

Compelling Christian Community

Introduction

Compelling Christian community is at the very heart of what it means to be the church and to be on mission together. There is no more powerful testimony to the Gospel than a community of folks who love one another consistently and unconditionally. In a culture where we are tempted to make church one more activity in an already crowded schedule developing compelling community takes intentionality and effort. But the effort is worth it. All of us have a deep need to belong and to be loved as we are.

When those who have not yet come to know Jesus see and experience a compelling community centered in Jesus Christ they are much more likely to really hear the good news of the gospel; and to experience the love of Jesus Christ.

Statistics

Church members are three and a half times as likely as nonmembers to be fully spiritually committed. Gallup in [Growing an Engaged Church](#), Albert L Winseman.

25% of Americans ages 18-29, say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion. <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>

The United States is on the verge of becoming a minority Protestant country; the number of Americans who report they are members of Protestant denominations now stands at barely 51%. <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>

Two Key Scripture Passages

Psalms 133: Describe a compelling community where verse 1 is lived out. What is required to achieve a community that is "good and pleasant"?

Acts 2:42-47: What are the components necessary in this passage for achieving compelling community and what are the results? In today's context, can this be done? If so, how? If not, why not? What's preventing us from this reality today?

Other related passages:

- Hebrews 10:24-25
- Philippians 2:1-5
- Genesis 2:18
- James 3:17-18 (*The Message*)

- Ephesians 4:29; Galatians 6:10 (passages that emphasize our conduct in community or groups)
- Isaiah 58:1-12
- Micah 6:8

Christ Point

The life and ministry of Jesus is the embodiment of compelling Christian community. He lived and traveled with his disciples modeling attentiveness to the Spirit and obedience to God and teaching them as they lived life together.

Jesus certainly loved his disciples as they were, not as they should be. Peter denied him three times as Jesus knew he would (John 12), but Jesus forgave him and reconciled with Peter asking him three times if he loved him (John 21). He understood Thomas' need to touch his wounds and allowed him to do so. At the same time he continually challenged them to be their best selves by loving each other as he had loved them (John 13:34-35).

Jesus washed his disciples feet as a sign of his love and desire to serve them (John 13) and allowed Peter to wash his feet. He prayed that his disciples might be one as he and the Father were one (John 17) and called them to remain connected to him as a vine to branches (John 15).

The Key Question

In today's highly individualized culture, having many other ways of staying connected, what's so compelling about Christian community?

Prayer

Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen

Church History Perspective

From the outset Christ made it clear that the Spirit would be the driving and compelling force of the Christian community. Before the church was begun Christ ask the disciples to wait first for the anointing of the Spirit. The Spirit works to bring people to Christ and help us to grow in our relationship with Christ as a community of believers. It is the Spirit who compels us to reach out in love and extend grace to our neighbor, welcome and embrace gender, ethnic and generational inclusiveness, provide material care, share story, enter into and live out the gospel, guide us in our prayers and worship and enables us to exercise the fruit of the Spirit.

The early church sought to be attentive to and live into the Spirit infused body of Christ. Paul chastised those who fell away from the Spirit directed life and urged the early church to remain attentive to the Spirit and hold fast to Christ's abiding and life giving presence. He also admitted this was and would continue to be a struggle.

Over the course of history the church has swayed back and forth from an emphasis on being the body of Christ or being an institution. Historically the church has extended care and grace, but at times struggled to shut out the ways of the world, ignoring those caught up in the bondage of injustice, or worse, embracing it. We are left to ask the question, "a compelling Christian community for whom?" Such was the question asked by those who launched the reformation. Re-emphasizing Christ as the head of the church, acknowledging that "everyone" has the right to come directly to God through Christ, proclaiming that salvation is by grace through faith alone, working to make God's word available to all people and recognizing that the final authority for all people is the Word of God.

Covenant Church History Perspective

The Covenant Church emerged from the pietistic movement that emphasized a personal relationship with God and a life lived for God. God has always been the focal point. It is God's abiding love and grace made manifest by Christ and the Spirit, that leads to a compelling Christian community. This community from the beginning was by nature devotional, biblical, connectional and missional.

The term "Mission Friends" was an early nickname given to Covenant people. They were committed to faithfully pursue the mission of God together. They emphasized exercising a deep personal and communal devotional life and attentiveness to the Spirit, turning to the Word of God as the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine and conduct, and joining with one another in response to the love and grace of God through Christ to extend God's love and fulfill God's will in the world.

Compelling Christian Community within the Covenant Church is:

Biblical: We read God's Word, *faithfully* aware of the lenses through which we view scripture, *communally* understanding that the Holy Spirit and the community of faith work in concert, *rigorously* with an awareness of cultural and historical context, *charitably* recognizing different interpretations on matters not central to our core beliefs, and *holistically* interpreting passages with in the context of the whole of scripture.

Connectional: Our Christ-like-ness is demonstrated most openly in the way we relate to others: within our families, the body of Christ, the wider community and the world. We recognize that we are all the church together, children, youth, adults, men and women, persons of all ethnicities, nationalities, social standing, and ability. Historically committed to building up one another in faith, caring for each another, extending grace, reaching out to those different from ourselves, sharing story, resources, and meals, rejoicing with each other, and suffering with each other.

Missional: The Great Commission sends us out into the world to make disciples and the Great Commandment calls us to love the Lord our God and neighbors as ourselves. Early on the Covenant church sent out missionaries across the seas and established local ministries of compassion and mercy, for immigrants, children, the ill and the aging. Global mission has expanded to 37 countries, and Covenant World Relief operates in the most destitute areas of the world to bring both immediate and long-term assistance. In recent years the Covenant church has also emphasized the importance of building awareness and acting against injustice by establishing ministries for attending to racial righteousness, human-trafficking, the imprisoned, the abused, and unjust practices toward immigrants.

Devotional: The Covenant church has always affirmed a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit and affirms the Trinitarian understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Compelling Christian Community acknowledges the necessity of being attentive and responsive to the Holy Spirit who instills within our hearts a desire to turn to Christ, who enables our obedience to Christ and conforms us into his image. For Covenanters this is manifested though a devotional life of prayer and worship. Both are a natural, integral, and inescapable part of our relationship with God and each other.

For Covenanters compelling Christian Community emphasizes not our need to be in the world for God but our need to be in God for the World.

Ten Suggestions to Move Forward

1. Acknowledge Christ as the head and the cornerstone of compelling community. Openly expressing devotion to our Lord and Savior in every gathering.

2. Commit to making community a priority and a mandate according to God's original intention. As Christ followers, commit to being "one in heart and spirit," as believers were in Acts 4:32
3. Submit to one another in community in complete mutuality and equality
4. Admit to our mutual brokenness and separation from one another because of our sin/condition/nature
5. Extend the love and grace of God to everyone
6. Embrace gender, ethnic and generational inclusiveness, ensuring not only presence, but engagement, participation and voice.
7. Create a safe space for authenticity, vulnerability, transparency, honesty, truth telling and healing.
8. Provide space for everyone to share their ongoing story of faith
9. Encourage devotion with God through an attentiveness to the Spirit, so that everyone might share their unique gifts in extending Christ's love to all people, for God.
10. Attend diligently to the nine other markers to foster a healthy compelling community of faith.

Five to Seven Challenges to Address

1. **Sin:** As the core culprit for mutual brokenness, sin successfully severed relationships with God and with one another. The community of oneness (Gen. 2:24) that was created in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27) was shattered by the sin of disobedience of Adam and Eve. Only through Christ's redemptive ministry is community restored. In Jesus' final hours, his prayer was that all believers/ Christ followers "may be one as we are one...so that they may be brought to complete unity." (John 17:20-23)
2. **Hierarchical structures:** Issues of power, gender, race/ethnicity/culture can severely hinder the authenticity necessary to being one in community. Galatians 3:28 clearly speaks against the differentiation of power, gender or race as Paul proclaimed that "There is neither Jew or Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Jesus also confronts his own community of disciples with the need to not pattern their structure as the world does (Matt. 20-25-28).
3. **Disintegration of family** often presents challenges for the church. How do we include children with unchurched parents; never-married/ widowed/ divorced/ single-on-Sunday adults (or other non-traditional family

- configurations); victims of domestic abuse into authentic community of the church? How do we live into Psalm 68:6 – “God sets the lonely in families...”
4. **Fear of authenticity/lack of trust/judgmental attitudes**, for example of those mentioned in #3, is the church a welcoming place to allow for those who may be different in familial structure or issues? Unfortunately, the church can so easily adopt the patterns of this world, conforming to the judgment of others by the standards of this world. Romans 12:1-2 must be our standard of conforming to this world as Christians in order to be a welcoming and compelling community.
 5. **High tech-low touch/technology** increases our isolation from one another, such as video games, emails, texting, etc. Add to that the increasing avenues of social media that replaces face-to-face interactions through the likes of Facebook, Tweeter, and a growing list of other means of technology. Not only do these “tools” of communication lead to a sense of individualism, but can also increase one’s busyness and time limitations that could prohibit participation in authentic face-to-face community.

Compelling Christian Communities Relationship with the other markers of a healthy church

Statistics show that more people than ever before are walking away from the church in the United States. Seventy-five percent of Americans call themselves Christian, according to the American Religious Identification Survey from Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. In 1990, the figure was 86 percent. Would they be walking away if our communities of faith were compelling?

The reality is that Compelling Christian Community must be linked with all the other markers in order to be compelling. Can there be a compelling community if the Word of God is not central, if there is no life-transforming walk with Jesus, no intentional evangelism, and a lack of heartfelt worship? How compelling is a community that lacks global perspective and engagement or demonstrates no capacity to actively engage in compassion, mercy and justice?

Fruitful organizational structures eliminate roadblocks and enable people to enter into community, to engage, have voice, and grow in their faith, ushering in a culture of godly leadership and are marked by sacrificial and generous living and giving.

Attention to the nine other healthy markers will in turn help to bring about a compelling Christian community that is inviting to those who do not yet know Christ and enable those already a part of the church to grow.

Relationship to mission priorities

The mission of the church cannot be done by a bunch of disconnected individuals. It becomes reality when we are connected to Christ and connected to one another in

Christ. The Gospel is embodied and becomes real to those who do not yet know Jesus when they see it lived out in compelling Christian community.

Case Study 1

ABC Covenant Church is a congregation with average attendance of 400. It is a 95% Anglo congregation made up of folks from a wide variety of church backgrounds. There are folks who are conservative theologically and politically and folks who are progressive. Some folks resonate with traditional liturgical worship and others enjoy contemporary worship. As a result there is a traditional service and a contemporary service. Some folks are in their 60's, 70's, and 80's and a number of folks are in their 20's and 30's. Some questions to consider are:

- How can the church create a culture where folks feel free and safe to express their point of view even when others think differently?
- How is community maintained between the folks who attend the traditional service and the folks who attend the contemporary service?
- How does the church handle potentially divisive issues that have a political dimension like: immigration, abortion, and health care.

Case Study 2

XYZ Covenant Church is a 6 year old church plant that has grown to 750 people. 60% of the attenders are under the age 35. There is a significant number of former Catholics and an equal number of folks who are unchurched. 30 % of the congregation have committed their lives to Christ in the last two years. Most of the folks in the congregation have no Covenant background and many do not know it is a Covenant church. If they do know of the Covenant connection they do not know much about the Covenant. There is a small but significant group of folks who have strong Covenant backgrounds. There is a wide socioeconomic mix from blue-collar (a significant number unemployed) to upper middle-class management types. About 15% of the congregation is African American and that number is growing. The church has become a regional church with folks traveling from a number of communities in the metro area. Some questions to consider are:

- How do you create opportunities for community in a rapidly growing congregation with folks who travel some distance to church?
- How important is it to establish a clear Covenant identity?
- How do you create opportunities for folks from different socioeconomic or racial backgrounds to hear one another's stories?

Coaches

- Mary Putera, walkinggently@gmail.com
- Jim Sequeira, jim@cascadeview.org
- Robert Owens, brohooks@comcast.net

- Greg Yee, greg.yee@pswc.org

Resources

Book Recommendations:

Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as Community of Oneness, Gilbert Bilezikian, 1997

Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 2009

Conclusion

Every congregation must be very intentional about developing community. It does not happen automatically or easily. Community is built and experienced as we commit ourselves to Christ and to one another; to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice; to serve one another and pray for one another and bear one another's burdens. When it happens there is no more satisfying way to live.