

A Supernatural Community of Love | 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Ephesians 2:14-22; Galatians 3:27-28

“The love for equals is a human thing—of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving & lovely. The world smiles. The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing—the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion & it touches the heart of the world. The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing—to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world is always bewildered by its saints. And then there is love for the enemy—love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens & inflicts pain. The tortured’s love for the torturer. This is God’s love. It conquers the world.” – Frederick Buechner

This is the love we have been thinking about, the 1 Corinthians 13 love, the love we are called to love one another as Jesus has loved us with. When we read the remainder of 1 Corinthians 13 it becomes clear that it is spiritual childishness which stops us loving others as Jesus loves us. Paul even had to write to this same church; **“But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not ready, for you are still off the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, “I follow Paul”, and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?”** It was because of jealousy & strife they were dividing behind human personalities, dividing into factions instead of growing together in Christ. I find that phrase **“being merely human”** important here. They were simply dividing up into natural communities – like for like communities – instead of growing in supernatural community. And Paul here in chapter 13 brings the remedy for this spiritual childishness – supernatural love. The love that goes way beyond mere human love, the love that enlarges the heart to embrace opposites, offenders & enemies, the love that expands way beyond those who are like it, the love of Christ. Sanctification, growing in Christ likeness, is the ongoing process of giving up childish ways to pursue the way of love.

Another thing about the remainder of these verses in 1 Corinthians 13 is the acknowledgement that we have not arrived - we know in part, we prophecy in part, we see in a mirror dimly etc. We also see what is eternal & what is temporary – tongues will cease, prophecy & knowledge will pass away. There will be no need for tongues, prophecy or knowledge when the kingdom comes in full, when we see him face to face, when we know fully. The only reason those things are helpful now is because we do not see face to face or know fully yet... This also means the real mark of Christian maturity cannot be any these temporary things but only in what lasts – love! The mark of Christian maturity in Christ-like love. Love is the greatest thing the gospel produces in Christians. Pursue love... for loving others as Jesus loves us is the panicle of sanctification. That Paul’s whole deal in this chapter. If we have all the other stuff without love, it is nothing, & we are missing the point of it & the point of Christianity! As Thomas Merton puts it; *“When all*

his has been said, the truth remains that our destiny is to love one another as Christ has loved us.” Love will help us see more clearly than anything. It is the logs of envy & boasting, arrogance & rudeness, self-seeking, irritability & resentment, rejoicing in wrongdoing that hinder our spiritual sight. However the love that is patient & kind, that rejoices with the truth, that bears, believes, hopes & endures all things; it will help us see more clearly. In growing in this supernatural love of Christ is that produces a supernatural community of love.

1. Natural Community

Before we think about supernatural community let's first think about natural community! What makes natural community? Does love exist in a community that's formed around something other than the gospel? Of course it does. We can find community in a GAA Club, in a walking group, in a band, in any number of interest or support groups. We can find natural community with people who are like us or who find themselves in a similar situation, stage of life or background to us. And in this natural community we find friendship, fellowship, affection, joy, support & yes a kind of love. This is good & it is a gift of God's common grace that we find people who have something or much in common with us. People who get us & enjoy what we enjoy.... We might even find such people in the church as well & this is no bad thing. The only point I am making about this is that this kind of community does not need the gospel to hold it together & therefore does not display the gospel – it does not display the depth & the breadth of Christ's love. However, at the same time we need to be careful not to pull away from natural community because

1. It is a gift from God &
2. It places us in relationships where we can share the gospel with others.

This is why I am not a big fan of Christian clubs & interest groups. Sometimes they are needed but most of the time they aren't. If you like football don't start a Christian football team go & join a normal football team & bring your Christianity with you. What we don't need is lots of little Christian splinter groups forming community around Jesus plus something else; whether it be race, gender, social class or personal interest. What we do need is lots of Christians scattered among all the spheres, clubs & interest groups in the area. We should be part of natural communities for our good & for the good of those communities & we should also be part of supernatural community as well – church! We should long for these two realities to overlap to the extension of Christ's kingdom. What we don't need is lots of little Christian subgroups that essentially keep Christians away from being a kingdom-influencers right across the wider community & away from one another. Let's go into the wider community & find our natural community & plant ourselves there, bringing our Christianity with us, & then when the time is right invite those in our natural communities to come & experience the supernatural community of the gospel. As Peter puts it; **“Live such good lives among the pagans...”**

Natural community is a gift from God & it can create opportunities for the extension of his kingdom. Natural community is good & important & should be viewed as part of our Christian life & witness but alone it is not enough, alone it does not display the power of the gospel. Natural community can put us in places of opportunity to share the gospel but it does not itself display the reconciling power of the gospel we heard about in Ephesians 2. This where our commitment to each other as a church – as a supernatural community of Christ – comes in. The ideal I'm presenting is not that we withdraw from natural community but that we also commit to supernatural community for the sake of Christ, for our own sanctification & for the sake of the many lost people in our natural communities. Church is supernatural community, a display of the reconciling gospel of Christ, & it exists for the good of every other community we find ourselves a part of.

2. Supernatural Community

Again note what Jesus said in Matt 5:43-48; **“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

What Jesus does in these verses is contrast natural love with supernatural love, human love with God's love & calls his followers to the latter. Followers of Jesus should love neighbours & enemies. Followers of Jesus should greet their brothers & their enemies. In other words they should be part of natural community & supernatural community but it is their commitment to supernatural community that sets them apart! What we see in Acts & the letters which follow is how this worked out in the formation of the church around the gospel. The gospel which declares: 1. Rom 5:10; **“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”** Gal 3:27-28; **“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”**

Now think about what the gospel does according to Ephesians 2. Note that these two groups had different backgrounds, different politics, and different ethnicity. There would have been deep disagreement around many things & even deep pain & hurt because of history between them. However Paul tells us the blood of Christ makes two opposing groups one, it creates one new man in the place of two, it reconciles both to God through the cross, it makes strangers & alien's fellow citizens & family in God's household. And all

these truths are sandwiched between the statements; **“For he himself is our peace”** (14) & **“Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone”** (20)! For he himself, Christ Jesus himself, is our peace & cornerstone! **Let’s read the verses again with that in mind.** He does all this himself. The vision is a supernatural community growing together in Christ!

These verses show us how the gospel is the foundation for such supernatural love & the church is the place where teaching on supernatural love is to be lived & demonstrated. Through the death of his Son, which demonstrated God’s love for us who had made ourselves his enemies, he reconciled us to himself. In that same death, through the cross he killed every excuse for hostility between Jew & Gentile & therefore between all people groups – whether the divide be race, social class, gender or anything else. When we are reconciled to God we are reconciled in one body through the cross, thereby killing hostility. That is what Paul teaches in Ephesians! We are not reconciled to God in cliques of Jew & Gentile, slave or free, male & female, black or white, married or single, rich or poor. We are reconciled to God in one body through the cross as a supernatural community that would not exist apart from the reality that Christ himself is our peace! Local church **MUST** reflect this reality as much as demographically possible. Church is not built on the foundation of Jesus plus same race, same social class, same gender or same anything else, but on Jesus alone. Christ himself is our peace. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:11 **“For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”** This secures Christ alone as the centre of all we are & do! When Christ himself changes to Christ plus something else Christian community breaks down in splinter groups & the supernatural community of love becomes natural community again.

We will never become a dwelling place for God by meeting only with people naturally like us & people we naturally like. We will only become a dwelling place for God when **“he himself is our peace.”** When it is all stripped back to him, when he is what is most important & all important to all of us, & when he stands at the centre by himself then we are ready to become a dwelling place for God by his Spirit.

To be at odds with an enemy is very natural. To love an enemy is very divine. Church is the place where natural enemies unite to form supernatural community in Christ. This is what Paul is talking about. Church is the place where opposites become one. Male & female unite, slave & free unite, Jew & gentile unite... Christ himself is our peace – he is the bond of peace who binds us together, Christ himself! The way to maintain & grow in unity in the Spirit is to make Christ himself our peace. Not Christ plus something else, Christ himself, Christ alone, Christ with nothing added. The eagerness to maintain the unity of the Spirit is expressed in our commitment of making Christ himself our peace & cornerstone of unity...

The problem is we can love ourselves more than unity with one another. We like our way of worship, our way of church, our way of thinking so we form fellowship with people who agree with us. This is what was happening in Corinth. What we end up with is churches that follow Christ & Luther, Christ & Wesley, Christ

& St. Francis. Isn't that in part why we have denominations? Or to bring it forward to today. We end up with groups who follow Christ & John Piper, Christ & Rick Warren, Christ & Carter Conlan or Christ & Bill Johnson. The problem is because of this when we come together we all expect a different kind of church to happen & these differences potentially divide us & pull us in different directions. See it's not just that we come from different backgrounds but we form different opinions & views & ideas about Christianity even though we read the same Bible. How we stay lives with this?

What if I told you now that Amazing Grace Fellowship is never going to be Bethlehem, Saddleback, Times Square or Bethel etc? Would you still be committed & excited about the further of Amazing Grace? What if our dream for church has to die for Christ himself truly to become our peace. Not everyone who is convinced that Jesus is Lord will be convinced by your favourite Christian writer or preacher or pastor or worship leader AND THAT IS OKAY! We are a fellowship of differentials! Christ himself is our peace! We can learn from many but we only follow one! As Bonhoeffer wrote; *"The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community."* Unity is not me bowing down to your dream or agenda for church or you to mine. Unity is all of us bowing to the Lordship of Christ! Supernatural community begins when Christ himself becomes our peace & he teaches us to love one another as Christ has loved us. Christian community is as wide as wide can be, as wide as the grace of God, yet it all depends one Person – **"for he himself is our peace... he has created in himself one new man..."**

Our commitment to loving one another should be greater than our commitment to a particular way of doing church. Loving one another as Jesus loves us is how to do church. Let's forget about style of worship & order of service & all the stuff we potentially splinter over until this foundational commandment of loving one another as Jesus loved us is our priority. Jesus new commandment does two things: 1. It lays the love of Christ as the foundation. It turns our attention to how Christ has loved us. 2. Then it calls us to love one another as he has loved us. The foundation of our lives is also the foundation of our fellowship & the evidence we are on the right foundation is that our fellowship reflects the supernatural love of Christ.

The supernatural love of Christ produces a supernatural community of love. Scott Sauls writes; *"When love is in the air, divisions & factions fade. When love is in the air, we are moved to expand our "us."*

We want to make sure that when we invite people from our natural communities to church we invite them into a community of supernatural love that amazes them. Deep & Wide community held together only by Christ himself!