

Building the Vision, Leaving a Legacy
The Missional Call of the Chinese Heritage Church (Acts 6:1-7)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on September 4, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ For those of you who are new to our church, you should know that our normal practice here is to preach through books of the Bible. We just finished a sermon series through Philippians. We usually jump back and forth between New Testament and Old Testament books. The reason is because we want the steady, staple diet that you're being fed from this pulpit to be driven by God's agenda and not ours. By God's priorities and not ours.
 - If we just preach through his Word, book by book, chapter by chapter, then we're more likely to address issues and topics that reflect *his* agenda and *his* priorities. Issues and topics that we'd probably overlook if we were only picking and choosing the topics that interest us. So that's why we do what we do.
 - But on occasion, we do a series that is more topical in nature. Meaning there's an overarching topic that binds all the sermons in the series together. We still try to do our best to faithfully preach each passage in its proper context, but we try to tie it all back to our broader topic.

- ❖ **So for this fall, we're doing a sermon series on the vision of our church.** We think this will be a great introduction for those of you new to HCC but also a good reminder for the members here who have heard a lot about this over the years and officially affirmed this church vision back in April of last year. So we've got seven messages lined up where we'll preach on texts that touch on the various components of our vision.
 - Now one aspect of the vision involves facility expansion and renovation, and in the weeks to come, you'll hear a lot about the big plans we have in store and how you can support it. So in our sermons, we'll try to make a connection between the overall church vision and how it relates to our upcoming building project.

- ❖ So that's where we're going in our sermons series in these next two months. Now some of you are probably thinking it's great that we're talking about the church's vision – but what is it? Take a look at today's sermon outline, and you'll see it printed out. Let me read it: ***HCC seeks to be an urban Chinese-heritage church in central Houston that reaches all those in our lives, Chinese or otherwise, through equipping, sending, and planting.***
 - In today's introductory message, I'd like to focus on the identity of our church – on what it means to call ourselves a Chinese-heritage church. And next week, I hope to talk more about our location and what it means to be an urban church in central Houston. And in the following weeks, we'll focus on the impact we hope our church can have on our community, our city, and beyond.

- ❖ Now throughout the whole vision-casting process, I've had conversations with people about the distinction between this new vision statement and our existing church mission statement – *to make God-loving, compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations*. They wonder if this means we're replacing the mission statement with this new vision statement.

- ❖ That's an understandable confusion because those terms are often conflated and used synonymously. But in our usage, we're keeping them distinct, and so that means we're still keeping and cherishing our existing mission statement. We think this vision statement will serve as a good supplement as it accomplishes a different purpose.
 - **When we speak of a mission statement – that's trying to address what we, as a church, are here for.** Why do we congregate as a body of believers? Why do we commit ourselves to one another as fellow church members of this local assembly? Why do we exist? To make God-loving, compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations. That's the underlying reason why we do all that we do as a church.

- ❖ But what will we look like if we faithfully pursued that mission of making those kinds of disciples? What do we en-vision our church to look like in the years to come as we live out our mission? Well, we en-vision ourselves to be: *an urban Chinese-heritage church in central Houston that reaches all those in our lives, Chinese or otherwise, through equipping, sending, and planting.*
 - **Our existing mission statement only speaks of what we *do* as a church. This new vision statement expresses what we *hope to be* as a church.** That's the main distinction, and we think they'll supplement each other well.

- ❖ So now let's get into the heart of today's message. I'd first like to provide you a definition of a Chinese-heritage church because that might be an unfamiliar term. Second, I want to address the unique challenges faced by all Chinese-heritage churches through a look at a similar kind of church in Acts 6. And lastly, I want to paint a hopeful vision for the future of Chinese-heritage churches like ours.

A Definition of a Chinese-Heritage Church

- ❖ So let's start by laying out a definition of what we mean when we talk about being a Chinese-heritage church. Because you probably just use the term Chinese church, so what's the point of using more words to describe it? Why include the word "heritage"? What are we trying to communicate when we describe HCC as a Chinese-heritage church?
 - It's straightforward really. **We means this church is – and always will be – a church with a Chinese heritage.** No matter if, decades from now, future congregations have altered the church's vision to fit their context – to the point that ministry to the Chinese diaspora in central Houston is no longer a prominent feature. Even so, this will *still* be a church with a Chinese heritage and could appropriately be described as a Chinese-heritage church.

- ❖ Let me give you an example from the church I attended in college up in Austin. Today, that church is called **Austin Oaks Church**. Back when I worshipped there, it was called **First Evangelical Free Church**. It went by that name since 1925. But prior to that, since its inception in 1892, it was called **Swedish Evangelical Church**, and their services were conducted in Swedish. So it was – and still is – a church with a Swedish heritage.

- ❖ Now since there's no longer a sizable Swedish diaspora in Austin – because Swedish immigration patterns have significantly dwindled over the past hundred years – I doubt Austin Oaks Church would find much benefit in promoting themselves as a Swedish-heritage church. They probably wouldn't describe themselves that way to a newcomer. But if they were to ever celebrate their church's history, then it would be true and honoring to speak highly of their Swedish-heritage and the ministry God accomplished through them in the past reaching the Swedish community. That would be the story of a Swedish-heritage church!
- ❖ Friends, I hope you see the obvious comparisons to our church and our context. **When we describe ourselves as a Chinese-heritage church – we mean to communicate that we are a church with a Chinese heritage.** That all of our founders, back in 1975, were immigrants of Chinese descent, and they had an expressed desire to reach, for Christ, the first-generation Chinese diaspora in our city. A community that continues to grow over the past 47 years.
 - And because there's still a significant and sizable first-generation Chinese diaspora here in Houston, we still have (and need) healthy Chinese congregations to do the gospel work that they are uniquely equipped and called to do. **And that's why describing ourselves as a Chinese-heritage church is fitting and helpful – because it not only honors our past heritage but accurately describes our present ministry. But what it also does – is that it leaves open our future.**
- ❖ Who knows that the future holds? Who knows what impact socio-political forces outside of our control might have on the future immigration of Chinese people to the U.S.? **Decades from now, who knows if Chinese ministry will still be a prominent feature of this church and whether it will still be helpful to describe ourselves as a Chinese-heritage church?**
 - Maybe one day, future members and leaders of this church will find themselves in a similar situation as Austin Oaks Church. And maybe for the sake of their present mission and ministry, they may no longer prominently feature the Chinese heritage of this church. **But I truly hope they will still celebrate and speak highly of our church's Chinese heritage that roots back to 1975 and a faithful group of UH grad students who were first-generation immigrants of Chinese descent.**
- ❖ So that's why I think this term "Chinese-heritage church" can be helpful in conversations with people today about our church. **It properly honors our heritage *in the past*. It accurately describes an important aspect of our ministry *in the present*. But it leaves things open *for the future*.** That's why our vision statement says we aim to reach for Christ "*all those in our lives, Chinese or otherwise*". That's one way to acknowledge and affirm those here who are not of Chinese descent but who are equally committed to making God-loving, compassionate disciples of Christ among all nations. And it encourages us to keep a broad outlook in our outreach to the larger community around us.
- ❖ Now some have asked me if I'm suggesting that we change our church's name to *Houston Chinese Heritage Church*. No, there's no need for that. There's no need to make Chinese church acronyms even longer.

- ❖ But if the term “Chinese-heritage church” becomes more normative in the way we speak about our church and churches like ours, then I hope it intrigues people to ask, “What do you mean by heritage?” And I hope that opens a door to talk about the history (heritage) of our church, about the ministries going on right now, and the opportunities that lay ahead of us.
 - If this kind of language and these kind of categories help you to describe the history, the identity, and the vision of the kind of church we could be in this city, then great – utilize it. But if it just confuses you or confuses others, then forget about it. **Terms like Chinese-heritage church are only helpful if they actually help.** So I just commend it to you and hope it helps you.

Challenges Faced by Chinese Heritage Churches

- ❖ Okay, let’s transition to talk about common challenges faced by Chinese-heritage churches. Now let’s finally take a look at Acts 6. Normally we jump right into the text. But with this topic, we had to lay out some groundwork. But now we’re ready.
 - **Acts is all about the early years of the church, starting with the church in Jerusalem.** In chapter 1:8, Jesus promises his apostles that they will, “*receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” And the rest of Acts shows how that unfolds. First in Jerusalem (chapters 2-7), then throughout Judea and Samaria (chapters 8-12), and then to the end of the earth (chapters 13-28).
- ❖ Now we’re in chapter 6, so the focus is still on the church in Jerusalem. In chapters 2-4, we read about the apostles preaching the gospel (2:14; 3:12; 4:2), accompanied by signs and wonders (2:43; 3:7). We read about mass conversions in the thousands (2:42, 27; 4:4).
 - **But with increased numbers comes increased attention from the religious authorities.** And in chapters 4-7, the church in Jerusalem gets hit hard by persecution. There are many threats made against them by the Jewish high court (Sanhedrin). And on a couple of occasions, they arrest the apostles, throw them in prison, and beat them up before letting them go (4:3; 5:18, 40).
- ❖ Now we’re told that these confrontations were instigated by human actors like the high priest or the Sadducees. **But at the same time, there are hints that, behind the scenes, darker forces are at work.** Satan almost goes unnamed throughout chapters 4-7, but there’s this one place in chapter 5 where the veil is slightly lifted and we get a glimpse of him.
 - In chapter 5:4, Peter says to Ananias – a man in the church who was driven by greed – “*Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit.*” That’s a peek behind the veil. **That’s a glimpse of the real warfare waging between the principal actors, Satan and the Holy Spirit.**
- ❖ **In chapter 5 alone, you get an idea of Satan’s strategy for destroying the church. He’ll try to corrupt it morally, suppress it externally, or divide it internally.** In chapter 5:1-11, Satan tries to **morally corrupt** the Jerusalem church through the greed of its members. It doesn’t work and the church keeps growing in vv12-16.

- ❖ So in vv17-41, we see him switch strategies, and he tries to **externally suppress** the church through physical threats and persecution. But again it doesn't work and the gospel, we're told in v42, continues to ring forth in the city from house to house.
 - So now, at the start of chapter 6, Satan changes up his strategy once more, and he tries to **internally divide** the church. In v1, we read about a brewing controversy between two groups within the Jerusalem church. *“Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.”*

- ❖ So we have two groups in the same church – the Hellenists and the Hebrews. They were all converted Jews. But there were two kinds of Jewish believers in the early church. **First, you had Hellenistic believers of Jewish descent.** Religiously, they're Christians. Ethnically, they're still Jews. But culturally, they're Hellenistic – meaning they identified more with Greek culture. Because they grew up in the Diaspora – the Jewish community outside of Palestine. They spoke Greek and were comfortable navigating Greek culture.
 - **And then there were the Hebraic believers of Jewish descent.** These are the native Palestinian Jews who grew up speaking Aramaic. They were much less familiar and comfortable engaging Greek culture. **Not only was there a language barrier, but there was a thick cultural barrier.** So understandably, they were more focused on reaching Jews who were like them – Aramaic-speaking and steeped in Jewish culture.

- ❖ **Does that sound familiar at all?** Two groups of Christians found in the same church. Dealing with language and cultural barriers. And, at the same time, having a different focus and competency in reaching lost people within two different cultures. **Are we talking about the Acts 6 church or the Chinese-heritage church?** Do you see how similar the two are?
 - What I really want you to see is how multicultural our church is. It wouldn't be accurate to describe us as multiethnic. That's not to say we don't warmly welcome and seek to have deep fellowship with those of other ethnicities. **But just based on proportions, we're not multiethnic. But we certainly are multicultural.**

- ❖ There's the obvious cultural differences between the Chinese and English congregations. We've got first-generation immigrant culture, which is different from the more Westernized culture of the second-generation (the children of immigrants). And on the Chinese side alone, there are cultural differences between the Chinese from Taiwan, from Hong Kong, from mainland China, or from other diaspora communities in places like Singapore or Malaysia. **Sure, they're all ethically the same, but they're culturally different.**

- ❖ **My point is that it's naive to look at a Chinese-heritage church like ours and suggest that we're lacking in diversity.** That assumes a very narrow definition of diversity that only considers ethnicity. But that means overlooking the generational diversity, linguistic diversity, and of course all the cultural diversity found in a church like ours.

- ❖ And that means that the same challenges facing the multicultural Acts 6 church are the same challenges we have to deal with. **If we're not careful, our cultural differences could easily sow distrust between different groups.** And that can lead to division and discord.
 - That's what was happening in the Jerusalem church in the beginning of Acts 6. We're told that the widows among the Hellenistic Jews were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. **It's likely because the Hellenists were the minority group and lacked representation in the leadership of the early church.** So without positions of leadership available to them, they had difficulty voicing the needs of their widows.

- ❖ So what did the leadership of the church do – the leadership that consisted of the apostles who were all Hebraic Jews? They didn't feel threatened by the complaints of Hellenists. They didn't grasp tighter to their position of power. **No, those in the majority freely released power and delegated responsibility to the minority group.** Based on the names in v5, we can tell that these seven men, who were given leadership, were Hellenists.
 - We're told that the twelve apostles asked the church to choose "*seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.*" **These men would oversee the church's mercy ministry to the widows – some of the poorest and neediest among them.** And that arrangement allows the apostles to dedicate themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer. As a result, we're told in v5 that the entire church was pleased. **Unity was maintained. Tensions were relieved. Trust was regained.**
 - This kind of unity in diversity – evident in the way that Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews were leading the church together and sharing resources – was beautiful not only to the church but to the world. Look at v7, "*And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*"

- ❖ The church's evangelism was effective because the gospel was being preached powerfully and lived out beautifully in their life together. **They could explain how the unity bridging the cultural gap between them just illustrates the greater unity Jesus established when he died to bridge the spiritual separation between a holy God and unholy sinners.**
 - In other words, if you're impressed when you see two groups unified as one body in spite of their deep differences, **then you're going to be blown away when you encounter a God who became one with his people in spite of their sin – in spite of the deep differences between them.** The Son of God suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God (1 Pet 3:18). Reconciling us to Father through the shedding of his blood on the cross.

- ❖ **That's what a multicultural church can do for the cause of Christ.** We can work hard to resist the tendency towards distrust and division. We can die to self. Putting the interests of the other group ahead of your own. Releasing control. Sharing leadership. And demonstrating to the watching world the unifying power of the gospel.

Hopefulness for the Chinese Heritage Church

- ❖ Friends, it because of Acts 6 and the way it demonstrates the kingdom-advancing potential of multicultural churches – that’s why I remain hopeful when I think about the future of the Chinese-heritage church. So let me share that hope. **I want to conclude by sharing some hopefulness for the Chinese-heritage church – for ours in particular.**

- ❖ I’ve been at this church since the early 90s, and I’ve served on staff for over fifteen years. I’ve seen firsthand the cultural differences and experienced cultural barriers on various occasions and in various forms. But at the same time, I’ve seen the intentional efforts on the part of leaders to bridge those gaps and lower those barriers. **I see parallels in the sacrificial steps taken by the Hebraic Jews and similar kinds of steps taken by Chinese-side leaders over the many years of our church.**

- ❖ Like the Hebraic Jews in the Jerusalem church, our Chinese-side leaders (past and present) never closed their ears when English-side members complained about feeling overlooked or disenfranchised. They didn’t grasp tighter to their power and control over the church. **No, over the years, the Chinese-side has continually welcomed English-side members into leadership – sharing power and delegating responsibility.**
 - And it came with a cost for the Chinese-side. **One of the biggest would be the intentional choice to make English the default language in staff and Council meetings.** That’s a sacrifice for our Chinese-side leaders – who have to discuss complex and difficult matters *in a second-language*. But that’s a sacrifice they’re willing to make in order to empower us and welcome us into leadership in this church. It’s a sacrifice that I don’t think many of us fully appreciate.
 - And because of those efforts – and ultimately because of God’s grace – we are a Chinese-heritage church with healthy, fully-staffed Chinese and English congregations that are engaged in vibrant, gospel-centered ministry. Where God’s Word continues to increase and disciples continue to multiply.

- ❖ **The Chinese and English congregations are committed to reaching for Christ all those whom God has placed in our lives.** We might conduct ministry in different languages. We might employ different ministry tactics and focus our effort on different communities of lost people in our city. But in the end, we are one body, one family, committed to the same mission to making God-loving, compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations.

- ❖ So because I’ve seen this Acts 6-type of unity and teamwork unfolding in our multicultural context – I remain hopeful for the future of our Chinese-heritage church. **And so with the future in view, we’ve been praying and planning, over the last few years, on how to expand and renovate our facilities on this plot of land God entrusted to us.**
 - In the past, us leaders have batted around the idea of relocating. Mostly jokingly but sometime serious. Just think about how much we could get for this property and how much more land we could purchase further out in the suburbs.

- ❖ **But after our last round of vision-casting, it became clear that the Lord is calling us to stay put.** He's put us in such a strategic location for gospel-ministry. We're in close proximity to key institutions like the Medical Center, Rice, UH, and the downtown core. All of which are huge draws for Chinese immigrants and for transplants to Houston from all over the nation and from a variety of backgrounds.
 - **And we are the only Chinese-heritage church in central Houston with a stable, healthy English congregation.** So we have a unique role to play and valuable resources to steward. And that includes our land and facilities.
 - That's why we've got a building project on the horizon. In the weeks to come, you're going to hear about our plans to expand our ministry space with new construction and to renovate this existing space. I think you're going to like it.

- ❖ But friends, let's remember that the church is not a place. It's not a building. It's the people – the redeemed in Christ. So you can have a new building, old building, or no building – and you can still be the church. **A building is not essential. But it is helpful.**
 - I think we often take for granted that we have a place of our own where we can gather every week. We're the beneficiaries of a building that has done its job over the last four decades. **What we hope to accomplish in this building project is to faithfully steward what God has give us in order to leave a legacy for future generations to continue on the good gospel work of a Chinese-heritage church.**
 - Our vision is that, for the next four decades and more, the gospel will continue to be faithfully proclaimed here at the corner of South Main and West Bellfort. That God-loving, compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ will continue to be made here and sent from here across our nation and to the ends of the earth.