

Building the Vision, Leaving a Legacy
The Planting of Church-Planting Churches (Acts 14:21-28)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on October 2, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ This Fall we've been in a sermon series that highlights our new vision statement. We've been describing the kind of church we hope to become as we carry out our mission of making God-loving, compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations. I do encourage you to listen to our previous messages in this series if you haven't done so already, which you can find on our website or podcast.
 - I hope you become as familiar with our vision statement as many of you are with our mission statement. It'll be a great thing to commit it to memory. Look inside your bulletin and you'll see it written next to the order of service. Let me restate 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.***

- ❖ This vision statement begins by addressing the question of **identity** – what kind of church we seek to be. So I recently preached on what it means to be an urban Chinese heritage church. Our vision also takes into account the particular **context** in which we're called to carry out our gospel ministry. So we talked about being in central Houston and how we're in close proximity to key institutions like the Med Center, Rice, and UH.
 - **A significant portion of you were drawn here – from across the country or across the world – by these institutions.** You're transplants to Houston. God has called you here for a season, and there's a chance, after you complete your training or that work project, he might call you to move on to another city or country. That happens a lot on both the English and Chinese side. Our congregations are highly-mobile.

- ❖ Now we could be sad about that. **We could bemoan the fact that people keep coming and going.** Those of us who are more rooted here know what it's like to invest time and energy into relationships here, but then in a few years time, a good chunk of the congregation turns over. Familiar faces are gone and new faces are all we see. It can be discouraging.
 - Or it could be exciting! It all depends on your perspective. It depends on whether you've captured that vision becoming an equipping and sending church. **But that calls for a ministry mindset focused not just on retention but on replication.** On reproducing disciple-making disciples, so that if they do move on from here, they'll be sent well-equipped to continue their discipleship in a new city – being a blessing to a new church. That's what we envision.

- ❖ Now for those of you well-rooted in our church, please hear me out – of course, we want to retain you. That's why the aspect of our vision related to the upcoming building project is, in a large part, being carried out with you in mind. We hope to expand and renovate facilities to serve the individuals and families that are more rooted here.
 - **But, at the same time – even if Houston is home and HCC is your home church – we still want to challenge you to consider being sent.** That's why church planting is a component of this vision. HCC has a legacy of church planting, so we want to keep that legacy alive. We want to continue to intentionally church plant.

- ❖ That's because we believe **healthy churches plant churches**. We believe that church planting shouldn't be considered rare and detrimental to the life of a church – but rather something common and intentional. To occur throughout the lifespan of a church.
 - Think about a sign of good health in the human body. **Just as healthy body cells naturally multiply and divide, a healthy church (a healthy body of believers) will naturally multiply and divide.** When that happens, we call it church planting. It's the natural result of a growing body. It's not a bad thing. It's a sign of good health.

- ❖ But let's not be naive. We're *not* saying that planting is a *definitive* sign of church health. Not every instance would be considered healthy. There is such a thing as **unhealthy church planting**. That's most obvious when it's the result of internal division and strife. You can try to dress it up as a church plant, but everyone knows it's a church split.
 - Or there is what we'd call **unintentional church planting**. That's when planting is a reluctant response to a group in the church wanting greater independence or because they're dissatisfied with the status quo. The planting process might go smoothly and harmoniously, but it's unlikely the church will want to do it again. Unless another group grows similarly dissatisfied.

- ❖ That's not what our vision has in mind. We envision a form of church planting that's viewed positively and not just as a remedy for the good problems of church growth. *“Oh no, there are so many people here! We're running out of space. I guess we have to plant.”* **No, our vision is to treat church planting as our very strategy for church growth.**
 - In other words, as our gospel ministry produces spiritual and numerical growth, we want to intentionally plan for multiplication. To multiply ourselves into new churches that bring the gospel to new communities outside of our current reach.
 - But for that to happen, we need a new mindset. Where it's not just about retention but replication. **Not just about institution building but kingdom building.** It's true, in church planting, your institution initially gets smaller. But you're okay with that if your goal is for the kingdom of God to get bigger.

- ❖ So I want you to see how today's theme is closely related to last week's. Last week, we talked about the Great Commission and the call of disciple-making. The point there was that fruitful evangelism should aim to make disciples of Christ and not merely to get decisions for Christ. Well, continuing that theme today, we're arguing that **fruitful churches should aim to plant churches and not merely to make a bunch of disconnected disciples.**
 - What I'll try to demonstrate from Scripture is that planting churches was the healthy and natural response to gospel growth during the time of the apostles. We're going to look at an excerpt from the book of Acts that describes the tail end of the Apostle Paul's first missionary journey. Here he set the pattern for all of his subsequent journeys. And I believe it's still a pattern for us to emulate today.
 - So this morning I want to (1) consider the pattern of church planting in the book of Acts. And (2) we'll talk about the vision for church planting in Houston – particularly the next project we have in mind as a church.

The Pattern of Church Planting in Acts

- ❖ So turn with me to Acts 14 starting in v21, and let's see Paul's pattern of church planting, which was on display in his first missionary journey. Back in the beginning of chapter 13, Paul and Barnabas are commissioned and sent by the church at Antioch to journey through the southern region of Asia Minor, preaching the gospel and planting churches (13:3).
 - Now they end up traveling to nine separate cities, and wherever they went, they witnessed gospel fruit *and* religious persecution. So by v21, they had most recently visited a city called Lystra where Paul was attacked by a crowd and left for dead (v19). The next day, they traveled to the city of Derbe where they saw a better response to their preaching, and there they made many disciples.
 - But then, surprisingly, instead of staying in Derbe – where the fruit was – v21 says Paul and Barnabas backtracked their steps and returned “*to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²²strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. ²³And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*”

- ❖ What I want you to notice is the pattern of church planting laid out in those verses. **Notice how fruitful evangelism resulted in – not just converted people – but a covenanted people.** Paul and Barnabas didn't travel from city to city making a bunch of disconnected disciples who will have to wait until heaven before they finally meet. **No, they congregated these disciples into a covenant community called the church and set leaders over them.** Leaders who will help them to continue in their discipleship and the work of gospel ministry.

- ❖ Look at v21. **The pattern begins with evangelizing a city.** They “*preached the gospel to [lit. gospelized] that city and had made many disciples.*” That's Matthew 28, Great Commission stuff being carried out. Now, in this context because of the short time frame, making many disciples is not referring to a long process of discipleship – but simply another way of saying that they led many people to make a decision to follow Jesus.
 - They preached the good news that the “*living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them*” (v15) – condemns you for your refusal to acknowledge and rightly worship him as Lord. But this same God, has shone a light of salvation, in the person of Jesus Christ, who lived and died and rose again for our forgiveness and for our inclusion into a spiritual kingdom where we live under his loving rule as both Redeemer and King. That was the gospel they preached.
 - **And when they preached that, they made sure to call for a response.** Because preaching isn't just about conveying information. It's about calling for a decision. Who will be Lord of your life? You or Christ? And those who respond with repentance and faith are those who answer Christ. And those are the ones who are rightly considered disciples. They've decided for Christ.

- ❖ **But notice how Paul and Barnabas were not content with simply leading people to make decisions for Christ.** If that was enough, then they would've moved on to the next city, looking for the next harvest field. But notice how they backtracked and returned to the same cities (in spite of the opposition) in order to mature those disciples in Christ. **They were committed to maturing as many disciples as they had made.**
- ❖ Which leads to the next step in this pattern of church planting. It began with evangelizing a city. **That then led to congregating disciples.** Paul and Barnabas returned to these cities and bound disciples together into an identifiable church. Then, they took the time to strengthen their souls and to encourage them to continue in the faith.
 - **Notice the emphasis in v22 on strengthening souls.** Not just filling minds with biblical teaching but feeding and nourishing souls by way of heart application. You see, I can help you understand the doctrine of justification by faith alone – that you are counted righteous in God's eyes by faith alone in the saving works of Christ alone. You can learn that and explain that with precision. But that glorious truth won't strengthen your soul until you see how it applies to your struggles with insecurity and self-doubt or how it undercuts your tendency towards pride and self-righteousness.
 - Friends, if you're responsible for teaching disciples (whether your own kids or believers under your care), remember the aim is to strengthen their souls. Don't just stimulate their minds. **Aim to stir their affections for God by speaking to the heart.** What's happening there that's hindering them or discouraging them from pursuing God? What's going to motivate them? Confront them with a God of glory who extends abundant love and gracious promises, which find their Yes in Christ crucified. That will tend to their souls.
- ❖ Now notice as well how Paul and Barnabas tried to **encourage disciples to continue in the faith.** Not just in *your* faith. We're not talking about an encouragement to keep believing – to keep having faith. No, this is an encouragement to keep true to *the* faith – to a particular body of teaching (Acts 6:7; 13:8; 16:5). Passed down from the Apostles. "The Faith" once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3). This is an encouragement to maintain sound doctrine.
 - Now first you have to learn this doctrine – the content of the faith. Then, you have to keep true to it. To not cave under any pressure to change the faith. To not try to add to it or subtract from it. **One of the most fundamental responsibilities of a disciple is to continue in the faith as it was entrusted to you.**
 - On a practical level, this means, when it comes to discipleship, it's important that we intentionally catechize believers. That means to help Christians learn the basic doctrines of the faith. **Historically, the church utilized a catechism, which is a teaching method built on a question-answer format.** Starting at a young age – in the home and in the church – disciples were catechized. They were systematically instructed on the basic principles of the faith. If any of you are interested in a modern version of a catechism, visit our book stall and look for the *New City Catechism*.

- ❖ Now look with me in v23, and notice a final step in this pattern of church planting. After evangelizing a city and congregating disciples, Paul and Barnabas did not move on to the next city and the next church plant until they appointed leaders. *“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”*
 - That was important to the apostles – **that distinct local churches would be under the local leadership of elders who were appointed from within their community.** A church was not yet complete until they had elders. That’s what Paul told Titus in **Titus 1:5** where he says *“I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.”* And notice the plural. Not just one elder leading the church – but a team, a plurality, of elders for every church.
 - We learn later, in Acts 20, what Paul expected elders to do. **They were to shepherd the flock of God.** Watching over the church as overseers, caring for the sheep and especially protecting them from the false teaching of wolves (20:28-30). That’s why they needed to be godly men who are above reproach and able to teach and instruct in sound doctrine (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:9).
- ❖ So that is Paul’s pattern. He would travel from city to city. Preaching the gospel, first to the Jews and then the Gentiles. And whoever responded with repentance and faith – whoever became a disciple – he then congregated together. He strengthened and encouraged them in the faith. And then left them in the good hands of elders who continued the good work, shepherding their churches. And Paul would repeat that pattern over and over again through three missionary journeys. That’s the pattern of church planting found in Acts.

The Vision for Church Planting in Houston

- ❖ Now let’s shift gears and focus on the city of Houston in the 21st-century. And the question is whether or not that same pattern in Acts should be emulated now in our context. Let’s talk about a vision for church planting in Houston.
 - **I won’t presume everyone agrees we need more churches in Houston.** I’m sure, every day on your drive to work, you pass by a dozen churches and some of them have massive buildings that can seat thousands. So don’t we have enough? Aren’t the existing churches, with their appointed leaders, able to do the job of evangelizing our city as well as strengthening souls and encouraging disciples to keep the faith? **Is there really a need for more churches?** That’s an understandable question.
- ❖ Let me answer that by first saying that any argument for the need to plant more churches in Houston is *not* suggesting that there’s no need to renew existing churches. **Church renewal and church planting are totally compatible goals.**
 - In fact, I’d argue that church planting is an effective means of renewing existing churches. Through the process of planting a new church, the planting church is often reinvigorated, and members who stay are inspired to step up to fill the ministry gaps left by the members who go. So it’s not an either-or situation but both-and. We need to be intentional in our efforts to *both* plant new churches *and* renew existing ones.

- ❖ But, at the same time, we can't ignore the facts. The fact is that older existing churches are much more likely to see transfer growth. While new church plants tend to be much more effective in reaching the unchurched.

- ❖ **In his book *Center Church*, Tim Keller mentions one study that said the average new church plant gains one-third to two-thirds of its new members from the unchurched.** While, on the other hand, older existing churches gain 80 to 90 percent of new members through the transfer of other believers from other churches. That means an average church plant will draw unchurched people at 6-8 times the rate of an older church of similar size.
 - Why is that the case? **It's because older existing churches have the important responsibility to care for the church people among them and to minister to their needs.** Which means they can't dedicate as much time and energy towards the unchurched compared to new church plants – who don't have many church people to begin with. That's the nature of planting. But church plants will get older and will have to dedicate more time to members and less time to the unchurched. That's the natural progression. You can't deny it or reverse it. But you *can* keep church planting.
 - **That's why our vision is not just to plant a church – but to plant church-planting churches.** Because we always want to be reaching the unbelieving and the unchurched, and we recognize that new church plants have the bandwidth and the energy to more effectively do that.

- ❖ This past week I was at a luncheon for the Houston Church Planting Network, and one of the speakers made a compelling case for why we need to plant more churches in Houston. **He explained how, right now, the population of Greater Houston is about 7.2 million, but we only have about 4,800 churches** (and that's not even factoring in how faithful these churches are at preaching the gospel and making disciples). So that works out to be about one church for every 1,500 people.
 - Now recent studies have shown that the average church in the US gathers about 65 people each week. Yes, we have a few churches around town with massive congregations that raise the average for Houston. But there's still no doubt that a very large percentage of Houstonians remain unchurched. And demographers predict that by 2050, the population of Greater Houston will reach 12 million!
 - So just to maintain that same one church to 1,500 people ratio will require 8,000 churches by 2050. **That means, in the next thirty years, at minimum, we'll need to plant 3,200 new churches.** But that's not even factoring in how many churches shut down each year, so the actual figure is much higher.

- ❖ Now if I lost you already with all those numbers, it's okay. **The point is this – we don't even have enough gospel-preaching churches right now to effectively reach the unbelieving and the unchurched. Let alone what it takes to keep up with the exponentially growing population.** So, yes, there is a need for more churches. And, yes, we need more churches to catch the vision to plant church-planting churches.

- ❖ Now there's one more question we'll need to address: **What will it take to plant more churches?** There are so many ways to tackle that question. Of course, it will take a church planter and the means to prepare that planter. Without the right person to lead and shepherd a group of disciples into becoming a newly covenanted people (a new church) and without the right kind of training – it's unlikely you're going to plant or at least plant in a healthy way.
 - **Church, we can be grateful to the Lord for recently providing our first church planting resident.** Jonathan Huang, one of our former elders, has been pursuing a call towards vocational ministry, which has now has a sharper focus on church planting. He recently finished seminary and joined us on staff as our church planting resident. As he gains practical experience here, Jon is also being trained by the Houston Church Planting Network through their finishing residency program.

- ❖ **So our plan, Lord-willing, is to plant an English-speaking church that's committed to gospel-centeredness, theological-soundness, and disciple-making. We also want that future church to pursue a multiethnic ministry.** Here in Houston, many majority-culture-led churches are already pursuing that same vision of multiethnic ministry, but we need more minority-led churches pursuing the same vision but coming from a different direction.
 - The timeline is not set in stone, but we are open to planting, Lord-willing, sometime around the end of 2023 or the start of 2024. We ask for you to pray for us, to pray for Jon and his family, and to pray and ask God to show you what role you might play in this next church planting project.

- ❖ But let's return to that question: What will it take to plant more churches? I think having the right planter and the right training is important. **But what matters most is for the church that's doing the planting to have the right attitude.**

- ❖ **First, we need to be willing to send our members and our money.** The core team that we're going to form to help start this church plant will likely draw from people outside our church. But it'll definitely contain some of our committed members. Members we're going to miss dearly. Members who give faithfully. **Their giving and, more importantly, they themselves will be sent to be blessing to a new congregation and a new community.**
 - If we have an attitude that only sees that as a loss – that can't see that as a huge gain for the kingdom of God – then we won't become a planting church. But thankfully, many of you have been learning – on a smaller scale – how intentionally multiplying your own small groups is a greater gain for the church than a personal loss for yourself. Those lessons can translate beautifully to our vision for church planting.

- ❖ **Second, along with a willingness to send our members and money, we need to be willing to trust and let go.** This is especially the case for us church leaders. Just like with any parent who has gone through the experience of sending your kids off to college, you know they need their independence. You don't want to stunt their growth and maturity. You know it's not healthy to still try to extend your parental authority – even after they've left the home. So you've got to trust your kids – and especially trust God – and let go. Release control.

- ❖ The same goes with church planting. The church plant will have its own appointed leaders – its own elders like all the churches Paul planted in Acts. There’s no question they’ll be committed to continuing in the faith – in sound, biblical doctrine.
 - **But they need the freedom to create their own identity as a gospel-preaching, disciple-making church, and that means they might have some theological distinctives that we don’t share; or some ministry practices that we don’t do; or some ministry partnerships that we don’t have.**
 - That’s totally fine and totally expected. Any of you with adult children, who are raising their own families, know that your kids don’t parent their own kids exactly like you did – and perhaps you’re even grateful for that!

- ❖ **So we need an attitude that’s willing to send members and money; to trust and let go – and third, we need to be willing to step up.** If some of us are called to go and plant a church, then some of us who are called to stay and support also need to step up and fill the ministry gaps left by those who go. And what happens is that more disciples are given more opportunities to use their spiritual gifts to serve and edify the church – both the church plant and the planting church.
 - Again, many of you have already experienced this blessing in your community groups. **Because of intentional multiplication in the past, some of you are serving in a leadership role, which is something you never expected to do in the past.** But gospel growth occurred in your group. The natural, healthy response was the multiply and divide. Ministry needs arose. And you faithfully stepped up to fill them.
 - The same phenomenon will occur as our church responds to the gospel growth in our congregation with the natural, healthy plan to plant a church-planting church. May God be with us and in our plans.