

An Introduction to Gospel Community (part 2) (Material taken from Dever: *Compelling Community*, cps. 1 & 2)

I want to begin with a vision from the prophet Ezekiel. He was in exile in Babylon. And He saw a vision of the temple. He sees the glory of the Lord, the same glory that filled the temple when Solomon dedicated it many years earlier. And the glory of the Lord is pictured as resting on a wheeled throne, and the throne is being supported by flying Cherubim. And then the glory begins to move. It leaves the most holy place. It stops at the threshold of the temple. And then it continues away, moving over the east gate. And finally, the glory of Lord is gone. It has left the temple! . . . Yet, for the time being, nothing appears different. The temple is still there. God's people are there. Life continues unchanged. It's all the same. Well, what if the same thing happened here at Grace! We continue to meet, preach, sing, study the Bible, etc. What happens?

Do some people immediately feel as though they don't belong? Or do they continue coming for mostly the same reasons they did before?

Do some friendships dissolve because no bond remains? Or do they survive because they were based on something other than the gospel in the first place?

Do you notice a conspicuous change in the conversations people have in your home groups? Maybe a new reluctance to engage in difficult talk about each other's lives? Or was the self-sacrifice in these relationships never dependent on God's Spirit to begin with?

Do you begin to see a flood of requests for pastoral counseling because members are no longer bearing each other's burdens? Or have people always seen the "pastors" or "staff" as the "professionals" they call upon in a time of need?

The author of the book writes "*I would hope our church would dissolve into chaos the moment God removed his power.*" Then he says, "*But I fear that many of us have built church community in such a way that Ezekiel's vision could come true in our own day, and we would never notice the difference.*"

This is a question we must ask ourselves? Have we built our community around the gospel . . . PLUS something else, that doesn't need the power of the gospel at all? Has the supernatural power of the gospel become optional? If this the case, then we've built a community that would continue even without the power of God. So, what would this look like? What are we giving up if our community is not a "supernatural" community? According to the author of *Compelling Community*, we compromise two essential parts of our commission as the Church of Christ: 1) Evangelism and 2) Discipleship. Let me ask, "*What is our mission as a church?*" Matt. 28:18-20 says, "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.**" Here, we see two essentials: 1) We are to evangelize. We are to tell them about Jesus (baptizing those who believe); and 2) We are to disciple those who believe (teach them to obey ALL the commands of Jesus). Let's begin with evangelism.

1. We compromise Evangelism. Here, the author emphasizes the foundation of our evangelism, the supernatural part of our community, particularly . . . love. In other words, he says the way we LOVE one another as a church is part of the power in our evangelism. When the world looks at us, they see a different kind of love. In John 13:34-35. Jesus says, **“A New Commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”** And then he says, **“By THIS all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** And what kind of love is this? It is the love of Christ, who went to the cross. Rom. 5:8 says, **“God showed his love toward us in while we were yet sinners (the enemies of God), Christ died for us.”** The world may lay it’s life down for its friends, but not for its enemies. This is why Paul prays in Eph. 3: that we might be **“rooted and grounded in love, and may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge . . .”** When the local church defies natural explanation, it confirms the supernatural power of the gospel which gives power to our witness.

The author of the book describes the early church in Acts, way before the local churches were established and the gospel was being preached. And he has a theory (which I like). Early on, what displayed the power of the gospel. In Jerusalem, in Samaria, and later to the Gentiles, it was speaking in tongues and miraculous signs. But years later, as Paul visits new churches and we read about them in the NT, the reports of the miraculous signs stop. Is it possible that those miraculous signs stopped because local churches were established? And once the gospel takes root in those churches, the Spirit enables miraculous community, as they display the love of Christ to one another and to the world. Whether this is true or not, the point still stands. If we do not love one another the way Christ loves, but instead become like the world in the way we love, we compromise our evangelism.

I believe at the end of the day, it will be the love of Christ that will compel us to love one another. So how do you practically grow in the love of Christ? You do this by reading the Bible and focusing on the great love of Christ in the Gospel. You do this through prayer (as Paul prayed for the Ephesians), asking God to help you see the love of Christ. You ask God to help you love each other as Christ loved.

2. We compromise discipleship. Not only do we compromise our evangelism if our community is not supernatural in the way we love, we also compromise our discipleship. Look with me to Eph. 4:11-16 where we see how discipleship works in the local church. **“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”** Here, we tend to focus on the leaders of the church as the ones who equip the saints for the ministry. In our context our elders, home group leaders, teachers preach and teach and live out the gospel in order to equip the saints. But if we stop here,

we miss the emphasis of this text. Discipleship starts with Christ who gives “ministers” of the Word, who then, teach the body to “obey the commands of Jesus.” But, it doesn’t stop there. Instead, it continues to the entire congregation; this is the emphasis. Look at vv. 12-14 again: “**to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ . . . until we all attain to the unity of the faith of the knowledge of the Son of god, to mature manhood . . .**” And then v. 14: “**so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine . . .**” The focus is on the entire congregation, that ALL of us grow in unity and maturity. And when we do this, we will not be “carried about by every wind of doctrine.” The author says, “*Nothing safeguards the gospel quite like the supernatural community of faith that gospel preaching produces. Lose what is supernatural about that community and, I fear in a generation or so, you lose the gospel.*”

By way of application, he says, “*Christian community makes faith plausible. When I am tempted to believe the world’s lies, community helps me remember that God’s truth is perfect. Repeat that return to faith after a moment of doubt or temptation a dozen times over, and you have a typical week in my life. Repeat it hundreds of times, and you have a faithful week in the life of the church. Repeat it a million times over, and the gospel is preserved for the next generation.*” This means that to the extent that we hold on to the gospel . . . TOGETHER . . . is the extent to which we build a supernatural community. Heb. 10:23-25 says, “**Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.**”

At this point the author asks the question: “*What makes community supernatural?*” And he boils it down to two things: 1) Supernatural forgiveness, and 2) Supernatural Love.

1. Supernatural Forgiveness. Let me retell a story from Luke 7. Here, Simon, a Pharisee, invites Jesus to his house for a meal. And as they are eating a “sinful” woman comes in with expensive ointment and begins to use it to wash Jesus’ feet. As she cries, she wipes Jesus feet with her tears and her long hair. And as Simon watches, he says to himself, “**If this man were a prophet, he would have known what sort of woman this is and would not have touched her**” (vv. 36-40). So, Jesus tells a parable of a about two men, one with a great amount of debt and another with a little debt, and neither could pay. And the lender forgives all their debts. And Jesus says to Simon, “**Which one will love the moneylender more?**” And Simon says, “**the one with the most debt.**” And then Jesus sums up the parable by speaking about the sinful woman. He says, “**I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.**” (vv. 41-50).

You see, the Pharisee thought he was forgiven because of how much he loved God. But the parable teaches the opposite. Love for God does not produce forgiveness. It’s the other way around. Forgiveness is what causes love. Her love was not the ground of her pardon, but the proof of a pardon she had come to know.” Brothers and sisters, we are those who sins are forgiven through the atoning death of Jesus. And, our forgiveness is supernatural. We are sinners. Think of all your sins, lack of love for neighbor, lusting after the opposite sex, disobedience as children, lack of trust in God and his word, etc. As sinners, we are by nature, utterly void of righteousness and positively inclined to evil. The wages of sin are death and

enmity against God. Our debt is too large to repay. It is impossible for us to generate or give the kind of righteousness God requires. And we are without excuse and without defense. Our fundamental problem is not that we lack meaning in life. Our problem is an insurmountable debt . . . sin . . . before a holy God. And our salvation is not conceivable by any human imagination. If God overlooks our sin, he ceases to be righteous and good and holy. My favorite words in all the Bible are found in Eph. 2:4: “But . . . God.” This is where the gospel of Christ comes in. 2 Cor. 5:21 says, “**For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**” Brothers and sisters, what makes us a supernatural community is the fact that our sins are forgiven.

2. Supernatural Love. This truth flows from the first. We love God to the extent that we understand his forgiveness. Our love for him flows from his forgiveness to us. Those who have been forgiven much WILL love much. There are no exceptions. 1 John 4:20-21 says: “**If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.**” This love allows us to live together in a way that the world does not understand. There is nobody we cannot forgive as Christians . . . if God has forgiven us. I question the heart of a person who names the name of Christ and cannot forgive another person, no matter what. A cold heart that does not love says one of two things: 1) Either he/she has not been forgiven, or 2) He/she does not appreciate the depth of God’s forgiveness (this is just immaturity).

Brothers and sisters, those who are part of a supernatural community love as they have been loved. And, all our actions flow from our understanding of the love of Christ. And this ability comes from the power of the Holy Spirit as we grow in our understanding of what Christ has done for us. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but living together is quite messy. We worship with other sinners (consider all your homes). But, by the supernatural power of God, who has forgiven us, we grow more and more to love those who sit next to us in this room.

In his conclusion the author gives two guiding principles concerning supernatural community, particularly how the leaders (elders) choose what to do in their decision-making. There are countless decisions. Should we choose this ministry leader or that one? Should home groups be open to visitors or not? How can we help a brother/sister who seems to be isolated? So, two principles:

1. Regeneration precedes community. I’ve spoken with pastors who take new congregations and shortly find out that a majority of their congregation is mostly non-Christian. There is little or no evidence they have been regenerated, or as Jesus says to Nicodemus, “born again.” If this is the case for the congregation, none of the things I’ve mentioned this morning will work. The author says, “*In fact, one sign in a congregation that is not regenerate is how hard you have to work to motive them. If an attractional ministry has gathered a congregation of Christians in name only, you will have to manipulate or coerce them into acting like followers of Jesus.*” (happening in many churches)

Therefore, his advice is to **PREACH THE GOSPEL**, from both the pulpit and in private conversation. Beloved, if you are really born again, and truly have the Holy Spirit, your elders

never have to motivate you to act as a Christian! This is why we preach the gospel over and over. I really believe some of you were not Christians when you became members at Grace, but over time, through the hearing of the beautiful words of the gospel of Christ, you've been truly saved. With this in mind, he tells leaders to be patient and continue to preach, praying for God to take word and by the Spirit, bring faith.

2. Theology precedes practice. Some people think that theology divides; so we should not go too deep into theology. But this absurd! Remember, our love comes as we understand . . . what? . . . FORGIVENESS. If you have been forgiven, you desire to go DEEP into the person and work of Christ. And it is IMPOSSIBLE to exhaust the depths of the beauty of Christ. If someone is into theology and not into loving others, the problem isn't that he's spent too much time learning about God; it's that he never took to heart what he learned. Supernatural community begins with sound theology, and the deeper we go and the more we learn of the glorious truths of the gospel, the more mature is our supernatural community.

These first two chapters assume these things about a congregation going forward. I believe the majority in this congregation are saved. So, pray for your elders, that we would do whatever it takes to create an environment where we have supernatural community!