

The Gospel and Community

A lot of time is spent discussing of the mission and purpose of the church in the world. What should it look like? What makes it unique? Does it still matter? The answers are incredibly varied and nuanced, but usually they tend to focus on a couple of elements: doctrine and practice. We need to develop a sound theology to undergird our understanding of the church and our practice ought to flow from this. For the most part, most books I've read all agree on this point (even if the particulars of these vary drastically).

But there's something else that's missing in the discussion—**the culture of your church**. The church's culture reveals what's really at the heart of the congregation... and if we're careful to look closely, we might find a disconnect.

It's why so many churches face the difficulty of saying they're about the Bible, yet the congregation never opens it, or we value evangelism, but our event schedules are so booked with classes, lectures or pot-lucks that we don't have time to actually get to know anyone who's not a Christian.

So how do we develop a culture where we're actually about the things we say or think we're about? In their new book, *Creature of the Word: The Jesus-Centered Church*, authors Matt Chandler, Josh Patterson, and Eric Geiger offer their insights into creating a gospel-centered culture that fuels every aspect of the local church.

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The authors divide the book into two parts, first examining the unique attributes of the "creature of the Word" (that is, the Church)—how God brings together a people, forming a body for His purposes in the world, and how it is to behave, worshipping, multiplying and serving in community. While many might consider this a "yeah, I get it" point, the authors remind us that we must always start here:

For just as an individual must continually return to the grace of Jesus for satisfaction and sanctification, a local church must continually return to the gospel as well. Our churches must be fully centered on Jesus and His work, or else death and emptiness is certain, regardless of the worship style or sermon series. Without the gospel, everything in a church is meaningless. And dead. (Kindle location 201)

We cannot move too quickly past the need to honestly examine ourselves in light of the gospel, whether individually or corporately. If we fail to do the hard and necessary work of self-examination and repentance, we'll fall flat on our faces. There won't be anything to sustain a truly Jesus-centered culture within our communities.

This point is arguably one of the authors' strongest as they explain there really isn't such a thing as true Christian community without the gospel and all it entails, for, "The gospel is the

deepest foundation for community.”

They continue:

...any attempt to build community on something more than the grace of Christ becomes a subtle move away from grace, a move toward pseudo-community that only puffs up and fails to transform. If something other than the person and work of Jesus becomes the foundation for a group of believers, that “other thing,” whatever it is—economic level, social manners, music preferences, common life experiences—becomes what they use to differentiate themselves from others. And it immediately becomes a point of boasting, a way to feel justified. (Kindle location 933)

Consider this critique carefully. This isn't meant only for the seeker church or the “progressive” church... it's got those of us in theologically conservative churches in mind, too. Over the last few years, there's been a renewal of concern over what it means to be a biblical church. And frequently you hear that a true church is “gospel-centered.” While this is unquestionably a good thing, there's a danger in turning it into a new measuring stick; so it becomes about how many months our sermon series runs, how long the preacher speaks for, how many churches we're planting... The things meant to serve the gospel wind up enslaving us.

Read Part Two [here](#).

Read more from Aaron [here](#).