

Rebuild



Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, They will raise up the former devastations, And they will repair the ruined cities, The desolations of many generations. (Isaiah 61:4)

Ingredients of Community (Part 4):

The Need for a Pastor to Commit to the "Impossible:" Making Community A Reality, Not Just An Ideal

Some think Christian Community would occur if God's people would just feel love for one another. Although loving feelings are nice, feelings have the tensile strength of cobwebs - they can't hold anything together. A strong wind blows, and feelings are aloft in the breeze, up and away, out of sight, no one knowing where they will land. Any relationship of trust and stability - whether in marriage or business - has to have more "weight" to it than this. Feelings are a fine thing, but if feelings are the basis of relationships, when the feelings go, the people will certainly go.

Christian Community can't be built upon the sea foam base of feelings. Intentional Christian Community demands forethought, prayerfulness, dedication, and a willingness to pay the price. Our culture screams, "Turn back!" at every step taken toward community. Like satan's great temptation of Christ in the wilderness, our society speaks lies to us:

You have things to do, dreams to fulfill, goals to achieve ... centering your life around relationships will bog you down.

Community is for wimps, the socially backward, those who cannot make it in the world. You can do better.

If you must decide on community, at least wait until you find one that fits your personality, "spiritual" preference, gifting, social class, lifestyle, etc.

And here is the script of temptations society speaks to "would-be" pastors of Community:

It's great to have ideals, but you confuse daydream for reality. Wake up and smell the musty hymn books! You have a hard time getting a small group to agree on a study topic; do you think your congregation is going

to commit their lives to each other? Maybe in the Early Church - maybe in another time, another place. Not in America, not here, not now - not ever.

If you focus on building Christian Community you will be chasing people away. People want church, but not that much church. People are already over-committed! How are they going to possibly find time for community when they are already shot and wasted from family and work commitments?

You have too many gifts to be stuck with the same group of people. You could touch so many more people if you stayed unattached, and were open to move on to bigger congregations.

Do you realize Christian Community is going to net you a small church - or at least a church that will grow very slowly? And what will people think after you have given yourself to all of the work to building community and still have so few people to show for it? They will think you have failed.

If people can still hear the call of Covenant Community without yielding to the above gospel-compromising rationalizations, the battle is not over. It has just begun. Now comes the hard part - actually living in Covenant with one another. This will not happen without loving, pastoral leadership, the kind of leadership that fits the following profile:

1) *Pastors of intentional communities model community.* There is no "Jekyll and Hyde" split between "The Pastor" and "the real guy." Community pastors are "all one piece" - whether in the pulpit or at the dinner table, whether salaried or without pay, whether recognized or overlooked, whether accompanied by great numbers or only a handful. These pastors call their flock to

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forgive, and they themselves are generous forgivers. They call their communities to confess their sins, and provide a model for this confession by openly sharing their own sin and need for repentance. Although these servants are undeniably called to the pastorate, they are not a part of a community because they need a ministry, but because of an overriding love for God that leads them to commit themselves to God's people.

2) *Pastors of authentic Community actually pastor their teaching.* There are a few who consistently preach the need for prayer, purity, loving obedience and interpersonal commitment, rarer still are those who allow these kinds of teachings to guide the style of their ministry. And here we discover whether Christian Community will occur among a people, or only remain a dream: What does the leadership do when their people contradict God's Covenant Love?

What do the pastors of a congregation do when someone has been wronged by another, and yet refuses to forgive or work out the conflict with the offender? Does the leadership lovingly take the person aside and encourage them to work for reconciliation; do they instruct that unforgiveness is incompatible with Christ's Covenant of love? Or does the leadership adopt a general "non-interference" policy, an attitude which says such disputes are a

private matter that we should not get involved in? Or what about the brother or sister who has had sex outside of marriage? What does the leadership do in their case (assuming they even know)? Do the pastors merely call the persons to ask God's forgiveness, or do they offer pastoral therapies that promote healing, restoration, and a greater purity? Or, citing yet one last example, what is the pastoral course in the case of gossip? Is the behavior corrected as something that will hurt the love and trust of the brethren, or merely accepted as the normal function of the church's "grapevine?"

Many more examples could be illustrated. The point is that Christian Community will not occur if leaders merely teach about love, and yet shy away from actually loving their people enough to get involved and pastor what they teach.

My experience is that God's people want to live in love and integrity, but are severely discouraged without pastors who are willing to provide practical instruction, support, and personal accountability.

There is no surer way to make God's people cynical, despairing, and hypo-critical than to preach love and then leave it up to "chance" whether anyone is going to really love anybody.

Leaders of genuine Christian Communities know that unless they address unloving attitudes, their flocks will not enter into the fullness of God's precious Covenant

blessings. So with a love that is greater than their fears, they offer gentle loving correction, and patient caring counsel. If this kind of bold love is not present within the community, the pastor knows that a leaven of distrust and hopelessness will sink the Community more quickly than an anvil in water. Of course! If the leaders are afraid to pastor community, how will their people find the courage to press against their fears and live it?

3) *The leadership must love God before all else.* The leadership must have more than just feelings for God, they must love Him enough to be with Him, to align their wills to His will, and to aspire to nothing greater than being His friend.

There is just no way one can lead God's people into a life of Covenant faithfulness without a deep relationship with the Lord. A fifteen minute prayer time on the drive to church won't cut it. Only a fiery love that desires nothing but God can successfully burn off society's freezing lies from our hearts. And this kind of love is not possible unless God's people - especially His shepherds - are not too busy to give themselves to a life of focused prayer and daily repentance.

Christian Community is just not possible without supernatural intervention. It cannot happen if we rely on only good intentions, effort, and marketing skill. Christian Community is a miracle of God, not something that we can pull off.

To overstate my point, virtually anyone can build a "church." Hire a "moving" preacher, get some good musicians, rent an attractive hall, conduct an aggressive ad campaign, provide for small group support, and I guarantee 100 people within a year. This easily "works" in an independent, consumer culture.

Christian Community, on the other hand, is an "American impossibility." No one can build Community. There is too much opposition both within the culture, and within the independent American soul, for it. You cannot "attend" community, and then drive away from it - you have to live in it. This vision does not fit our schedules.

There is only one way community can happen, but it requires a devotion that requires a walking-on-water dependance on God - the kind of trusting love the first Christian Community demonstrated. Leaders with this kind of devotion can do what this society says cannot be done, and their example can encourage their flocks to do the same.

May God gives us leaders who will not be content with any achievable goal, but with only the one God alone can achieve: To be a loving People.

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