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## IMAGE

### THE GOAL

Let me begin by acknowledging that building gospel-saturated community is not an easy task. Cain made it clear that the effects of the fall would throw a wrench in community and relationships in general. Starting with a poor biblical foundation increases that labor significantly. Lifeless community begins when we don't have a clear understanding of why we are in community in the first place. Yet, when we try to rejuvenate small groups, we generally ask how we can get more people in them, rather than addressing the question of why they exist. It is no surprise that we have a hard time attracting people to such a ministry.

Our goal here is bigger than increasing the number of groups we have in our churches. We want to reestablish the basis for community and why it is, and always has been, essential to the Christian life. Because community takes sacrifice and intentionality, our view of community must be bigger than a way to belong, making church feel smaller, or closing the back door of the church. We need to see the eternal purpose in order to inspire the devotion to community that we see in Acts 2.

### A GOOD THING BROKEN

You see, the problem is deeper than the need to belong. On the cross, the community of the Trinity was momentarily broken.<sup>1</sup> It was a

picture of what sin always does to communities. Sin always separates what God joins together. This truth is seen in Adam's response to the fall. The first thing that Adam and Eve did in response to their rebellion was hide from God.<sup>2</sup> God intended for Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, thereby building communities that would glorify him. Instead, because of indwelling sin, each community was more rebellious than the last, manifesting in relational evil against one another. That moment on the cross was a reflection of our sins of independence, selfishness, rivalry, jealousy, oppression, blame shifting, gossip, backbiting, neglect, isolation, pride, apathy, and every other perversion of grace that destroys community.

There are a couple of problems with a life that perverts grace in this way. First, it is a distorted picture of what God himself is like. A community of God's people should reflect the nature of God. A community that is marked more by sin than by grace and claims to be a community formed by God misrepresents the Creator. Second, it denies grace by choosing an impoverished and deprived life. The community God creates is good because it reflects him; it is good for his people. Choosing a life outside of community with God denies this truth and is what got us in this mess in the first place.

Christians certainly aren't the only ones to lament the fragmentation of society. Christian or not, we all have an intrinsic need for community. We all suffer from the isolation that sin breeds. Our neighbors are desperate to belong and be connected to a people. Some try to rebuild community through social action, campaigns, planning better cities, revitalizing neighborhood schools, or feeding the homeless. Others join gangs or social clubs, immerse themselves in virtual communities online, or hang out in coffee shops. These are all attempts to satisfy the need for community, but the problem is, none of these solutions address the real problem. They don't address the cause of isolation.

The sin that disintegrates our communities and alienates us from one another is what put Jesus on the cross. He experienced the worst isolation and the worst evil—separation from God the Father. He was relationally severed from the eternal community of the

Trinity. In trade, he gave us the greatest good, reconciliation to God and others, making community possible.

## REBUILT ON THE CROSS

But let's be honest, we have all fallen short of community that proclaims the truth of God's goodness and grace, as we are often censored by fear or muzzled by sin. The cross, then, is central to building community within the church. If the church is going to offer an alternative to the brokenness and isolation in the world, then it must be a community that is transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In Ephesians 2:15b–22, we see the intentionality behind the cross in building (or rebuilding) the community of God:

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. So then you are *no longer strangers and aliens*, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone*, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

In this text we see that we are a community of believers built on the cornerstone of Jesus. This work is completed and we need only to receive it. Through Christ we are fellow citizens and members of one household reconciled through the cross. We are saved to be a community, not a church of individuals. Dietrich Bonhoeffer sums it up this way: "Christian community means community through and in Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup> It is through Christ that we have been reconciled to God and to one another. It is in Christ that we are united together like a family who shares the bloodline of Jesus. Jesus gives us the ability to experience life as God intended, in real community with him and one another. In a

world searching for belonging, the cross is a beacon of hope. We belong to one another because we have been united in Christ.

The purpose of such community is to display the love of God for the world. We see this design just a few verses earlier in Ephesians 2 when Paul explains why we have been made alive in Christ. He says that it was "so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."<sup>4</sup> This is the purpose of community. We have been saved so that we would express the gospel of Jesus Christ. Living together in community, reconciled and united by the cross, is a physical demonstration of the grace of God.

*Community is for us a declaration of the overwhelming love of God, a tangible proclamation of the reconciling work of the cross.* This is a truly compelling reason to build community groups within our churches. This is the bigger purpose that can inspire real community. Community groups are a living illustration of the gospel and its power to save. The world needs this, and so does your church.

### CREATED FOR COMMUNITY

Understanding why community is essential to the life of the Christian and the proclamation of the gospel begins with understanding that we were created for community.

No one really debates the need for people to exist within community. It is not merely a Christian understanding; it is a human understanding. But belonging in and of itself will never be enough. Hanging the need for community on belonging is like hanging the need for water on thirst. The need for both is deeper. Thirst is a symptom of a deeper design—that your body was created to require water to survive. While we can technically survive without community, we don't function properly without it. The deeper need for community is embedded in the very fabric of who we are; it is part of our design.

Ask people who they are and you will get plenty of different answers. We often define ourselves by what we do or what we have. This identity determines how we see ourselves and affects every choice we make. Distortions in our identity lead us to search for fulfillment

in places other than God and to settle for less than what God intended. If our identity is wrapped up in being self-sufficient and autonomous, then we will likely never experience life-giving community. Start in the wrong place and it really doesn't matter how good the map is.

Because Jesus has redeemed us, we can reset our identity to reside in the place God intended. When Jesus reconciled us to the Father, he established for us a renewed identity. This identity is a restoration of the image of God in which we were created.

In Genesis, at the pinnacle of creation, God creates mankind. The Bible records that God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."<sup>5</sup> When God says he is going to make man in his image, he informs us of our intended identity. We are image bearers of God. We exist as a living reflection of God, who exists in eternal community.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, God exists in an eternal relationship within the Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As a relational being, he creates us as relational beings to represent him to all of creation. God solidifies this point in the creation story of man in Genesis 2. He makes a point of expressing the incompleteness of man apart from community when he says, "It is not good that the man should be alone."<sup>7</sup> Scripture emphasizes that we cannot image God's relational nature in isolation.

So what does this mean? This means that we were created for community. We were not created simply to appreciate it. We are incomplete without it.

Furthermore, by God's grace, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, he made true community possible. Jesus restored the image of God that was marred by sin. Jesus made it possible for us to reflect the relational nature of God through life in community. When we live in community as a declaration of the gospel, we announce that Jesus has restored what sin had broken, and we experience life as God intended.

### CREATED TO GLORIFY GOD

We have established that indeed we were created for community, but why? Being an image bearer is not only a description of who we are;

it is also a description of why we are. We are created as a reflection of God (who we are) to reflect God to all of creation (why we are). The eternal purpose of mankind is to proclaim the glory of God to the world. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says as much when it declares that "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."<sup>8</sup> We do this as we receive, believe, and celebrate what has been done through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Reflecting the glory of God as an image bearer is to proclaim who God is through our lives. God reveals his nature to us in this way:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.<sup>9</sup>

This is the nature of God that we are to reflect in Christ-centered community. A community of God should be merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. They are a people who address sin with compassion and patience and are quick to restore the repentant. Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Colossians:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.<sup>10</sup>

This is a picture of a community reflecting the attributes of God because of what Jesus has done. Christ-centered community allows

us to reflect the relational nature of God as well as his mercy and grace. It is a community that confronts sin and forgives one another, marked by compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. It is a community that seeks to live in peace with one another and reconcile broken relationships. That is dramatically different than the way the world handles conflict. When Christ reconciled us to one another on the cross, he made such a reflection possible.

Reflecting the image of God was a gift to mankind that was not shared with any other created being. Yet it is a gift that we forfeited through sin and rebellion. Jesus purchased and restores this precious gift through the cross. And when we then exalt Jesus, we glorify the Father and fulfill our call as image bearers to proclaim the greatness of God.

It is not enough to say that we should live out our faith in community because we are image bearers of the Trinitarian God. We are image bearers of a Trinitarian God who have been redeemed by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Our lives in community are a proclamation of who God is and what God has done through our Savior.

### INSPIRED BY HIS GLORY

This understanding inspires a life and community devoted to Jesus. The motivation that will sustain such community is not the expectation to glorify God; it is the glory of God itself. In other words, you can't just tell people that they *should* glorify God. We need to see the beauty, the splendor, and the magnificence of our God. A clear view of God puts life in perspective. It is simultaneously terrifying and motivating. When we see God clearly, we understand that there is nothing more important than worshiping him and lifting up his name.

Isaiah saw the glory of God in the temple and he was a mess.<sup>11</sup> He was so aware of his sin and the sin of his people that he thought he would die in the midst of God. That experience changed Isaiah and the way he lived his life. After seeing God's majesty, he was willing to do anything to proclaim the majesty of the Father. When asked who would go to proclaim the truth of God, Isaiah volunteered without

hesitation. He did not ask what he was being sent to do. He did not ask what he would receive in return. He just went.

We see the same pattern in Moses, David, Peter, and Paul. These men were all inspired by the glory of God to live lives that reflected his splendor. Peter is my favorite of the bunch. Prone to write checks with his mouth that his body could not cash, something changed in Peter after he witnessed the resurrection of Jesus. Before the resurrection, Peter boasted of going to his death for Jesus but was so intimidated by the questions of a teenage girl that he denied Christ altogether.<sup>12</sup> However, after witnessing the splendor of God through the resurrected Jesus, Peter preached with boldness until he was crucified upside down for his faith.<sup>13</sup>

So why are our communities so apathetic and paralyzed by fear of man? We, too, have seen the glory of God. The Gospel of John tells us that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."<sup>14</sup> Not only have we seen him, but also we have received his grace. How much more should we be inspired to live in a community that exalts the Son?

Through his letter to Timothy, Paul tells us to "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory."<sup>15</sup> Now that is a man who has seen the goodness of God and knows that Jesus is worthy to be worshiped. The death and resurrection of Christ inspired Paul to live a life submitted to the will of the Father. The grace of God displayed through the Son sustained Paul through suffering and pain. He was willing to "endure everything" for the chance to be a part of God's saving work in the world.

That is the kind of community we want to build. We want a people who have such a clear view of Jesus that temporal circumstances

do not make them waiver from their call to make disciples. If we are going to call the church to live out the gospel through the storms of life, we need this kind of inspiration.

### EMPOWERED BY HIS GRACE

While God's glory inspires obedience, it is empowered by his grace. Isaiah was right to be afraid to be in the presence of God. But God in his grace cleansed him of his sin so that he could respond to God's call. God not only inspires us through his glory, he also gives us the ability to respond through his grace. This is the beauty of the atoning work of Jesus on the cross. We have been reconciled so that we can image him to the world, and he sends us the Holy Spirit to empower us to such a life.<sup>16</sup> Second Peter says, "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."<sup>17</sup> This is God's promise for transformational community.

So what does a community inspired by the glory of God and empowered by grace look like? As we receive his grace we are able to be a reflection of his goodness. A community that has been transformed by the gospel reflects the nature of God. One of my favorite pictures of who we are to be as a community can be found in 1 Peter 2:9–12:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 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.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

What a great description of community. The context here is that we are being built up as a spiritual house of God, just as Paul declared in Ephesians 2.<sup>18</sup> This then is a picture of the church. It is a community of people transformed by the gospel.



Peter begins with reminding us of our identity. We are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession."<sup>19</sup> We have a new identity that comes from our faith in Christ and binds us together. Christ has purchased this identity, so we are *already* "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession."<sup>20</sup> We simply need to *be* what Jesus has already secured for us in his death and resurrection. Notice then, that this identity is corporate rather than individual. While my personal identity is in Jesus, Peter makes it clear that we have a communal identity, as well.

Christianity is not an individual sport. We are part of a team. For our community groups to mature and image God, we need to see ourselves as a people connected by Jesus. We have to be more than a collection of individuals who occasionally gather together. We need a corporate sense of our identity. A gospel-centered community will find their identity in Jesus individually and corporately.

Peter then gives us the reason for which God made us a community. He says it is "*that you may proclaim the excellencies*" of the one who saved us.<sup>21</sup> This is more than a description of a Christian community. This is the purpose of community. We are to worship Jesus as a people and declare the good news that a Savior has come. The natural expression of gratitude for a community that has been reconciled from death to life will be marked by worship and proclamation. We do this through remembering what he has done for us, calling us out of the isolation caused by sin and back into relationship with the Father.<sup>22</sup>

Next we see sanctification as an outworking of the gospel in community.<sup>23</sup> We are to be sanctified by living lives together that are honoring to God and marked by growth and maturation. Bonhoeffer anchors the goal of Christian community in "meet[ing] one another as bringers of the message of salvation."<sup>24</sup> That is because it is through the gospel that we are continuously being sanctified. A life-giving community is one that is continuously being transformed by the gospel as a people.

To illustrate this point, Peter says that we are in a "war" for our

souls.<sup>25</sup> In boxing, you fight alone; in war, you fight as a nation. Sanctification is not an individual fight; it is one we fight as a community. By speaking the gospel to one another and living out its implications, we participate in a corporate sanctification process. This is true community.

Finally, Peter tells us to protect our witness among our neighbors.<sup>26</sup> He expects such a community to be seen by those who have yet to meet Jesus. There is an assumption that the way we live together is seen and points to Christ. Honorable conduct, or holiness, is not required to earn our righteousness; instead, it is an outworking of the gospel work in us that testifies to the power of the cross.<sup>27</sup>

Jesus makes this point to his disciples during the Last Supper when he tells them, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."<sup>28</sup> Thus, he calls us to love one another in ways that can be seen by all men so that they know we live this way because of Jesus. Our primary purpose in community is not that our needs are being met, but that Jesus would be lifted up. It is not that we aren't blessed by the love we share for one another, but that we experience our greatest joy when Jesus is most glorified.<sup>29</sup>

Basically, the witness of community is more powerful than an individual witness. Loving your neighbors is much easier if you never have to deal with them. Living in light of the gospel is much harder in community where people sin against you. Your neighbors know this and that is why talk is cheap. Experiencing a people who confess their sins against one another, repent, and forgive is foreign to the world. Communities that live in this way, transformed by the gospel, will not only have a good reputation among their neighbors, but also they will point them to hope in Jesus. This is a community that has joined the mission of God.

And what is the ultimate goal of our neighbors seeing how we live? It is so they will worship God!<sup>30</sup> Having our identity in Jesus—out of which flows worship of God, community with one another, and mission to the world—culminates in God being worshiped on

the last day. Indeed, in this passage "Peter sees the priestly nature of the church as 'declaring the praises' of our exodus God and living in such a way among the nations that they come to glorify God."<sup>31</sup> The functions of community build toward this goal as we are empowered by his grace to live out gospel-centered community.

### COMMUNITY IS NOT OPTIONAL

Community groups are essential to the Christian life because we were created for community. We were built to function in relationship with one another and with God. We are able to do so through the grace and reconciliation made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Community, therefore, is an expression of who God is in Trinitarian relationship and a testimony to his love in redeeming us as a people through Jesus.

We must conclude that if God created community for this purpose, it should be an essential part of every Christian's life. The marginalization of community within the church and culture has not come from conviction but from apathy and isolation brought on by sin. Isolation is our response to sin. Community is our response to reconciliation.<sup>32</sup>

When we don't ask why we have community, it becomes a secondary function of the church rather than the primary vehicle through which God moves and makes his glory known. To resuscitate life in the community of God, we must reestablish the foundational purpose of community. We must root it in the cross.

If we want to take our small group communities off life support, we need to go to the source. We need the atoning work of Jesus that brings the dead to life. It is the gospel that plucked us from death, and it is the gospel that will breathe life into our anemic communities.

The inspiration for community is the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the glimpse of his glorious return. It is the power over sin. It is his victory over death. As we receive the gift of grace and believe in the promise of what Jesus accomplished, we are compelled by the grace of our Savior to proclaim this great act of love. Living grace-filled lives in a community marked by humility and love, which seeks

to reconcile one to another and broken lives to God, is the perfect means for such a proclamation.

We do not have community groups to close the back door of the church. We do not have groups because people need to belong or we need to care for one another. These are good but secondary effects of authentic community. These effects are not the foundation. We have community groups because we have seen the glory of God<sup>33</sup> and we have been given the grace to live our lives to exalt the Christ.<sup>34</sup> We have community groups because we have been reconciled to God and one another. We once were not a people but now we are a people of God's own possession.<sup>35</sup> We have community groups as a proclamation of the goodness of our God and testimony to the completed work of the cross. This is the foundation for gospel-saturated community that will overflow with life.

Call your people to meditate on the purpose of community. Seeing the eternal purpose purchased by the blood of Jesus will inspire the kind of devotion we see in the Acts 2 and 1 Peter 2 churches and that we desperately want to see lived out in the body of Christ.