

A Church on Mission

Acts 1:1-11

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on January 7, 2024

Introduction

- ❖ If you've been worshipping with us over the past year, you've probably heard about our latest church planting project. Which fits right in with HCC's legacy of church planting. In our church's history, we've been directly involved in the planting of five churches. In Clear Lake. In Port Lavaca. In West Houston. In Sugarland. Even a church over in Almaty, Kazakhstan. And we're still in the process of planting a church in Pearland.

- ❖ **This morning we have the privilege of sending off a church planting team to plant a unique kind of church on the west side of town in the neighborhoods surrounding the Energy Corridor.** Like all our church plants, the goal is to plant a gospel-preaching, disciple-making church. But like HCC, those five plants were Chinese heritage churches that included a Chinese-speaking ministry aimed at reaching the immigrant community.
 - What's unique about our latest plant is that this is a plant that comes out of our English congregation; that's led by an English-side leader; that's building a team including believers from other area churches that are not Chinese; and it's designed to be a church intentionally pursuing a multiethnic ministry.

- ❖ Over the years, we've discussed the importance of church diversity. **The greater the diversity of the members in a church, the greater the opportunity for the gospel to shine.** For the unifying power of the gospel to be on display. In the way it draws together a disparate people into one body, the body of Christ.
 - And over the years, we've made the point that diversity comes in different forms. **A church can be diverse generationally, culturally, economically, linguistically, and ethnically.** All these forms of diversity have the potential to divide us if we're not careful. But they also have the potential to magnify Christ in us.
 - And the point I've made is that a Chinese church like ours is already diverse – with obvious differences in age, culture, and language. And while our goal is to reach and welcome anyone whom God puts in our lives of all ethnicities – **we believe HCC can more effectively contribute to the vision of multiethnic churches by planting out with that vision in mind.**

- ❖ In an ethnically-diverse city like Houston, there are many solid majority-culture churches trying to plant multiethnic expressions led by majority-culture planters. **What's needed are more ethnic churches planting with minority planters that pursue the same multiethnic vision but coming from a different direction.**
 - Because along the way, some people are going to feel more comfortable jumping on board going this direction compared to a majority-culture church plant coming from the other direction. **Two kinds of churches headed towards the same goal; just coming from different directions.**

- ❖ **This is the vision that gave birth to Ethnos Church.** Jonathan Huang is a faithful brother who loves the Chinese heritage church. Who grew up in this one. Who served for many years as an effective small group leader and elder in our church. Who pivoted in his career as a physician and began to pursue a calling to pastor and specifically to help plant a new church. Back in the fall of 2022, Jon came on staff as our church planting resident. He received intensive training from the *Houston Church Planting Network* and practical ministry experience serving with us. And over the course of this past year, he recruited and developed a church planting team consisting of fourteen adults and ten children.
 - **And, by God’s grace, Ethnos will be starting out with a strong financial foundation.** Generous donors have already given over \$100,000 to help it get off the ground. And HCC, as the sending church, has committed to covering one-third of Ethnos’s projected budget for the first three years, including all their startup expenses. That’s how much we believe in this planting project. *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* (Mt 6:21)

- ❖ It’s our joy and privilege to send them off. Later this morning, they’ll hold a private worship service. They’ll take communion and covenant together as Ethnos Church, and starting next week, they’ll begin worshipping together on the Lord’s Day. **So it’s my honor to preach a message directed to all – but particularly directed to our church planting team.** Our text this morning comes out of the first chapter of Acts. It’s a fitting text for this occasion – as we send Ethnos and as they go – as we seek together to advance the mission of God.
 - There are three aspects of this mission worth our consideration. Together, we’ll be two churches on a mission (1) advanced with the Spirit’s power, (2) advanced with centrifugal force, and (3) advanced with patience and diligence.

A Mission Advanced with the Spirit’s Power

- ❖ The first thing we see is the church is on a mission advanced with the Spirit’s power. Our mission is so difficult that it can’t be advanced with man’s strength alone. If the apostles were to go forth preaching the gospel and trying to make disciples, it doesn’t matter how organized they are; how much effort they exert; or how enthusiastic they get. **They will fail miserably if they attempt to advance without the Holy Spirit.** This is the point being made in vv1-5.
 - Look again at v1. *“In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.”* Tradition tells us that the author of Acts is none other than Luke who authored the third Gospel, which he refers to here in that *“first book”* (Lk 1:1-4). That’s where he dealt with all that Jesus *began* to do and teach. **Which suggests that this second book will deal with all that Jesus *continues* to do and teach – but now through his Church.**

- ❖ It’s helpful to read the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts together as one work of ancient literature. **Luke ends and Acts begins – with a focus on the same event, the Ascension of Christ.** That moment is the linchpin between the two books. Look at v2. Luke says his Gospel addressed all that Jesus did and taught, *“until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.”*

- The commands he gave his apostles can be found at the end of Luke. Listen to Luke 24:47-49, “⁴⁷*and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.* ⁴⁸*You are witnesses of these things.* ⁴⁹*And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.*”

- ❖ So even the Gospel of Luke ends with instructions to wait for God to empower them from on high before advancing their mission to proclaim to all nations a gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **And if we return to our text, in vv4-5, we see that this power from on high refers to the Holy Spirit himself.** “⁴*And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."* **In other words, they must not move forward until they receive a baptism of the Holy Spirit.**

- ❖ **Now throughout the OT and during Jesus’s earthly ministry, the Holy Spirit was already present and active.** We read about the Spirit falling on or rushing upon individuals (Ezk 11:5; Judg 14:6; 1 Sam 11:6; 16:13), entering people (Ezk 2:2), and filling people (Ex 31:3; Lk 1:67). The effect was to empower these individuals for service to the Lord – either by giving strength, or skill, or prophetic speech.
 - **But just as quickly as he would come upon you, the Spirit would depart.** That’s why David prays, “*take not your Holy Spirit from me*” (Ps 51:11). The presence of the Spirit in your life wasn’t permanent. He didn’t take up permanent residence.

- ❖ That is, until this prediction and promise of **Holy Spirit baptism.** And based on what occurs in Acts 2, the apostles didn’t have to wait long. We’re told in v3 that Jesus remained with them for forty days before ascending. Well, on Pentecost – which is a holiday celebrated fifty days after Passover – the Spirit came rushing down. So they only had to wait ten days.
 - **And once baptized by the Spirit, the apostles are empowered to proclaim the gospel.** Peter stands up and preaches the first sermon in the name of the Risen Lord, which leads to the conversion of about three thousand souls (2:41).

- ❖ **Unlike the experiences of the Holy Spirit prior to the Ascension, this baptism of the Spirit was no temporary enablement that would come and go.** The Spirit became a permanent empowering presence in the Church accomplishing mighty gospel deeds through ordinary people (4:8; 7:55; 10:44; 13:2; 19:6, 21).
 - *And what was the result?* Starting with 120 disciples, within 30 years the Church shook the foundations of the Roman Empire. Within 250 years, 50% of the Empire professed to be Christian. Since then, the faith has spread throughout the world having transformed the lives of billions of people. Think about it. **Because they waited for the Holy Spirit, this small band of fishermen and tax collectors turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6).**

- ❖ Church, remember we too have been baptized by the Holy Spirit. We too have been clothed with power from on high. **Yet are we turning the world upside down?** How often do we go about serving the Lord – without waiting for him, without conscious dependence upon him? **It's so easy to fall into a pattern where we're just faithfully doing our ministry – yet all the while depending on our own wisdom, strength, and experience.**
 - The Lord is issuing a similar order to us. “HCC, before you send out Ethnos – a new church on mission for the gospel – wait for the promised Holy Spirit. **Do not advance forward until your heart, soul, mind, and strength is consciously relying on the Spirit's indwelling presence and power in you.**” That's how crucial and difficult our gospel mission is. It cannot be engaged by our strength alone.

A Mission Advanced with Centrifugal Force

- ❖ The second thing we see is that the church is on a mission advanced with centrifugal force. This is what's emphasized in v8. What we see is that the mission of God does have a center – a particular focus on Israel, specifically on the city of Jerusalem. **But the mission is intended to advance outward from Jerusalem with centrifugal force.**
 - The disciples had a sense of this – but only a partial sense. They knew the center of God's mission is Jerusalem – is focused on Israel. Because they were steeped in the Old Testament. That's why, in v6, you find them asking Jesus, “*Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*” But the problem is that they're thinking about restoring Israel's monarchy with Jesus sitting on David's throne. **They thought he was about to restore Israel's national glory.**
- ❖ Now there is a sense in which Jesus died and rose and ascended – with the goal of restoring Israel. But not it's national sovereignty. **He did it to restore Israel's unique mission to the world.** From the beginning, Israel was blessed to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:3). They were commissioned to be “*a light for the nations that [God's] salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*” (Isa 49:6) In other words, Israel's mission has always been focused on blessing the world.
 - **But in the Old Testament, Israel blessed the nations with a come-and-see approach. Their mission exerted a centripetal force moving people towards the center – towards Jerusalem (Micah 4:1-2).** At the height of their national glory, under Solomon's reign, the peoples of the earth (including kings and queens) were drawn to the city of David and marveled at the glory of Israel. The nations were invited to come-and-see God's glory and blessings, and they were invited to experience it for themselves.
- ❖ But now that Christ has ascended and the Spirit has come, the mission still begins with Israel – the first Christians were Israelites; the first church was in Jerusalem – but the mission won't rest there. **The mission of God advances forward with centrifugal force – moving out and away from the center. God's Church – those who have been baptized by the Spirit – are commissioned to bless the nations with a go-and-tell approach.**

- ❖ Listen again to v8, “*But you 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.*” **The rest of Acts shows how that mission unfolds with centrifugal force.** It starts in Jerusalem (chapters 2-7), then it radiates throughout regions of Judea and Samaria (chapters 8-12), and then it advances forth to the ends of the earth (chapters 13-28). **Have you ever noticed how the book of Acts ends without a clear conclusion to the story?**
 - We, as readers, are left with an implicit challenge to pick up where it left off and continue the mission. It’s exciting when you think about it. **The Church today has a significant part to play in this ancient mission that has been radiating out from Jerusalem with centrifugal force for the last two thousand years!**

- ❖ **This is why our church must never remain stagnant or merely inward-focused. We can’t just adopt a come-and-see approach.** Look, there’s good reason for any church, including ours, to invest in their facilities, to improve their programming, to strengthen their small groups, to become a more welcoming church. That’s all well and good. But that’s a come-and-see approach. Which is effective for fellow Christians who are new to town looking for a church. Or for non-Christians who are even willing to step foot into a church building.
 - **But there are so many non-Christians out there who have no interest in coming to church.** To reach them for Christ, you’re going to have to go to them. That’s why at the heart of the church’s mission has to be a go-and-tell approach that advances with centrifugal force.

- ❖ **The church is, by nature, a sending organization.** If that’s true, then we need to adjust the typical metric by which we measure success. **Instead of determining how successful a church is by measuring how many new members we take in or how big we get – we should be measuring how many members we send out on mission.** How many churches we continue to plant. And will those new churches eventually plant even newer churches? **When Ethnos, by God’s grace, matures to a point where they’re in position to plant another church, that’ll be a good sign of success.**
 - How many are going and telling? How many are we sending? How many are we planting? Look, I know it can’t be the only metric. A church’s success has to be measured in a variety of ways. **But I think it’s fair to say that a sending metric is often overlooked and under appreciated.** But that’s why we’re committed to sending out Ethnos and supporting them until they’re able to flourish on their own.

A Mission Advanced with Patience and Diligence

- ❖ The third thing we see in our text is that the church is on a mission advanced with patience and diligence. That’s a needed word for the apostles. Look back at v6. **They were a bit impatient – hoping for Jesus to restore the kingdom, to take up his earthly rule, “at this time.”** They want his kingdom come *right now*. For his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven *right now*. Their Lord has just defeated death. He’s back in a glorified, resurrected body. So in their enthusiasm, they assumed now is the perfect time for Jesus to reign over his kingdom here on earth.

- ❖ **Notice how Jesus doesn't reject their expectations for a restored kingdom.** He doesn't squash their hope that one day his kingdom values, his kingdom ethics, and his kingdom priorities will all be perfectly reflected and celebrated in all the earth.
 - **But Jesus goes on to explain that the timing of this – of when all of this will take place – is none of our concern.** Look at v7, *“It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.”* All you need to know is that the Father has fixed a date for the kingdom's restoration.

- ❖ That's why you should be confident that his kingdom *will* come. That God's will will be done on this earth. Because he promised. **His kingdom, in all its fullness, will be established here on earth. But that day has yet to come.**
 - And in v9, Jesus basically underlines that point by ascending into the clouds out of sight. It's like he's saying, “Sorry to disappoint but I'm taking off. I won't be establishing my earthly reign today.” **But Jesus did leave them with the assurance that the Father has fixed a date.** So be patient. The King will return. Of that you can be sure. And when that day arrives, his kingdom will come in all its fullness.

- ❖ That's the hope sustaining so many Christians and so many churches. **They're patiently waiting, in hope, that Jesus will return and rescue us from this world that's filled with darkness and despair, full of sin and suffering.** There are many Christians who are heeding Jesus's words and patiently waiting. With their eyes fixed on heaven. Waiting for his return.
 - But what they also need to heed are the words of the two angels who appear after Jesus ascends. Being patient as you wait for heaven to come down to earth is one thing. **But you also need to be diligent with the mission you've been given to witness to the realities of heaven while you're here on earth.**
 - Look at v10, *“¹⁰And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.””*

- ❖ These angels appear and see these disciples with their heads in the clouds, and they're like, “Why are you guys staring off into space? Didn't Jesus give you a mission to advance?”
 - **I think some Christians today are likewise staring off into heaven just waiting for Jesus to return.** They've concluded that our world is so corrupt and so irredeemable that they've disengaged. They huddle together in their worshipping communities – hoping and praying Jesus comes back soon to scoop them up and get them out of here before it all burns.

- ❖ Church, that can't be us. If we find ourselves gazing up into heaven with an anxiousness that takes our eyes off our earthly mission to make more disciples and plant more churches, then perhaps we need the same angelic words to ring in our ears, **“Brothers and sisters of HCC, brothers and sisters of Ethnos – why do you stand looking into heaven?”**

- ❖ There's a job to do. There's a mission to advance. **Stop staring into the sky waiting for Jesus. He'll come when he comes.** And when he comes, he'll bring all of heaven with him. But in the meanwhile, get to it.
 - The King of kings has ascended to his throne. Which means all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him (Mt 28:18). Jesus sits in absolute authority, and he's given us a mission as well as the power of his Spirit to carry it out.

- ❖ **Like the apostles, we're called to be witnesses – to speak of what we have seen and experienced of the Risen Christ.** We're to proclaim a message to all nations of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in his name (Lk 24:47). We're to call sinners to turn to the One who died for sins and rose again that all who trust in him may have everlasting life.
 - Let's be realistic. Our job is not to bring heaven down to earth. That's what Jesus will do. **We just want to make sure that when he returns, he won't catch us standing around looking into heaven.** Instead he'll find us diligently witnessing in his name in our Jerusalem, our Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.