

Sermon for Sunday, May 1, 2011
Dr. Dan Doriani
A Vision for the Church: Life Together
Acts 1:1-8, 2:42-47

Let's imagine a conversation between two opinionated people. One says, "I cannot fathom the American fascination with the royal wedding. It's not our country; we weren't invited. We fought hard to overthrow the monarchy and we succeeded, 230 years ago. Half of the British think the monarchy is meaningless to them. What do they do anyway?"

The other replies: "Thanks for bringing up the topic of useless institutions, consider the church. What does it do? Yes, the church helps in times of spiritual need, in hospitals, for funerals and weddings, but otherwise:

- The church is often best at taking care of itself. It can become an insular social group or ethical and religious society.
- Worship and classes are often dull or fail to meet my needs.
- Bad things happen in churches. Efforts are wasted and people get hurt."

1. The Mission of Jesus' Church

With his last words, Jesus gave the church a great commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mat. 28:19-20). Note that Jesus does not say, "share my gospel" or "make converts." Rather, "Make disciples" throughout the world.

We go to make disciples. We don't wait for them to come to us. We baptize. We put the name of the triune God on Jesus' disciples. There is no room for secret faith; we need to own God's name. We teach them "to obey everything" Jesus commanded – every last thing. Not just the favorite words, the attractive or cool or easy things Jesus commands, but every last thing he says. No red letter Bibles.

Jesus adds assurance and motivation. He is sovereign: "All authority has been given to me." And he is here: "I am with you always." Hear the repetition: Jesus has all authority. The apostles make disciples of all nations, by teaching all Jesus' commands, and he is with disciples all our days.

In Luke Jesus tells his disciples that he had to "suffer and rise from the dead on the third day." They are his witnesses. He will give them power to proclaim "repentance and forgiveness of sins" in his name: "You are witnesses of these things..." and must proclaim them "to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (24:44-49). He promises, "You will receive power" to fulfill their commission. And, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem... and to the ends of the earth" (1:7-8).

This is the mission of the church. Not simply to preach, or share the gospel or share the faith. Not to be good or do good, but to make disciples. Disciples know and follow Jesus globally. They equip others to join them and to take their place. Paul told Timothy, one of the church's first pastors, "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim). So it goes: Paul to Timothy, Timothy to reliable men, reliable men who will teach others, on through the generations.

This is the mission. Acts 1-5 shows how the church began to fulfill it. The apostles preached and created a community, a life together, in the church. The church is the school for disciples, the launch pad for the mission. Acts describes the character of the church in four ways.

2. The Character of Jesus' Church

First, the church is immersed in Scripture. Acts says they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." Acts 1-5 mentions the apostles' teaching ten times (2:14-36, 42; 3:12-26; 4:2, 18, 33, 5:21, 25, 28, 42). This was important to the early church and it should be important to you. Read and study Scripture alone or with us.

Second, Christians share meals and prayers. Acts says the first Christians "devoted themselves to prayer" (1:14). They "broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (2:46). Again, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (2:4). Clearly, the disciples often met to share meals and pray (4:24).

Shared meals, joint prayer are important because we're humans, not snakes. We bond, laugh, tell stories, and share burdens together. Together, we discover our gifts and roles, we find friends and share a life. So let's spend time together, care for each other, know each other, and grow together.

Third, disciples meet in groups large and small. The early church "continued to meet together in the temple courts" daily (2:46). Acts says this seven times: The church often met in the temple to hear the apostles teach and to worship together ("pray" equals worship; 2:46, 3:1; 5:11, 20-25, 42). They *all gathered* in the temple. This is the large group, where they heard and celebrated the apostolic teaching, the gospel of God's grace in Christ (20:24). A church needs to be large enough to celebrate, to experience the power of joint praise.

But a church also needs ways to get small, to care for each other. So the first Christians "broke bread in their homes and ate together." They met in groups large and small. Small groups form the relationships, but they are not magically healing or helpful. The root of fellowship is that we belong to Jesus. Hanging out is good, but community is more – it's hanging out with a purpose.

"Many people seek fellowship because they cannot stand to be alone." If you merely seek "the company of other people," you will probably be disappointed. Fellowship is not distraction from loneliness. Some people can't be alone. Don't confuse a desire to *be around people* with a desire for community. If you seek community to avoid silence or loneliness, you may hurt yourself and others. God calls us to purposeful community.¹

The first Christians met in the temple – the large group – and in homes – the small group. This is the lasting pattern. After worship, have discussion, a meal and conversation. It's how we grow and it's how an outsider explores the faith: Listen and discuss over a span of time. Generally, the longer a secular person considers the claims of Christ, before coming to faith, the better.

Jesus' followers celebrate God's presence and power. The early church had unique experiences of God's presence: "Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles." They were "praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people" (2:42, 47). The apostles

¹ Life Together, 76-7

are no longer here, performing "many wonders" but the Lord still hears and answers prayer and we should celebrate that.

Fourth, the disciples care for the needy: "They shared everything they had... There were no needy persons among them" (4:32-35). There was a lot of poverty and dislocation in the early church. Many were separated from their families, so the church helped. The church has been second family – brothers and sisters - and has been quick to offer help to each other in time of we need.

Paul said, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10). Aid starts with fellow believers, because we are family. Sadly, human needs are so great that no one can minister to all the poor and needy. Yet the church always wants to show kindness as Jesus did, especially to the weakest and poorest, refugees, children and more. Keep with your eyes open. If you don't know where to start, consider our refugee ministry or our ministry at Roosevelt High School in the city.

3. This Church Can Pursue God's Ideals

This is the picture of the early church at its best, a picture we want to embody: Sharing time in Scripture; meeting in groups, large and small, to celebrate God's presence, to pray and enjoy fellowship, and to extend God's love to the needy. Can we approach this ideal? Our church purpose statement says we aim for it: "We seek to glorify the triune God by embracing the gospel, making disciples, building our community, and transforming societies." That covers worship and teaching and a life shared in large and small groups, prayer and care for each other.

Sadly, no church is equally good at fulfilling all the marks of the church. May I speak plainly: Whether we see ourselves this way or not, others see Central as a teaching and worshiping church, a prosperous and educated church. A church that is better at world mission than local mission. Right or wrong, it's our reputation. Can we evaluate our reputation?

A worshiping church: Yes. Just listen to the excellence of our music, the careful planning of the elements of worship (liturgy). Consider why do so many visitors come here at Christmas and Easter, people who don't really have a church or skip between churches? The worship music is a very big part of the reason.

A teaching church: Eight years ago, you hired a professor as your senior pastor. Need I say more? No, but I will. Family churches, social action churches don't do that. Teaching churches hire professors. For at least forty years, this church has aimed to hire preachers and teachers.

I'm not advocating this, I'm labeling it. I'm not saying, "We ought to be a teaching church." But we need to know ourselves, since lack of self-knowledge can hurt us. If we instinctively act like a teaching and worshiping church, we must ask how that instinct can lead us astray. If we focus too much on teaching and worship, we won't be as mature, won't come as close to God's ideal, as we could. If we're naturally a church of worship and teaching, and we want to be complete, we must work harder at the other elements of our mission.

To speak candidly, God gave Israel three offices in the Old Testament: prophet, priest and king. A church like ours can focus on the prophet – teaching – and ignore the rest if we're not careful. Priests offer care. Good kings want to lead, to make a difference in the world. We need an eye for all three. Sites can help us here.

Sites

I believe sites are vital to Central's future. Lord willing, we will be a church *of sites*, not just a church *with a site or two*. I pray that sites will become essential to our identity. I think it's time to start early planning for the next site, probably a few miles east of Central. Trio and West County now have a total attendance of about 230 weekly and it's been increasing for a year. So it's timely.

Sites are vital to Central for several reasons. First, because Clayton is a great city, space is tight and will remain so. Real estate is costly. We may never have all the parking or space we want or need. We can grow more in Clayton, but not very much. Sites allow us to expand our ministry without worrying so much about space. If we hope to grow much as a church, if we hope to make a difference in the St. Louis area, we need sites.

It's easy to sit on the sidelines in a large church: "I love the teaching, worship and community, but I can't see needs, where I should serve." When someone joins a site, the needs are obvious. Sites get people out of the stands and into the game.

Sites let us have the advantages of large and small church dynamics. At sites, we can know everyone. Visitors will be noticed. Everyone feels needed. Other people want the strengths of size: programs, specialists, even a touch of anonymity. Because of sites, Central can be both.

Sites will help us become a missional church. Sad but true: family churches and teaching/worshiping churches can easily become self-absorbed. It's good to give thanks for our strengths, but we can become providers and consumers of fellowship, music, worship, and teaching. All good things, but we want to be more than consumers of religious services.

How can we reach our nobler goals? Central has a reputation of being better at serving the world than at serving our neighborhood and city. Is there truth to that? If so, sites will help us bore deeper into the city, neighborhood by neighborhood.

Someone will say, "Sites are complicated. Why not just give some money and delegate some people to a church plant and let them go their way?" Several reasons: First, one third of all church plants fail in three years. Of those that survive, the average attendance is seventy or less. Central's experience is similar.

Sites seem to work better for churches like us. There are 2,000 multi-site churches today. They offer local ministry and partnership with a broader network, a team. Stability comes with relationships and shared resources. Bluntly: Sites can *keep us from being self-absorbed*. They can make us more missional, caring more for our city. But for sites to work, we need a shared vision. Can we locate the essence of our church? Will we find anything to share with the city?

Is Central an accident? Or is there some essence, a blend of traits we can pass on to others? A brand, as business folk would say? I suspect that there is. How many large, fairly healthy 170 year-old evangelical churches stand west of the Mississippi? How many churches endure the death of two senior pastors, with other major traumas, in less than decade, and remain standing? There must be something. Let me name three things that have long been here, things we want to retain for years to come.

First, a commitment to God-centered, Christ-centered, expository teaching – exploration and application of God's inspired, infallible word. Christ-centered means we don't just tell you what to do, how to manage your life. We listen, but we may not give priority to felt needs. We don't just say, "Got a

problem? Jesus is the solution." We also say, "Please take a look at what God did in Jesus Christ. What does that tell you about this world? About you?" If you believe in Him, we're not going to just tell you what to do. We're going to tell you, "You're united to Christ – go to a meadow and dream about that."

Second, we engage the culture. We have lectures and concerts. We have formal and informal dialogue, with people who stand outside the Christian faith. They visit here a lot because they sense that we take them seriously and plainly address their views. We let people take months, even years, if necessary.

I'm no pessimist but it's realistic to say that America is a post-Christian nation. Most people simply don't know what the Bible says. Christian ideas are alien: The holy God created all things. Mankind is created in his image? All people are accountable to God? God is all-powerful, but lets people make self-wounding mistakes? Jesus, Son of God, came to earth to redeem mankind, through his death and resurrection? Whoa, the secular person calls. Slow down. Yes, we can slow down. Tell us why you object; we'll listen. You can test the faith with us. We don't press them to make a decision today. We believe God's Spirit can work slowly too, through a small group, a series of conversations, a new members class, a communion-based invitation. And God brings many to himself here.

Third, there is a pattern of loyalty and caring for each other. Why didn't this church disintegrate when two senior pastors died while in office and another resigned for moral reasons? Because there were loyal, caring people here, people who don't quit on each other.

Maybe you will be part of our next site, in the city. Pray? Give?

Missions

When you give your offering a fair part goes to missions. Central is a missional church. We are missional and we do missions. Our prime mission event is Sunday worship. You bring your secular friends because you know that. Your life may look disappointing or frenzied to you, but people look and see a light, so they engage you. Wherever we go in St. Louis, we take the gospel with us. Outside St. Louis, in missions abroad, we aim to take the worship of Jesus to places where no one worships. We want to reach the "unreached" here and across the globe with the gospel of Jesus' grace.

Over the last decade, we have adopted a new strategy. Instead of sending Americans into alien cultures, we train and empower nationals to serve their own people. We come alongside to train leaders, to share resources. But it's most effective for Kenyans, Hungarians, Indians, and Brazilians to reach and lead Kenyans, Hungarians, Indians and Brazilians.

Ten years ago Central supported two national leaders around the world. Today we support twenty-seven nationals in nineteen countries on six continents. They have biblical and theological training. Sometimes we help sponsor the most gifted leaders so they can come here for strong theological training. They come for four years and return for forty. The return rate is 100%. They do better than Americans. They know the people, language and culture. They have connections; they don't get homesick. They're ready to start upon arrival, not after years of language lessons – Parlez vous France? Oui, oui. Magnifique.

We have helped nationals plant six new churches in India, ten in Ukraine, dozens in Kenya. They also established schools, orphanages, and Bible colleges. This is how we try to use your gifts wisely, as we strive to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Our motto: An unchanging message with ever changing methods. We adopt the best means we know. We work with nationals when we can, yet we still support western missionaries where appropriate for logistics, translation, and training. We still go abroad in person so we know our missionaries and their families by name and form bonds that last.

We also remain open to new works. We support Third Millennium Ministries. Its founder, Richard Pratt, spoke here last month. They produce training videos for third-world pastors and leaders. The form is like the History Channel, talking heads and images, with classes on Old Testament history, the life of Jesus, and Christian doctrine going around the world in English, Mandarin, Russian, Spanish, Arabic and more.

But God chooses to work in unexpected ways. So, ordinary Christians, plus Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and agnostics have an appetite for Third Millennium materials. Between one and ten million Arabic speaking people watch regularly. A Third Millennium "show" is the Number One television program in Mongolia. God must be laughing: Leadership training that's this interesting: secular people love it and come to faith. We would love to give them more funds. Yet Randy and I both give it time, too.

Recall the mission: "Go to all the world and make disciples." Not *converts*, disciples – men and women who follow Jesus, and walk in his ways.

You join the mission, first, by believing and following Jesus. If not, then consider the faith. After that, I need to ask you give to our mission. By give, I mean give money. It's been years since I have talked about money for more than five minutes. You hate long harangues about money and I hate to deliver them. So here it is short and straight: Since 2007 attendance is slowly rising and giving is slowly falling, about 5% this year. We squeezed the budget. We dropped non-essentials. We froze pay. But after four years it's compromising our mission. I'm baffled.

Yes, incomes are flat. Some of you are new to the faith and the concept of giving *sacrificially* is alien. Some of us scatter our giving to eight causes and think, "Central will be fine." Well, we're not ready to close the doors. But if we hope to go deeper into our mission to our city and the world in the ways you heard, it requires resources. If you believe in our mission, give to it. If we trust God with our lives, we can trust him with our finances.

Pray for it. Pray for what excites you, sometimes even on your knees. And as you pray, ask "Lord, what would you have me do, so we can talk the gospel and make disciples in all nations?"