ask that you consider these truths from this week and next and begin to ask yourself and your elders good questions moving forward as to how we are working through such things.

USE Ezekiel temple at end.

So, how do we cultivate a supernatural community? The author says that our main problem is that we see “community” as more important than God. In other words, the “community” becomes our MAIN focus instead of God. So, what must our focus be as a church? I think of Acts 6 with the forming of the initial deacons. The early church in Jerusalem was on the verge of a split. The apostles were spending most of their time in food distribution to the Greek speaking widows. So, they called 7 men (deacons) to “physically” serve the body. Why? Let me read the response of the apostles. In 6:3-4: “**Therefore brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.**” And then in v. 4 he gives the essentials to church growth and healthy community. “**But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.**” Elders must spend most of their efforts in preaching and prayer. The implication is that the entire body does the same. If we move away from THESE very simple things, and spend our time in other things, we will eventually lose the gospel and do other things to grow the congregation.