

# The Compelling Community

## Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive

APRIL 17, 2015 **ERIK RAYMOND**

Often the word *community* is casually tossed around like a Frisbee at a church picnic. Most are familiar enough with it to comfortably “give it a toss” but don’t often think deeply about its dynamics. What would you say community is in your church? Is it small groups? Perhaps it’s a fellowship meal. Maybe it’s men or women getting together. Whatever the case, community likely involves church people getting together for one reason or another. This is a good start, but there is more.

In the latest release from 9Marks, Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop thoughtfully advance the conversation in *Compelling Community: Where God’s Power Makes a Church Attractive*. Dever and Dunlop serve together as pastors at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. Dunlop discloses that while the book is written in his voice, it includes significant influence and input from Dever. Therefore, they are co-authors.

## Essential, Not Ideal

Dever and Dunlop want to raise and lower our ambition for church community. Sound puzzling? Perhaps it will make more sense when considering their definition: “Community is the togetherness and commitment we experience that transcends all natural bonds—because of our commonality in Jesus Christ” (13). This community results from what we share in Jesus Christ. Far from being something merely ideal in a church, community is essential to it. Further, community isn’t something we can build; it comes from God:

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. (14)

At this point *Compelling Community* draws us in for a diagnostic on the uniqueness and preciousness of community in our churches. The bottom-line question is simply this: is community in your church a supernatural phenomenon or a merely natural one? As Dever and Dunlop observe, “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” (20–21). In other words, most of the ways the experts tell us to “build” community has little to nothing to do with the way God actually creates it.

# Gospel Revealing, Not Gospel Plus

Dever and Dunlop distinguish between “gospel-plus” community and “gospel-revealing” community. I found this distinction to be most helpful.

“Gospel-plus” community is characterized by people’s natural similarities to build community. “In gospel-plus community, nearly every relationship is founded on the gospel *plus* something else,” the authors observe. “Sam and Joe are both Christians, but the real reason they’re friends is that they’re both singers in their 40s, or share a passion to combat illiteracy, or work as doctors” (22). This might be a fine thing, but it says little about the gospel.

In “gospel-revealing” community, on the other hand, many relationships “would never exist” but for the truth and power of the gospel. The authors explain:

[This is] 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 outside 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. (22–23)

When you think about this point, it just makes sense. Instead of seeing churches build natural things that will surely perish, God builds them on the eternal word and work of Christ. He will not build modern-day Babels that reflect us, but monuments of grace that showcase the glory of the Trinity.

## Calling-Based, Not Comfort-Based

As you continue to think about this perspective, even convinced of its rightness, you may ask yourself, *How in the world am I going to do this?* Exactly. You can’t. Go back to the beginning of the basis of our fellowship, our community: it is first with God and then with one another ([1 John 1:3](#)). God builds this community; we humbly recognize it and nurture it.

In a chapter titled “Community Runs Deep,” we are given another helpful distinction to show how the expectations and experience of membership reinforce this “gospel-revealing” community. Amid healthy interaction with consumer-driven culture and practical membership practices, Dever and Dunlop contrast “comfort-based” and “calling-based” commitment. You can see the contrast: comfort puts on the consumer or customer hat, whereas calling is based on the new life of the gospel. There are pages of deeply practical helps to guide an elder team through assessing and addressing the church. I am personally eager to get to work on this with our elder team. It is gold.

The rest of the book emphasizes the things you probably already know need to be priorities in the local church. Topics like preaching and praying aren't novel concepts; however, Dever and Dunlop seem to hit a few surprising notes in the context of assessing, feeding, nurturing, and protecting community. If pastors grasp biblical community, they will work hard to emphasize and honor it in their preaching. They will pray publically for this community to characterize their churches. They will understand that biblical community takes intentionality, faithfulness, and time. These chapters walk the church leader through a number of helpful questions and considerations for their congregation. Again, it is deeply practical.

## Not From Here

Why is such community compelling? Ironically, it is compelling because it's not from here. God builds it, and it looks quite different from anything we could build. By this simple fact, people will look at the church like a Labrador after a strange whistle. *What is that?* We smile, and say, *God did it.*

Sometimes when you read books by guys in churches where the ministry is thriving you will hear a caution like, "Easy, that may work in D.C. but that won't work where we are." This is true in some cases, but not here. The beauty of *The Compelling Community* is that it transcends zip codes, even national boundaries. While it surely reflects ministry at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, it could work in any congregation, in any time, in any place. This is the beauty of a book tautly tethered to the Bible. It highlights what God has done, and it shows what we are to do.

**Erik Raymond** is the senior pastor at [Redeemer Fellowship Church](#) in Metro Boston. He and his wife, Christie, have six children. He blogs at [Ordinary Pastor](#). You can [follow him on Twitter](#).