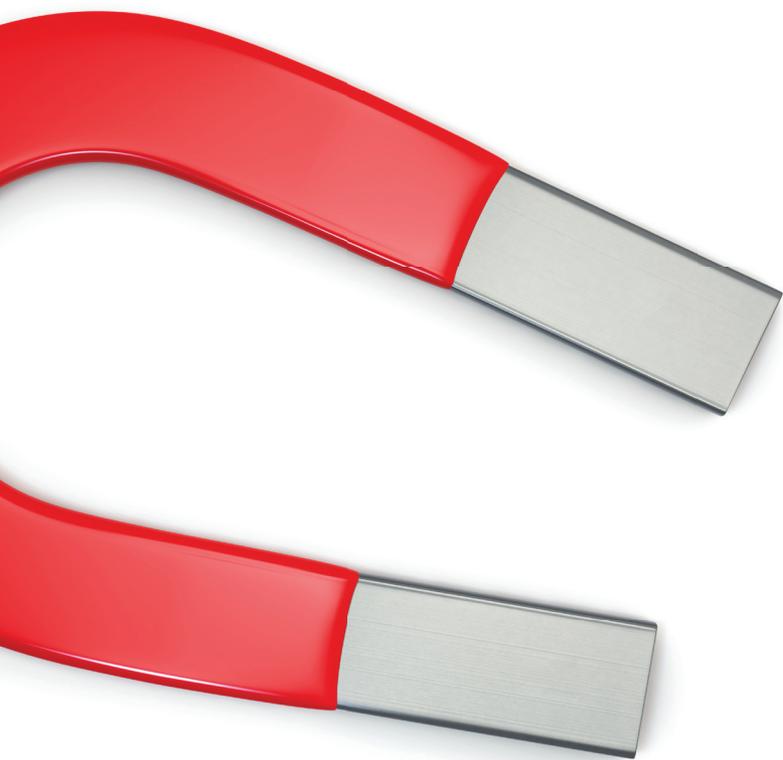


IX 9Marks

THE COMPELLING COMMUNITY

*Where God's Power Makes
a Church Attractive*



**MARK DEVER &
JAMIE DUNLOP**

"If you are ready to be refreshed as well as challenged, read this book. It is biblical and practical. Its clarity is powerful and very compelling. Thank you, Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, for loving the church of Jesus Christ!"

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**THE
COMPELLING
COMMUNITY**

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THE COMPELLING COMMUNITY

*Where God's Power Makes
a Church Attractive*

MARK DEVER &
JAMIE DUNLOP

The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive

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To our church, with joy and gratitude

“For what thanksgiving can
we return to God for you,
for all the joy that we feel for
your sake before our God?”

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Series Preface

The 9Marks series of books is premised on two basic ideas. First, the local church is far more important to the Christian life than many Christians today perhaps realize. We at 9Marks believe that a healthy Christian is a healthy church member.

Second, local churches grow in life and vitality as they organize their lives around God's Word. God speaks. Churches should listen and follow. It's that simple. When a church listens and follows, it begins to look like the One it is following. It reflects his love and holiness. It displays his glory. A church will look like him as it listens to him. By this token, the reader might notice that all "9 marks," taken from Mark Dever's book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway, 3rd ed., 2013), begin with the Bible:

- expositional preaching;
- biblical theology;
- a biblical understanding of the gospel;
- a biblical understanding of conversion;
- a biblical understanding of evangelism;
- a biblical understanding of church membership;
- a biblical understanding of church discipline;
- a biblical understanding of discipleship and growth; and
- a biblical understanding of church leadership.

More can be said about what churches should do in order to be healthy, such as pray. But these nine practices are the ones that we

believe are most often overlooked today (unlike prayer). So our basic message to churches is, don't look to the best business practices or the latest styles; look to God. Start by listening to God's Word again.

Out of this overall project comes the 9Marks series of books. These volumes intend to examine the nine marks more closely and from different angles. Some target pastors. Some target church members. Hopefully all will combine careful biblical examination, theological reflection, cultural consideration, corporate application, and even a bit of individual exhortation. The best Christian books are always both theological and practical.

It's our prayer that God will use this volume and the others to help prepare his bride, the church, with radiance and splendor for the day of his coming.

Introduction

What is *community* in your church? A monthly fellowship night? The conversation that follows a Sunday service? Good friends who know you? Many of us equate *community* with small groups. Over the last few months, I've told friends of mine from Shanghai to Seoul to San Francisco that I'm writing about church community. Their reply: "You mean a book about small groups?" I suppose your definition of *community* flows largely from the ambition you have for it. And in writing this book, I want to both raise and lower your ambition for church community.

Raising the Bar

On the one hand, I want to raise the bar of what you envision church community to be. I appreciate small groups. But they only scratch the surface of what God intends to create in your church through community. Why? Of all the ways that the gospel changes this world, the community of the local church is the most obviously supernatural. Its witness even goes beyond this world. "The rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" sit up and take notice, says Paul (Eph. 3:9–10). In this book, I'll define local church community as a togetherness and commitment we experience that transcends all natural bonds—because of our commonality in Jesus Christ. Far from being a "nice to have" element of your church, community is core to who you are. Is this really something you can leave to small groups or a mentoring program?

Humility and Honesty

On the other hand, I want to lower your ambition for church community. That is, I want to lower your ambition for what *you can do* to create community in your church. Scripture teaches that the community that matters is community built by God. We may cultivate it, feed it, protect it, and use it. But we dare not pretend to create it. When in our hubris we set out to “build community,” we risk subverting God’s plans for our churches—and I’m afraid this is something we do all the time.

So what is the book you hold in your hand? It is not a method for building community that you should implement with expectation of immediate change. Instead, it’s a set of biblical principles that can guide gradual change in your congregation over several years.

It’s not a book that’s simply about relational closeness or fulfillment. Instead, it’s a book that attempts to focus on God’s purposes for church community instead of our own.

It’s not a “new” book, but a modern-day retelling of truths that have been discussed throughout church history, and especially in the centuries following the Protestant Reformation.

It’s not just theory; it’s come out of my own church’s real-life struggles to shape a more biblical community.

It’s not a how-to book that tells you to copy what worked in one church, as if that example were applicable for everyone. It’s an exploration of what God’s Word says about community—paired with practical advice for how you might work out these principles in your own local church.

Who Wrote This?

You’ve probably noticed that two authors are on the cover, but I’ve been writing in the first-person singular. “I” being Jamie Dunlop. Mark Dever and I planned this book out together. I wrote it. Then we worked through the finished copy until we agreed on every word. We put both names on the cover because I couldn’t claim this as “my

book” with any form of integrity. Let me explain the story of how it came to be, and you’ll see why.

For the greater part of two decades, I’ve been a member of Capitol Hill Baptist Church where Mark Dever pastors in Washington, DC. I moved to DC in the late 1990s shortly after he began serving as pastor, and I joined the church. In fact, it was the first church I’d ever joined. I watched the church transform slowly, sometimes imperceptibly, into the type of community you’ll read about in these pages. After a few years, my wife and I moved to San Francisco. We joined a wonderful Presbyterian church near our home. But a few years later, we moved back to Capitol Hill. Not because we couldn’t find a good church in San Francisco. Certainly not because we enjoyed DC more than San Francisco. But we missed Capitol Hill Baptist Church. More than Mark Dever, more than his preaching, we missed the community that had grown up around that preaching. A few years after arriving back in DC, I began serving as one of the church’s elders. And a few years after that, I left my job in business and joined the church’s staff as an associate pastor.

This book is about the type of community that I’ve seen form in the congregation I’ve come to love. In that sense, this is Mark’s book. The underlying principles, experiences, and approaches you’ll see described—sometimes even the way things are phrased—are all his. He’s been conducting the orchestra, so to speak; I’ve been in the recording booth. Of course, that analogy falls flat since God is the author of all good that happens in any of our churches. But you get my point. Frankly, having sat under this man’s teaching for so long, it’s sometimes hard to know exactly where his words and ideas end and mine begin.

Compelling Community is a result of our partnership in the gospel over many years. As a result, this isn’t a book full of good ideas that have never been tried. Nor is it a book about “the Capitol Hill Baptist way of doing church.” On the one hand, we have put everything you read here into practice in our own church. Mark and I have taken our own medicine. On the other hand, I’ve taken pains in this book to

avoid merely telling you to do things the way we have. I've used our church as an example—but rested my advice in the Scriptures and not in my church's experience. I'm confident that these principles will and should work out differently in your church.

As you can imagine, we have many to thank for bringing this project to fruition. My wife, Joan, and Jonathan Leeman at 9Marks Ministries patiently worked through the manuscript with me. Isaac Adams, Andy Johnson, Matt Merker, Erik Hom, and Michael Lawrence all provided important ideas and feedback. Hinson Baptist Church in Portland, Oregon, kindly hosted my family while I was writing. And Capitol Hill Baptist Church provided me with time, encouragement, and motivation to tell this story.

Who Should Read This?

Finally, I want to add something about you, the reader. I've written this book for church leaders. If you're a pastor or a pastor-in-training, you'll find the book aimed squarely at you. If you're in another position of church leadership, especially as an elder, then you're also my intended audience. If you're not a church leader, you don't have to put the book down—but know that you'll need to translate as you read. Use the book to help you support your church's leaders, and to shape whatever future leadership you may exercise in your congregation.

I want this book to encourage you. I hope it reminds you of how important community is in your own church. I hope it sends you deep into the Scriptures to see how God intends that community to function—even if you disagree with me at times. And I hope it leads you to praise God for his glory in the local church. More than your prowess as a church leader, more than any advice I can give you in a book, the gospel of Jesus Christ has power to create community in your church that is evidently supernatural. And that community in your church is part of what will propel both you and me into praise forever around his throne.

With that end in mind, please read, think, and worship.

Part 1

A Vision for Community

Two Visions of Community

Two churches in my neighborhood offer a study in surprising similarity.

One church is a theologically liberal congregation; the other is the theologically conservative church where I pastor. Both started meeting in 1867. Both grew considerably with the city of Washington, DC, in the years surrounding the Second World War. Both struggled as the surrounding blocks were decimated by a wave of race-charged rioting. By the late twentieth century, both congregations had dwindled in number and consisted largely of older commuters from the suburbs. In response, both purged their roles to remove members who no longer attended. The future of both was in question.

But then starting in the late 1990s, both began to grow. Both attracted young people who were moving into the city, and both re-grew roots into the neighborhood. For many years, the growth of both churches was roughly the same: the membership of one never strayed more than a hundred or so people from the other. Both congregations care for the poor in the neighborhood. Both buzz with activity on Sunday mornings and throughout the week. Both receive attention in the secular press for their tight-knit community.

But despite a similar history, these two churches could not differ

more at their core. When I first moved to Washington in the 1990s, the pastor of this other church didn't call himself a Christian. He didn't believe in the atonement, didn't believe in physical resurrection, and, as he explained to me one day, wasn't even sure he believed in God! Whereas our church logo cites Romans 10:17 ("Faith comes from hearing"), theirs describes them as "the church of the open communion." Ours is a congregation centered on the historic Christian gospel. Theirs is a congregation, I would maintain, focused on an entirely different gospel. And yet both appear to thrive.

My point? You don't need God to "build community" in a church.

How to Build Church Community without the Gospel

Now, if you're reading this book you probably *do* believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. You probably *do* believe in a holy God, in the reality of sin, in the power of the atonement. And beyond that, you likely hold the Bible to be the perfect Word of God. So for you, community without the gospel isn't a danger. Right?

That's exactly where I intend to challenge you. I think we build community without the gospel all the time.

Leave aside the theologically liberal church I just described. My concern for the evangelical church isn't so much that we're out to deny the gospel in fostering community. Instead, my concern is that, despite good intentions, we're building communities that can thrive regardless of the gospel.

I'll give you an example. Let's say that a single mother joins my church. Who is she naturally going to build friendships with? Who is naturally going to understand her best? Other single moms, of course. So I encourage her to join a small group for single moms, and sure enough, she quickly integrates into that community and thrives. Mission accomplished, right? Not quite.

What occurred is a *demographic phenomenon* and not necessarily a *gospel phenomenon*. Single moms gravitate to each other regardless of

whether or not the gospel is true. This community is wonderful and helpful—but its existence says nothing about the power of the gospel.

In fact, most of the “tools” we use to build community center on something other than the gospel:

- *Similar life experience*: Singles groups, newly married Bible studies, and young professionals networks build community based on demographic groupings.
- *Similar identity*: Cowboy churches, motorcycle churches, arts churches, and the like are all gospel-believing churches with something other than the gospel at the core of their identity.
- *Similar cause*: Ministry teams for feeding the hungry, helping an elementary school, and combating human trafficking build community based on shared passion for a God-honoring cause.
- *Similar needs*: Program-based churches build community by assembling people into programs based on the similarity of their felt needs.
- *Similar social position*: Sometimes a ministry—or an entire church—gathers the “movers and shakers” in society.

I recognize this probably sounds ridiculous. In the space of a hundred words I’ve critiqued Bible studies for single moms, singles groups, and hunger ministries. But stick with me for a moment. Underneath all these community-building strategies is something we need to expose and examine with fresh eyes.

Let’s go back to the small group for single moms. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be with people of similar life experience. It’s entirely natural and can be spiritually beneficial. But if this is the sum total of what we call “church community,” I’m afraid we’ve built something that would exist even if God didn’t.

My goal in writing this book is not for us to feel guilty whenever we enjoy a friendship that would probably exist even if the gospel wasn’t true. My goal is not to encourage churches to aim at some entirely unrealistic model of relationship where we never share anything in common but Christ. Rather, my goal is twofold:

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1. To recognize that building community purely through natural bonds has a cost as well as a benefit. Often, we look at tools like the single moms small group and see only positive. But there is a cost as well: if groups like this come to *characterize* community in our churches, then our community ceases to be remarkable to the world around us.
2. To adjust our aspiration. Many relationships that naturally form in our churches would exist even if the gospel weren't true. That's good, right, and helpful. But in addition, we should aspire for many relationships that exist only because of the gospel. So often, we aim at nothing more than community built on similarity; I want us to aim at community characterized by relationships that are obviously supernatural. And by *supernatural* I don't imply the mystical, vaguely spiritual sense in which pop culture uses the term. I mean the very biblical idea of a sovereign God working in space and time to do what confounds the natural laws of our world.

Two Types of Community

In this book, I'll contrast two types of community that exist in gospel-preaching, evangelical churches. Let's call one "gospel-plus" community. In gospel-plus community, nearly every relationship is founded on the gospel *plus* something else. Sam and Joe are both Christians, but the real reason they're friends is that they're both singles in their 40s, or share a passion to combat illiteracy, or work as doctors. In gospel-plus community, church leaders enthusiastically use similarity to build community. But as a whole, this community says little about the power of the gospel.

Contrast this with "gospel-revealing" community. In gospel-revealing community, many relationships would never exist but for the truth and power of the gospel—either because of the depth of care for each other or because two people in relationship have little in common but Christ. While affinity-based relationships also thrive in this church, they're not the focus. Instead, church leaders focus on

helping people out of their comfort zones to cultivate relationships that would not be possible apart from the supernatural. And so this community *reveals* the power of the gospel.

You can't physically see the gospel; it's simply truth. But when we encourage community that is obviously supernatural, it makes the gospel visible. Think of a kid rubbing a balloon against his shirt to charge it with static electricity. When he holds it over someone's head with thin, wispy hair, what happens? The hair reaches for the balloon. You can't see the static electricity. But its effect—the unnatural reaction of the hair—is unmistakable. The same goes for gospel-revealing community.

Yet gospel-revealing community isn't our first inclination, is it? Our tendency is toward gospel-plus community because it "works." Niche marketing undergirds so many church growth plans because it "works." People gravitate to people just like themselves. If I told you to take a church of two hundred and grow it to four hundred in two years, you'd seem foolish *not* to build community based on some kind of similarity.

A friend of mine recently received such a growth directive. He pastors the English-language congregation of an ethnically Chinese church, and the advice he received consisted nearly entirely of which type of similarity he should focus on. "You should be the church for second generationals." "You should be the church for young professionals." "You should stick with English-speaking people of Chinese descent." And so forth. If you want to draw a crowd, build community through similarity. That's how people work.

So is there anything wrong with this? Isn't this just a basic law of organizational development? Does it matter how we draw the crowd so long as once they arrive we tell them the gospel?

Yes. It does matter. When Christians unite around something other than the gospel, they create community that would likely exist even if God didn't. As a modern-day tower of Babel, that community glorifies *their* strength instead of God's. And the very

earnest things they do to create this type of community actually undermine God's purposes for it. Gospel-plus community may result in the inclusive relationships we're looking for. But it says little about the truth and power of the gospel. To understand why, let's examine God's purposes for the local church in the book of Ephesians.

Supernatural Community Is God's Plan for the Church

What is God's plan for the local church? The apostle Paul lays it out in Ephesians chapters 2 and 3. It begins with the gospel, in 2:1-10. We were "dead in the trespasses and sins" (v. 1). But God "made us alive together with Christ" (v. 5). "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (vv. 8-9).

But that gospel doesn't end with our salvation; it leads to some very disruptive implications. Implication number one: unity. As Paul writes of Jews and Gentiles at the end of chapter 2, God abolished the dividing wall of hostility "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" (vv. 15-18). Note that the gospel alone creates this unity: the *cross* is how Christ put to death their hostility. After all, what else could ever bring together two peoples with such different history, ethnicity, religion, and culture?

Now, what is the purpose for this unity between Jews and Gentiles? Skip down to chapter 3, verse 10: God's intent was "that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."

Consider a group of Jews and Gentiles who share nothing in common except for a centuries-old loathing for one another. For a

less extreme, modern-day parallel, think of liberal Democrats and libertarian Republicans in my own neighborhood. Or the disdain the Prada-shod fashionista feels for the Schlitz-swilling NASCAR crowd (multiplied many times over, of course). Bring them together into the local church where they rub shoulders on a regular basis, and things explode, right? No! Because of the one thing they *do* have in common—the bond of Christ—they live together in astonishing love and unity. Unity that is so unexpected, so contrary to how our world operates, that even the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” sit up and take notice. God’s plans are amazing, aren’t they!¹

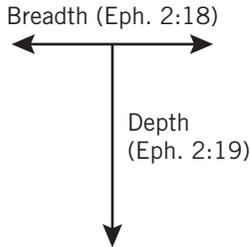
Gospel-revealing community is notable along two dimensions (see figure on p. 26). First, it’s notable for its *breadth*. That is, it stretches to include such peoples as divergent as Jew and Gentile. As Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, “If you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” (Matt. 5:46). One way in which this community glorifies God is by reaching people who, apart from supernatural power, would never unite together. Remember Ephesians 2:18: “For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.” Second, this community is notable for its *depth*. That is, it doesn’t merely bring people together to tolerate each other, but to be so tightly committed that Paul can call them a “new humanity” (2:15) and a new “household” (2:19, NIV). Paul reaches for the natural world’s deepest bonds—the bonds of ethnicity and family—to describe this new community in the local church.

Supernatural depth and breadth of community make the glory of an invisible God to be visible. This is the ultimate purpose statement

¹How do we know that Paul is referring to a local church here and not just the universal church? Three reasons: (1) What is true of the heavenly assembly should also be true of the local assembly. Peter O’Brien puts it well in his commentary: “Since it was appropriate that this new relationship with the ascended Lord should find concrete expression in believers’ regular coming together, that is, ‘in church’ (cf. Heb. 10:25), then the term here in 3:10 should probably be taken as the heavenly gathering that is assembled around Christ *and* as a local congregation of Christians” (*The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999], 246). (2) Much of the rest of the epistle will discuss relationships between believers in a local church. (3) The focus of 3:10 is the present, not an assembly someday in heaven. The assembly of Jews and Gentiles *today* is the local church. And each congregation points to the larger, grander assembly of all peoples in Revelation 7.

for community in the Ephesian church. This is the ultimate purpose statement for community in churches today. Is it the ultimate purpose for community in your church?

Two Dimensions of Community in Ephesians 2



Let me summarize two foundational elements from Ephesians 2–3 before we move on:

1. *This community is characterized by commonality in Christ.* It's said that "blood is thicker than water." Our world's history is a long story of tribal conflict where no one is closer than those who are family. That is, with one critical exception of course: the local church. When two people share Christ—even if everything else is different—they are closer than even blood ties could ever bring them. Again, they are the family of God.
2. *If this community is not supernatural, it doesn't work.* By "work" I mean "fulfill God's plans for community." What if, instead of uniting around Christ, Jews and Gentiles figured out some nifty organizational trick for them to coexist? Would that make known "the manifold wisdom of God"? No. It would glorify *their* wisdom and *their* ability. And it could never approximate the breadth and depth of community described in Ephesians. What if Jewish Christians just loved Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians just loved Gentile Christians? Not a bad start . . . but compared to the community Paul describes in Ephesians, it says relatively little about the power of God in the gospel.

Does this mean that we should flee any relationships where we share Christ plus something else? No. God uses our sociological affinities. Every church has a certain culture, a certain feel, a certain majority. It would be dishonest to suggest otherwise, to say that a congregation shares *nothing* in common but Christ. Like is attracted to like, and that's a natural reality. There's nothing inherently wrong with people's comfort with the familiar. Nonetheless, an important question is, What are you going to build with? What tools are you going to use? Will you use the natural tools of "ministry by similarity"? Or, while recognizing our tendency toward similarity, will you set your aspiration on community where similarity isn't necessary—because of the supernatural bond of the gospel? As the apostle writes, "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4). The difference will show itself over time. When you build with natural tools, over time the natural divisions between people will become set in concrete. Use natural tools to reach middle-class whites, and over time your church will be middle-class white. But when you build with supernatural tools, over time those natural divisions begin to soften. An all-white church will, remarkably, slowly perhaps, become less all-white. This has been the story of my own congregation.

While recognizing our tendency toward similarity, we should aspire toward community where similarity isn't necessary—where no strand of similarity in the congregation explains the *whole* congregation. That kind of community defies naturalistic explanations.

God has great purposes for the community of your church: to safeguard the gospel, to transform lives and communities, to shine as a beacon of hope to the unconverted. Community that does this is demonstrably supernatural. It is not community designed around the gospel *plus* some other bond of similarity. It is community that *reveals* the gospel. Yet too often, community in our churches better testifies to our own prowess in niche marketing than to the supernatural at work. Why is this?

Pressure to Build Gospel-Plus Community

Quite simply, gospel-plus community seems more reliable than the supernatural community we see in Ephesians 2–3. We’re sure we know how to make it happen. Compare community building to the breeding of some endangered species at the zoo. You could just let those black-footed ferrets have at it in nature’s own special way and hope for progeny to blossom. But with so much at stake, you’d never leave it to chance, would you? So the zoo in my town is measuring timing, and temperature, and diet, and whatever else you can imagine to help black-footed ferrets breed as reliably as possible.

We have our own endangered species to protect: the community of the local church, and we know how important it is. Community makes people feel included. When people feel included, they stay and volunteer and give. When they don’t feel included, they leave. So the growth of our churches and the apparent success of our ministries depend on effective community. With something that important at stake, it’s understandable that we want it to be as reliable as possible. We want something we can control. Plus, we *do* want as many as possible coming to faith, and this is a good thing!

So what do we do? Like the ferret-breeding project, we seek community that is measurable and repeatable: community you can capture on a spreadsheet. We assign everyone to a life-stage small group. Or we slice and dice demographic segments to perfectly situate people in the resulting affinity groups. Or we narrow our “target market” until we reach precise homogeneity.

These pressures are nothing new. In his book *Revival and Revivalism*, Iain Murray traces the root of American Protestant liberalism to a tendency among Christians to seek seemingly supernatural results through entirely natural means.² The First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, Murray explains, was an example of genuine “revival.” God chose to supernaturally bless the ordinary means of grace: the preaching of the Word of God and prayer. As time went

²Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994).

on, however, God stopped blessing those means of grace to the same degree. And so the so-called Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century attempted to produce revival-like results through entirely mechanistic means—what Murray calls “revivalism.” The book chronicles the destructive fruit of these tendencies in the American church; they are still alive and well today.

When we build gospel-plus community, we may get the inclusive relationships we’re looking for. But aside from an unusual act of God, we will not achieve the supernatural breadth and depth of community that makes the world sit up and take notice. We build a demographic phenomenon, not a gospel phenomenon.

So how do we cultivate the type of community Paul describes in Ephesians?

A Book about the Shadow, Not the Substance

Oddly enough, we cultivate this kind of community by not paying it too much attention. And this is hard work. It is hard work to not worry and get impatient. It is hard work *not* to get in the way of the supernatural. But fostering church community is like learning to ride a bicycle. If you focus too much on the mechanics of what you’re doing (left foot forward, right foot, quick! turn handles a little, lean to the right), you’ll crash. But eventually we all realize that as we focus on the goal ahead, the riding happens.

In that sense, church community is the shadow, not the substance. It’s not the thing we should focus on. To be sure, this is a book about cultivating community in a local church. We will explore how as a leader in your church you can help your congregation become fertile ground for the kind of organic, sharing-life relationships that we all hope to see in our churches. Yet as we do this, we must remember that community isn’t the point. The point, the substance, is God. God is immortal. He “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16). So how do we learn about him? Through his Word. And how do we perceive his glory? Primarily,

through the church. The body of Christ is the fullness of God (Eph. 1:23) and the most visible manifestation of God's glory in this present age (Eph. 3:10). And so describing community in the local church is like describing the light radiating from the heavenly throne. The point is not the community; the point is God. Community is merely the effect.

Our new society of the church is not a *mutual* admiration society, but a *shared* admiration society. Our affection for each other is derivative. It derives from our worship of God—a God who saved us from a million different “communities” of this world to become his family. Our identify no longer stems from our families of origin, our professions, or our interests and ambitions, but the fact that we are in Christ. We are *Christians*. And so as an urban American of the professional class, I have more in common with my working class, rural, Sudanese brother in Christ than with my own non-Christian blood brother. Thus the song of heaven is praise for this culmination of Christ's exploits, that “by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). God and his glory in the church are the point, not the community we seek.

The Rest of This Book

In one sense then, nurturing Ephesians 3 community in a local church is simple. When the gospel is believed, the supernatural community described in the New Testament happens. Our problem is that our impatience for this all-important work of the Spirit leads us to construct it artificially. Consider how standard approaches affect depth and breadth of community:

- *Depth*: Instead of calling people to act out the supernatural depth of commitment to other Christians that is inherent to faith, we make our churches as low-commitment as possible for newcomers. “Slide on in,” we say. “We’ve got no expectations.” We hope that as they grow, these people will increase their commitment

to one another. But, of course, what you win them with is how you'll keep them. Attract people as consumers, and you'll wind up with a church of demanding consumers. This may allow our people to feel some level of commitment quickly, but it compromises long-term depth of love for each other. And consumerism is the antithesis of the gospel of grace.

- *Breadth*: Since we attract people as consumers, there is no intrinsic commitment to others in our church. So we must manufacture that commitment. How? Through ministry by similarity. Instead of prophetically calling Christians to love those with whom they may have little in common but Jesus, we patch people into affinity groups where we know relationships will prosper. As a result, our church “community” is really pockets of independent, homogeneous communities that do not display the supernatural breadth God intends.

As you read through these chapters, you may hesitate at what I'm saying. “But wait,” you might say. “If we don't have [insert name of ministry you use to attract people to your church], then how will people come? Don't you care about getting people into my church?” I do. Absolutely. But I'm concerned that the things we do to attract people can actually compromise our ability to nurture a supernatural community. And God intends that community to be profoundly more attractive than those things you're doing today. Yet to do this, you may need to rethink much of your ministry, such as your approach to small groups, your goals for Sunday services, or your membership policies. Then lay the groundwork for a community you're dependent on God to grow—a community whose attraction and beauty will reach to the heavens.

In all our efforts to build community, we so often destroy the very elements that should mark it out as a supernatural act of God. We're like King Saul, impatient with God's timing as he waited for an all-important sacrifice, deciding to do things our own way. The rest of this book shows how we as church leaders can foster biblical community *without* getting in the way.

Chapter 2 will examine what makes “supernatural community” *supernatural* in the first place. Then chapters 3 and 4 will assess how we can cultivate the two most distinctive marks of this supernatural community: its depth of commitment (chap. 3) and its breadth of diversity (chap. 4). With this foundation in place, the rest of the book will apply these principles to our preaching and prayer, how we encourage personal relationships, and how we address conflict and sin. Finally, the last two chapters will focus on stewarding the community God’s given us—through evangelism and church planting.

Conclusion

Not All Community Is the Same

At the beginning of this chapter, I described the uncanny parallels of growth between the church where I pastor and another church that long ago rejected the Bible as its authority. Yet I don’t believe for a moment that the community life of these two churches is in any way similar. One community can pretty much be understood by the world. Special, to be sure. But not unexpected. The other? The formerly non-Christian neighbors of mine, whom you’ll meet in this book, would say it’s something supernatural. It was community they could not explain as non-Christians, and yet found profoundly attractive despite the offense of the gospel at its core.

I’ll close this chapter with some questions to help you assess your own attitudes toward church community.

1. How do you define “success” for the network of relationships in your church that we call community? How close is your definition to Ephesians 3:10 (“through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known . . .”)?
2. Are your goals and targets for nurturing community in the local church consistent with something that only God can create? Or do they push you to gospel-plus community that people can manufacture on their 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?
4. What do you talk about with other church members outside of church? To what extent do casual conversations differ from what you’d expect to hear in a local bar/neighborhood picnic/Little League game?
5. How many of your friendships at church would likely exist even if you weren’t a Christian?

This, then, is the thesis of this book: Authentic, gospel-revealing community with supernatural depth and breadth is a natural outgrowth of belief in God’s Word. But we get impatient, building gospel-plus community that undermines God’s purposes for the local church by compromising that same depth and breadth. So how do we work against our own worst tendencies and nurture biblical community in our churches? We start by examining exactly how God’s community becomes “supernatural.”

What does a community that testifies to God's power look like?

GOD'S PEOPLE ARE CALLED to a togetherness and commitment that transcend all natural boundaries—whether ethnic, generational, or economic. But such a community can be enjoyed only when it relies on the power of God in the gospel.

In *The Compelling Community*, pastors Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop cast a captivating vision for authentic fellowship in the local church that goes beyond small groups. Full of biblical principles and practical advice, this book will help pastors lead their congregations toward the kind of community that glorifies God, edifies his people, and attracts the lost.

"The Compelling Community provides an alternative to running your church on the building blocks of specialization and segmentation. Great stuff from two men who have given their lives to the welfare of the local church."

DAVID R. HELM, *Pastor, Holy Trinity Church, Chicago; Chairman, The Charles Simeon Trust*

"If you are ready to be refreshed as well as challenged, read this book. It is biblical and practical."

RONNIE FLOYD, *President, the Southern Baptist Convention; Senior Pastor, Cross Church, Springdale, Arkansas*

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CONRAD MBEWE, *Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church, Lusaka, Zambia*

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