

Us: Recommitting to What's Important

How to Live Out Our Unique Calling

Acts 2:42-47

Mark Vroegop

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).

Wherever there are humans, there's a culture.

If you've traveled overseas, you may have experienced something called "culture shock." It's both the excitement of a completely new environment, new language, new food, new smells, and sounds, etc. and the disorientation of navigating a world where you don't know the language, social cues, or values. Culture shock sneaks up on you. It can be intense. It can also be exhausting as you try to figure out how to navigate a new environment.

I remember what I thought was the worst sermon I ever preached in a cross-cultural setting. It was in India. The harder I preached, the more the audience kept shaking their heads. I wanted to quit. But I later learned from Nate Irwin that a head nod in India looks more like a head bobble. I only wished I knew that before I started preaching.

There's a different culture in various regions of our country. Even within a city, there are unique cultures. Just think about the difference between Broad Ripple, Fountain Square, Carmel, Geist, Speedway, and Greenwood. One of the reasons that we changed our church planting strategy from church campuses to independent churches was because of that reality.

Culture shock doesn't only happen overseas. Wherever there are humans, there's a culture. And that culture can be powerful. During our Biblical Unity Vision Trip, I learned about a place called Bucc-ee's. Talk about a culture! From sixty gas pumps to brisket sandwiches, to beaver nuggets and the cleanest restrooms in America, it's crazy! I found myself bouncing between "What is going on!" to "This is amazing!" On a family trip a few months later, I traveled a different route just to take my wife and daughter to Bucc-ee's. Plus, I spent over \$50 on snacks on two visits! Goodness!

Wherever there are humans, there is a culture. And it's powerful. If you've read leadership books, you may know that Peter Drucker famously said, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." It's true.

Do you know that churches have a culture? It's also a powerful reality, one that can be used for good and the advancement of the gospel. But also, a culture can get off track and even be unhelpful. Over the last few years, our pastors and elders have talked a lot about the culture of our church, and we've worked hard to distill and capture our vision for that culture.

That's become increasingly important as our society changes, new people come to our church, and as what it means to be Christian in America is changing. In College Park's first twenty years of ministry, many of our members were new converts, and those who were already Christians often came from an overly fundamentalist church or churches. A radio ministry also drew a lot of people here. Over the next twenty years, that shifted. Frankly, our church is a bit of a melting pot of backgrounds and experiences, and the range of cultures from which we draw is much broader now. At one level, that's awesome. But it also makes things complicated.

Next week we'll start our year-long journey through 1 & 2 Samuel. I can't wait to start this series. Last week I invited you to think about what it means to follow Jesus, how to make our relationship with Jesus work in the real world and right where we are. This week I want to have us think about the unique story that the Spirit has written at College Park and how that translates into our culture.

This sermon will remind those of you who are members of our church what we're aiming for and what you are a part of. For those of you who are new, I hope this puts the pieces together and motivates you to take some next steps in regards to your church engagement. If you are not yet a Christian, I hope this message presents the case for a compelling community, such that you'll long to have a relationship with Jesus.

I want to look at three examples in the Bible of church culture, and then I want to help you understand how we think about our church.

Three Church Cultures

Remember that the Bible records real people in real cities trying to live out the gospel. The Spirit was at work in each situation with different dynamics, politics, economies, and people.

Jerusalem – 33 AD (Acts 2:42-47)

Acts 2 is an early record (really the first record) of the church after Pentecost when the Spirit descended and 3,000 people were miraculously converted. This was an incredible moment. It was risky because the crucifixion of Jesus had taken place just only forty days earlier. There was excitement. The gospel went forth in the languages of the people gathered at the festival, a reversal of the curse of Babel. The message about Jesus was spreading!

Verses 42-47 help us to see what was happening at this new gathering. The first four things mentioned are really important: (1) teaching, (2) fellowship, (3) communion, and (4) prayer. These elements

became the building blocks for what the church is all about. These are still core ingredients in what characterizes our church. But there's more. The Spirit of God was moving through a healthy fear of God, through miracles via the apostles, and by a radical generosity to meet the needs of the people. The effect was incredible! Verse 47 says that they had "favor with all the people . . . and the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Antioch – 40 AD (Acts 11:19-26)

About seven years later, the environment in Jerusalem was very hostile. After Stephen's murder, persecution of Christians started. Believers were scattered all over the known world, but the primary ministry focus was on the Jewish people. About 300 miles north of Jerusalem, the gospel spread to Antioch (modern day Turkey), but the ministry involved Gentiles and Jews. The leaders in Jerusalem were so curious about this that they sent Barnabas to see the church. He was so moved by what was happening that he recruited Paul to serve with him there for a year. It's the first multiethnic church, and it's the place where believers in Jesus were first called Christians.

It's also the place of Paul's confrontation of Peter recorded in Galatians 2. Peter spent time in Antioch ministering and fellowshiping with Gentiles. His vision in Acts 10 was now becoming reality. Gentiles were becoming part of God's family. But old ways die hard, especially when it comes to the fear of man and ethnic divisions. When James and a number of leaders from Jerusalem visited the church, Peter withdrew from publicly fellowshiping with Gentiles. Other people followed his example (his fear and anxiety spread!), including Barnabas. Paul called him out. He charged Peter with not living out the gospel (Gal. 2:11-15). It was important enough that Paul wrote about all of this in Galatians 2.

Ephesus – 95 AD (Rev. 2:1-7)

The church at Ephesus was a theological and mission powerhouse. The church was likely planted by the Apostle Paul during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:19). Along with Paul, Priscilla and Aquila served the church, and Apollos also visited the city with great fruit (Acts 18:24-25). During Paul's third missionary journey, he spent three years in Ephesus. The book of Ephesians bears no rebuke, and it seems that church was spiritually healthy. Revelation 2 commends the church for their works, toil, patient endurance, discernment, steadfastness in persecution, and their godly perseverance.

And yet Jesus offers this rebuke: "You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the works you did at first" (Rev. 2:4-5). The church needed this warning, but we don't know all the reasons.

Maybe after a few decades of ministry, the church at Ephesus began to lose some of their first love passion both for Jesus and for one another. When we studied this passage in August of 2022, I said this:

"Their zeal for orthodoxy led them to be unloving toward God and others. The early days of their enthusiasm for spiritual things and their care for one another diminished. The stress of hardship and opposition caused their affections for God and others to deflate."

The church at Ephesus was a good church. I'm sure they still faithfully preached the gospel. But 30 years after they received Paul's letter that we call Ephesians, they needed to take a look at their church culture.

All three churches loved the same Jesus. They taught the same truths. They were all deeply loved by God. I'm sure that they saw people converted. Yet each of them—Jerusalem, Antioch, and Ephesus—faced unique internal and external challenges. Jesus is always building his church in different eras, in unique cities, and with the people who he has sovereignly ordained.

Every person and every church in every season has to think and wrestle with what faithfulness looks like in their generation. The church has to be tethered to gospel and biblical orthodoxy, but also always ready to speak into the complexities of the generation in which it lives. Faithfulness was required of each church, but how that faithfulness actually worked out was going to be different.

That's important for us as we consider the kind of ministry the Lord will have for us in 2024.

Identity Compass

Who is College Park Church? You could look at our bylaws, member confession, and our member covenant for some answers. A few years ago, we realized that clarity on our identity would be helpful. We developed something we call our "identity compass."

It's an attempt to pull together the most important parts of who we are and show how they connect together. The aim is to link our mission, values, strategy, and culture into a singular visual. While this doesn't answer every question, it certainly helps to clarify some of the most important words that define our church and our culture.

Let me put it this way: with a world filled with change and increasing complexity, this is what helps guide us. This is who we are. It's our identity.

Mission/Values

When I took the call to be the lead pastor of College Park in 2008, one of the first tasks given to me by the elders was the completion of a project started a year earlier. There was a need to clarify our mission and core values. At the time, the mission statement was decent, but it wasn't clear. It was wordy. No one could quote it.

Without a clear mission and articulated values, it really opens up a church to drift. So, we put together a task force to work on rewording the mission statement.

That's when we developed **igniting a passion to follow Jesus**.

Additionally, in 2008 there were no core values. Instead, there were twenty-one historical and cultural principles. They were good, but no one would be able to cite all of them. The task force synthesized the twenty-one principles into six core values. These have characterized our church since its founding, and they've guided us through the years. And they will continue to guide us:

- **Pre-eminence of Jesus** – Our central priority is knowing, loving, and sharing Jesus
- **Authority of the Word** – Our foundation of belief and practice is the Scriptures
- **Redemptive Community** – Our groups and classes are places for content and community (Groups: community + content / Classes: content + community)
- **Extravagant Grace** – Loving people the way Jesus loved us
- **Biblical Unity in Diversity** – Pursuing oneness personally, theologically, and ethnically. Let's look like heaven now.
- **The Call to Go!** – Live on mission in our neighborhoods, in our city, and around the world

These values have been shaped by the story the Spirit is writing in our church, and these are the things that will continue to guide us into the next year. These help us know how to live out the gospel and what faithful witness looks like in our generation.

Strategy

How do we set people up for following Jesus? What is our discipleship pathway? What are the lanes in which we are able to present everyone mature in Christ (Col. 1:28)? It looks like this:

- **Belong:** United to Christ and his church through meaningful membership
- **Grow:** Incremental discipleship and personal growth
- **Multiply:** Movement towards mission

Culture

What specific words and what combination of words characterize the culture of our church? What is the experience of God's people and what is the Spirit-borne environment of our church? We started thinking about this several years ago because this is the fruit of our mission, values, and strategy. What's more, it creates the culture of our church.

We summarized that culture with four words. Each word and the collection of words are important. We chose depth, care, creativity, and impact. What do these words mean?

Depth – Commitment to historical and theological truth

- We teach expositionally through the Bible with a desire to know the truth of God's Word.
- Our groups and classes are deeply committed to studying the Scripture.
- We have opportunities for theological training and discipleship.
- Monthly we gather for prayer so that we can learn to pray deeply and intimately.
- We have a counseling ministry that helps people apply the Scripture practically in their lives.
- In March we'll host our annual THINK conference. This year will feature Dr. Trevin Wax in learning how to reconstruct our faith in a challenging world.

Care – We want to make a big church feel small because people matter to God and us.

- Our pastors, elders, and deacons are intentional with spiritual care for our members.
- We began praying ten years ago about how to shepherd the church more effectively.

- We developed the parish model—interviewing members, praying for people in our parish, providing care, and providing a place for connection.
- Tim Doyle was one of our best care-oriented lay elders.

Creativity – Find new and fresh ways to reach people and help them grow

- This one can make people understandably nervous, so let me say that it doesn't mean creativity for creativity's sake or this over-emphasis on being "relevant."
- It does mean, however, intentional thinking and dreaming about how the gospel can advance.
- It's looked like supporting unreached people groups, a 15-year investment in Brookside, development of the parish model, building bridges with our neighbors (especially in our Jerusalem), Biblical Unity Vision Trip, Luma Counseling and Collective, Christmas Concert, and Trunk or Treat, to name a few.
- This recognizes that there are two ditches: compromise by being too relevant or calcification by being stuck in the past.

Impact – Change the world together, one person at a time

- We want to be good stewards and to reach people where God has placed us.
- Maximize our efforts together on Sundays.
- Embrace ministry opportunities to advance the gospel.
- Reach our friends and neighbors—our Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the world.
- A great example of this is The Portico which will be ready for use in the spring.

Each of these words is important. But it's critical that you understand the collection of these words. One of the unique aspects of our culture (from the beginning) is the combination of these words. Depth and creativity don't always go together. Care and impact might not fit well at times. But we aim to be a church of "both." That means you are probably going to worship with people who would order these differently. It means that church might be a bit uncomfortable at times.

In light of this, what might you consider?

- Pray – Would you pray regularly for our church, our leaders, and the spread of the gospel?
- Love – Would you help us love on each other well every Sunday and every week?
- Engage – Would you consider how you might be involved through serving, giving, and discipling?

Wherever there are humans, there is a culture. And I'm thankful for an imperfect but wonderful culture at our church. You and I are an important part of that. The Spirit of the risen Christ wants to use our church, you and me, to spread the gospel. He creates that culture so that together we can ignite a passion to follow Jesus.

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