

THE GOSPEL AND COMMUNITY

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Introduction: An Important Matter

When it comes to understanding and discussing community in the context of the local church, much has been written and said from a variety of positions and perspectives. For any local church it is important to evaluate and articulate a biblical understanding of community, but for a church plant, it is paramount to do this as the culture and DNA of a church is being developed. While there has been much discussion regarding community in the local church, what is often lacking in the discussion is an understanding of the role of the gospel in forming and shaping biblical community. For the local church to function as a biblical community the gospel cannot be set aside for trends, fads, and pragmatic goals. Rather, the gospel must be the central and foundational component that impacts and influences every aspect of community within the local church including its inception as such.

To that end, the goal of this paper is to articulate how the gospel molds and shapes community by looking at the creation of the community, the foundation of the community, the shaping of the community, and the mission of the community. What will be made clear is that without the gospel at the center of the local church, no real community and, subsequently, no real life and lasting impact will be seen in the local church, which will exist as a social organization and not a called-out family.

The Gospel Calls a Community

Before there can be a proper understanding of biblical community there must be an understanding of how biblical community has come about. In the church today community is a buzzword. Everyone is all about authentic community. While that is good, it is often not clear why community is important and why it exists. If there is not a proper understanding of how community has come about in the context of the local church, then community will only remain a buzzword and will, most likely, not exist in any other or different form than the local Kiwanis Club, Alumni Chapter, or stay-at-home mom's playgroup. To remedy this wrong understanding of community in the church, the church cannot simply tack on "gospel" to community. At the end of the day, this addition of a word to create a catchphrase is not helpful to anyone in his or her understanding of community. What must be clear is that the gospel is not something added onto community, as if it is a certain flavor of biblical community, but that the gospel is the means of community, bringing it into existence.

The people of God are a called people. While this paper cannot present an exhaustive treatment of the Old Testament affirmation of this truth, what is clear from the text of the Old Testament is that God chose to call and create a people for his own possession (cf. Gen 12:1-3; 15; 17:1-8; Deut 7:6-8; Mal 3:16-18). The need to call a people out of the larger human race is due to the sinfulness and depravity of humanity. After the Fall, man has been at enmity with God, separated, orphaned. Man needed divine intervention to



bring about forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration. God, from the beginning, intended to redeem a people (Gen 3:15) and the redemptive story that is weaved throughout the text of Scripture reveals that this is exactly what he has done. The calling of his people is a theme of Scripture. When we fast forward to the culmination of the calling that takes place in and through the death and resurrection of Christ, we see that God reveals the essence of this calling and takes it up to a higher, more significant degree for his people. Christ comes to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). He did this by living the life all men should live and dying the death that all men should die for their rebellion and misplaced worship, namely of themselves. Christ Jesus, the Son of God, was sent to dwell among humanity on a Divine Rescue Plan. The cross of Christ is the pinnacle of the redemptive plan of God and in it the pinnacle of the calling of God's people. While there are many examples of this calling, one of the best is seen in 1 Peter 2. In this text Peter makes it clear that because of what Christ has done for them God has made them a people. "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (v. 10). These rebellious people were not God's people by genealogy or biology, they became God's people through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The gospel is what forms the people of God. A New Covenant people has been formed that are now declared to be a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession" in order to be worshipers and missionaries for the glory of God and the good of others (v. 9). While the people of God have existed since God began to call people, even from the time of Noah, what is clear from the New Testament and under the New Covenant is that the people of God have become the church and this has happened through the gospel.¹

The critical connection that must be seen is that the people of God, the church, which has come about by the gospel of Jesus Christ, is

true biblical community. There is no other biblical community that exists apart from the redeeming work of Christ. To give further definition to what it means to be the people of God, Romans 8:14-17 declares that the people of God are not merely a redeemed people, but through Christ have become the family of God. Once alienated people have been adopted into the family God where God is now Father and the Son is now brother. The metaphor and spiritual reality of adoption is an amazing aspect of the gospel and is not possible by any other means than the gospel.

As the people of God exist as the family of God, relationships with one another within the church gain greater clarity. Christ died for his people and upon repentance and faith an individual is brought into the people of God. People are not saved as individuals and then decide to be a part of the church, they are saved and brought into the family of God, the church, from the beginning.² Through Christ's sacrifice reconciliation has taken place between God and man, but also between everyone else who has been reconciled.³ God called his people not only to be in fellowship with him, but in fellowship with one another (1 Cor 5:2). True biblical community is formed through the good news of Jesus' reconciling and redeeming work. The implications for this truth are significant.

The church does not exist as a social club or religious organization, but as the bride of Christ, the family of God, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession. Community should then be seen as a synonym for all of these phrases that describe the church and the people of God. Biblical community is not a faddish term or a humanly derived concept. It is a divine creation that was declared and decided before the foundation of the world when it was decreed that God would adopt wicked sinners as his sons and daughters through the sacrifice of his Son (Eph 1:3-6). This means that community is not an option, but a mandate of the gospel. The gospel does not bring about salvation



and then leave individuals as isolated people. The gospel brings about salvation to undeserving people, recreating them and causing them to become living stones that are being built up as a spiritual house for the purpose of offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Christ (1 Pet 2:5). Therefore, true community comes about only in and through the gospel because apart from the gospel there is no reconciliation between God and man or man and man. Biblical community cannot exist apart from the gospel.

The Gospel as the Foundation of the Community

Since the gospel is the cause and originator of community, then it must also be the foundation of that community. To acknowledge that the gospel forms and calls a community is good, but applying this truth to the reality of life and ministry is an entirely additional step.

Everything that the local church does must be centered on and focused on the gospel. It must consistently and constantly call people to find their identity in Christ and to rest in and operate from that identity when it comes to how they live their lives and individuals and in community with one another. As mentioned above, the church is the family of God. Being family to one another is an implication of the gospel. A person cannot see themselves as a part of the people of God and not look at one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. When the gospel is the originator of community, but also the foundation of community it redefines our relationships with one another in the context of the local church. When a person becomes a part of a local church he or she can no longer be completely focused on himself or herself, but must consider the larger community, recognizing that his or her personal involvement will effect, either negatively or positively, the rest of the community. When the gospel is the foundation for the community there can no longer be a me-focused mentality to community within the local

church. The primary reason for this is that the gospel is contrary to individualistic living and thinking. Second Corinthians 5:15 clearly states that the gospel changes the focus of a person's living from self to God. God cares for his people and so, by implication, a follower of Christ should also love and care for God's people.

When the gospel is not only the originator, but also the foundation of a community, everything that the community does should be impacted by the gospel. In a gospel-centered community there should be continual striving to root out all sexism, racism, and classism because the gospel is the solution for all of these things (cf. Gal 3:25-29; Eph 2:11-22). In a community whose foundation is the gospel there should be a constant call for men and women to be who they are in Christ in every facet of life—as parents, spouses, children, neighbors, workers, bosses, coaches, community members, consumers, etc. The gospel can never be set aside for some other spiritual teaching, as if something else is more important or central to the people of God than the very truth that called them into existence. The gospel must remain at the center of the church and be the foundation of the community. Apart from this gospel foundation, the community will crumble, become ineffective or, at the very worst, teach both insiders and outsiders that the gospel is nothing more than a therapeutic solution to personal problems effectively making the church an optional activity or religious ritual.

The Gospel Shapes a Community

When the gospel is the foundation of the community of the local church it should shape every aspect of the church. To be more specific, the gospel should drive the mission, vision, and ministry of the local church. The mission of the church is to make disciples. Disciples are made when the gospel is preached and applied to every aspect of a person's life—the whole gospel to the whole person. When a person is clearly taught the gospel and shown how



the gospel impacts every area of life, including his or her relationships with other believers, significant things can begin to take place in the individual and the community. When a person understands that the gospel is what has called them out of darkness and into light and that it is the gospel that has brought them into the family of God to exist with others as the people of God, western individualism begins to become dismantled in a person's heart and life. In our individualistic culture we tend to make church an activity among many activities. But when we understand that the gospel calls us into a family and reorients our identity completely, we should start to see the community of the people of God as the center of our lives allowing all other aspects of life to flow in and out of this community.⁴ For instance, people are often excited about the idea of community until the community starts to speak into the life and decisions of a person. But this is exactly what a gospel-shaped community should look like, a real family where every one is speaking truth to everyone.⁵ The place for community within the local church is front and center. In other words, to be a part of a local church, but not connected to one another in real community where everyone is speaking truth to everyone will result in a lack of real discipleship and be a church where true gospel community does not exist. Worse yet is the reality that if an individual claims Christ, but has no interest in being connected and committed to a local church in real community, he or she might need to question whether they are really a part of the body of Christ at all.⁶

A gospel-centered community is a community that takes seriously the call to carry out all of the one-another commands given to the church in New Testament. These commands are to be lived out in the context of community, not merely as individuals. Again, this means that true biblical community must be at the center of who the church is and what the church does. While the church gathers together in corporate community on Sundays, it also scatters out as the church throughout the week, meeting in smaller gatherings

(e.g. community groups) and also sharing life together informally. It is in the church gathered and scattered that the making of disciples and discipleship should take place. Discipleship is about being conformed to the image of Christ through the process of sanctification with the means of the gospel. The community of God's people must play a central and primary role in discipleship. Ephesians 4 makes it very clear that the community is the place where growth to maturity takes place. It happens through various giftings, but most importantly through speaking the truth in love to one another. Change, therefore, in the life of a follower of Christ is and must be a community project.⁷

Change and discipleship in and through the community must be done by applying the gospel to one another's lives. Confession and repentance should be a regular part of the community discipleship process in addition to speaking the gospel of grace to one another. The community must call one another to live a life that is pleasing to God (cf. Eph 4:1; Col 2:6; 1 Thes 2:12). It must also remind one another of the grace of God and who we have become in and through the gospel (cf. Rom 8:1; 2 Cor 5:17). No real discipleship happens apart from the gospel and no real community happens apart from the gospel. It is central to everything. When a person's identity is found in Christ and a community's identity is found in Christ, real heart change and transformation can take place. When the gospel is central to everything and applied to every aspect of a person and a community it keeps the local church away from, to borrow from Tim Keller, religion and irreligion. The gospel is and must be the shaping factor of the community of God's people.

The Gospel is Fuel for Mission in Community

As a person and a community know the gospel and strive to live out the implications of the gospel the subsequent overflow should be that the individual and the community are compelled to go and



tell more and more people about the gospel. The gospel becomes the fuel for mission in the context of the community. The gospel creates a people who now find their identity in Christ instead of in themselves or the world. The gospel frees someone from living for himself or herself and enables that person to live for Christ (Gal 2:20). The old has passed away, the new has come (2 Cor 5:17). When a person has a new identity that places them in a new community and allows them to have a new focus for worship the overflow of all of this is to go and tell more people. An identity in Christ with worship of Christ leads to mission for Christ. Identity, worship, mission. First Peter 2:9-10 put this on display. When a person understands who they are because of the gospel, he is able to see that he was created and recreated to proclaim the excellencies of the one who called him out of darkness into his marvelous light. Proclaiming God's excellencies is both worship and evangelism. Therefore, gospel identity is central to gospel mission. And for gospel identity to be central, as has been stated above, a person must be in gospel community. Just like discipleship, mission is not an individual project, but a community project.⁸

Too often mission has been reduced to a one-to-one relationship with a believer to a non-believer. While individuals should be intentionally looking for opportunities to share the message of the gospel, this commitment and effort to evangelize should not be seen as something separate from the larger gospel community of the local church. Practically this means that as believers are building relationships with non-believers they should be seeking to integrate their relationships so that both their believing and non-believing friends begin to interact with another. This can be at Sunday gatherings, community group gatherings, or in everyday, normal life occurrences. The mission to make disciples in the surrounding local community should be the call and mandate of the local church all of the time, not simply during special events or campaigns. Tim Chester and Steve Timmis have so clearly stated that

much of gospel ministry and mission involve "ordinary people doing ordinary things with gospel intentionality."⁹ A community that understands that it has come into being because of the gospel, rests on the foundation of the gospel, and is shaped by the gospel, will also see mission and evangelism as an outworking of the gospel in their lives. Everyone then is a mouthpiece and ambassador of reconciliation.

In an area such as Northern Virginia, individualism reigns and commuting long distances for everything is normal. More gospel-centered churches need to be planted in Northern Virginia so that the local church can actually be local. A person's biblical community can and should exist within their physical community. When this takes place and a person is connected to a local church that preaches and applies the gospel to every aspect of his or her life, mission can happen in a more contextualized way because gospel-missionaries are being sent out into the surrounding community every week with the gospel on their minds and hearts and impacting the way they live resulting in ordinary people doing ordinary things with gospel intentionality. Real relationships are formed in the context of real life. The gospel reminds people that this world is not their home, but while they wait for the consummation of all things and for the New City to come they can live as sojourners and exiles in this place keeping their conduct honorable among non-believers so that they might see good gospel deeds and glorify God when Christ returns (1 Pet 2:11-12).

In John 13:35, Jesus tells his disciples that people will know they are his disciples by their love for another. In order for a non-believing world to see the love believers have for one another believers must do two things. First, they must actually be a part of a biblical community that strives to live out the implications of the gospel. Second, they must expose their lives and community to non-believers so that they might see what true biblical community

is. When community is founded and shaped by the gospel and non-believers are welcomed into it to experience it, the radical other worldly nature of it will become apparent. It will be clear that God's people are not perfect, self-righteous people, but people who have received grace upon grace and are seeking to honor God with their lives by becoming more like Jesus each and every-day. A gospel shaped community does not call people out of the world, but sends them out into the world to proclaim the life, hope, grace, mercy, and restoration that comes in and through Christ alone. The gospel continues to remain the center of everything for the people of God.

Conclusion: No Gospel, No Community, No Life

When the gospel is set aside for other spiritual things in the local church that local church begins to die. The gospel is what originates the church, it is the means of calling and creating the people of God. Because the gospel is the originator of true biblical community it must be present for real community to be present. Without the gospel there is no community. Without the gospel the local church becomes a social gathering and religious organization. It is relegated to an extracurricular activity, not the center of a person's life. The church is not something extra for the follower of Christ, it is his family. But the local church will only remain a person's family or be seen as a person's family when the gospel is preached and applied clearly and consistently. Without the gospel real community cannot exist. Without the gospel real life for this life is not possible. Therefore, the gospel must be paramount to all that the church is and does as the called out people of God.

Endnotes

¹ The phrase and thought "the people of God have become the church" was taken from a sermon preached by Joe Holland at The Commonwealth Collective, August 2012, in Arlington, VA. Session One - <http://www.commonwealthcollective.org/community-the-church-on-mission/>.

² Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 39.

³ Mark Dever, *What is a Healthy Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 24-25.

⁴ Chester and Timmis, *Total Church*, 44-45.

⁵ Tim Chester, *You Can Change* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 156.

⁶ Dever, *What is a Healthy Church?*, 27.

⁷ Chester, *You Can Change*, 152.

⁸ Chester and Timmis, *Total Church*, 62.

⁹ Ibid., 63.