

Session III

An Introduction to Mercy Hill Church

I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

1 Corinthians 2:2

Introduction

The Outline

We are now two sessions deep in the Covenant Membership Series. Sessions I and II provided an introduction to church membership in general. Now we start to deal with what it means to be a member at Mercy Hill Church in particular. We are going to look at three headings: (1) Our Mission and Vision; (2) Our Values; and (3) Our Ministry Strategy.

Our Mission and Vision

Mission Statement	Mercy Hill Church exists to Adore, Manifest, and Proclaim the glory of God as revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ . . .
Vision Statement	. . . until that glory fills the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Our Mission

I preached a full message on these statements back in January of 2016, so I'm not looking to do that here (you can find the sermon online at mercyhillchurch.org). But I do want to take a moment to unfold the basic idea for you because there's really nothing more fundamental to a church than its Mission and Vision Statements. They answer the questions: "Why do we exist?"; "What are we doing here?"; and "Where are we going?"

Our Mission Statement reads as follows: "Mercy Hill Church exists to Adore, Manifest, and Proclaim the glory of God as revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ." Before we tackle the action verbs (Adore, Manifest, Proclaim), I want to look at the two objects of those verbs that come into view at the end of this statement: namely, "the glory of God as revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ."

"The Glory of God as Revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ"—Our Eyes Are Opened

The glory of God is best understood as the radiance or outshining of all His perfections. It is the beauty of all that God is put on display. And the Scriptures make plain that God's glory is preeminently revealed to us in His Son (Heb 1:3). As Paul would say: "[We see] the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:3).

And, ironically, nowhere does that glory shine brighter from His face than when it is smacked bloody for us on the cross. It is at the cross that God's holiness, God's purity, God's power, God's justice, God's compassion, God's mercy, God's love, etc. are put, not just on display, but in high definition. The glory of God is revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our eyes are opened...



“Adore”—Our Hearts Are Enthralled

And when at last we see God's glory as it has been revealed in Jesus and His work on the cross, we Adore Him for it. Our hearts come alive with love for the God who has first loved us. As Jesus implies in Luke 7:47—“He who is forgiven much loves much.”

Our eyes are opened; our hearts are enthralled...



“Manifest”—Our Lives Are Transformed

Adoration leads to Manifestation. This is why Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “[W]e all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord [in the face of Jesus Christ], are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

As I look upon Him, I start to look more and more like Him. I start to look like the cross. I start to give others a glimpse of the Savior in the way I lay my life down for them. I start to manifest in my life the glory of the One I so adore.

Our eyes are opened; our hearts are enthralled; our lives are transformed...

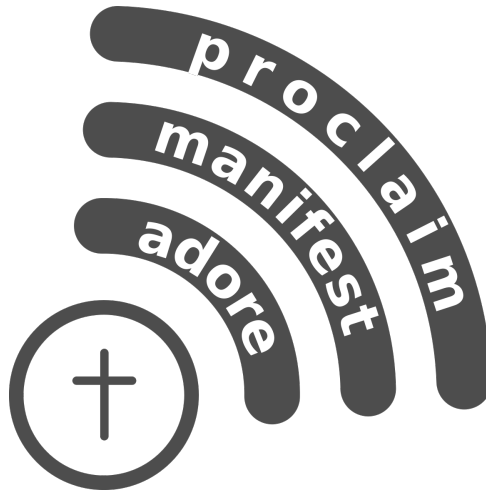


“Proclaim”—Our Tongues Are Loosed

Manifestation leads to Proclamation. We are not content to merely look upon Him. Nor are we content to merely look like Him. We want others to be swept up by Him as well. So we speak: “[H]ow are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” (Rom 10:14).

Our eyes are opened; our hearts are enthralled; our lives are transformed; and our tongues are loosed!

We Adore, Manifest, and Proclaim the glory of God as revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.



Gospel AMPLification

Taking the acronym established by the action verbs in our statement (A-M-P), we call this process Gospel AMPLification. We exist to turn up the volume on God’s glory by Adoring, Manifesting, and Proclaiming the gospel of His Son.

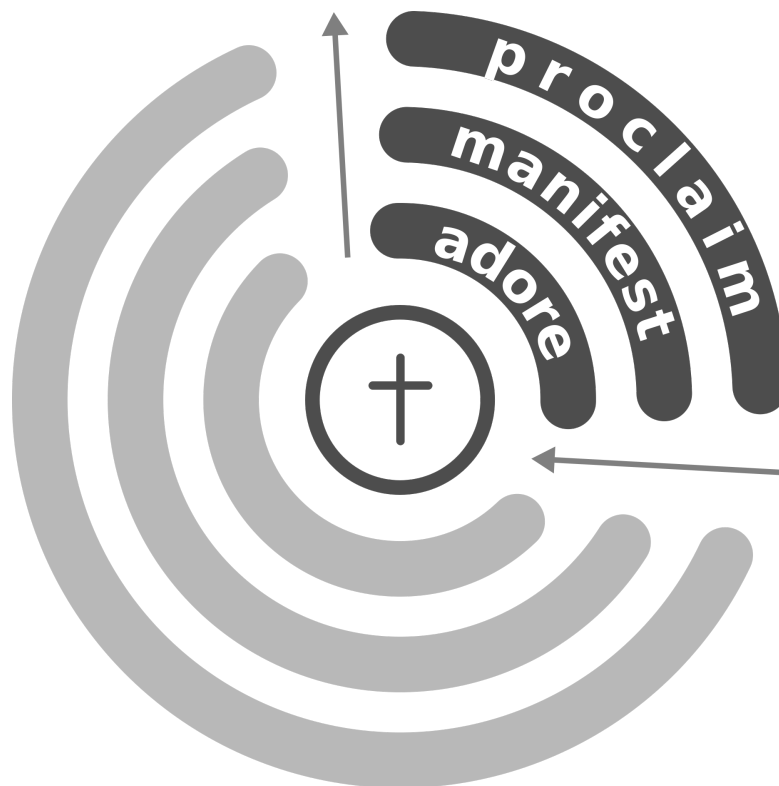
Our Vision

Gospel Reverberation

And this Gospel Amplification leads to what we've called Gospel Reverberation. For as we AMPlify the glory of God as revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, others come to Adore Him, Manifest Him, and Proclaim Him. The amplification is multiplying, getting louder, reverberating, until at last our grand vision is fulfilled and the glory of God finally fills the earth as the waters cover the sea (Hab 2:14).

Bringing our Mission and Vision Statements together, then, we read: [Mission:] "Mercy Hill Church exists to Adore, Manifest, and Proclaim the glory of God as revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ . . . [Vision:] until that glory fills the earth as the waters cover the sea."

Gospel Amplification for Gospel Reverberation. Amplifying Christ in all of life and in all the world. That's why Mercy Hill exists. That's what I am going to give my life for in this church!



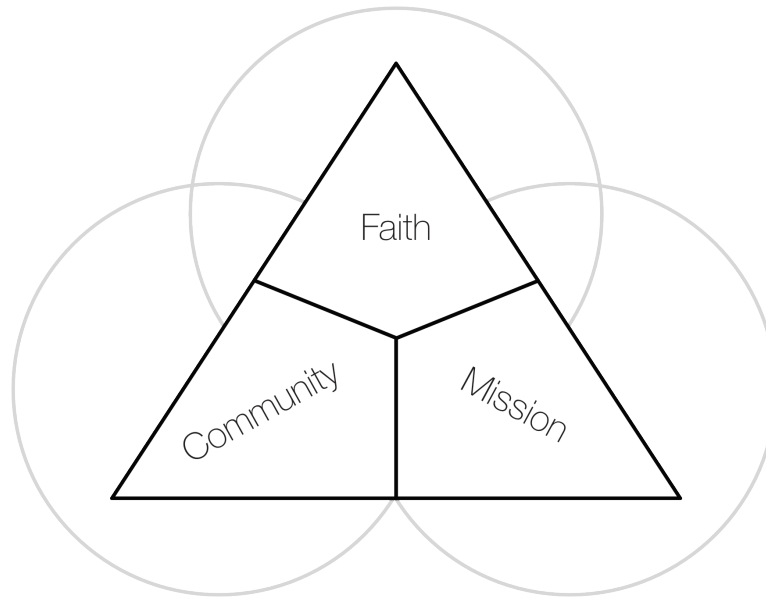
Our Values

From Three Aspects to Three Values

As we transition now to look at our Values, I need to remind us of the way I defined the church back at the very beginning of this series: "The church is that blessed assembly that exists in the *presence* of God, as the *people* of God, for the *purpose* of God." This is who we were at first created to be in Adam, and who we are now redeemed to be in Christ. One blessed assembly, three distinct aspects.

Understanding that this is what God has created and redeemed us to be as *the* church, I want to make sure that this is what we are aiming with all our might to be in *this* church. Therefore, these three aspects—*Presence*,

People, Purpose—flow into and correlate with, what I would identify as our three values—*Faith, Community, and Mission*.



I will unfold each of these Values further in future sessions, but for now I just want to quickly define them and relate them to one another.

Defining Each Value

1. Faith: Knowing and Loving *the Lord*

We, the church, exist in the Presence of God. We are the Bride of Christ, created and redeemed to enjoy intimate union with Him. This value presses our church upwards in love for Him.

Consider 1 Corinthians 8:6—“For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

We were created for Him. To know Him, love Him, obey Him, worship Him. We once had been exiled from Him in our sin, but through Christ we have been brought back.

We value Faith in this church.

2. Community: Knowing and Loving *the Church*

We, the church, exist as the People of God. We are the Family of Christ, adopted in the Beloved and brought into covenantal relationship with His people. This value presses our church inwards in love for one another.

Consider Ephesians 2:19—“So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.”

We were created for community. To know and love others and to let ourselves be known and loved by others. We once were at enmity with one another—bitter enemies like Jew and Gentile. But in Christ, we have been reconciled, brought into the same family room under care of the same Father.

We value Community in this church.

3. Mission: Knowing and Loving *the World*

We, the church, exist for the Purpose of God. We are the Embassy of Christ, commissioned by the Savior to be His ambassadors—salt and light in a decaying and darkening world. This value presses our church outwards in love for the unbelieving.

Consider 2 Corinthians 5:20—“We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

You were created for something so much bigger than yourself. You were created to take part in the rush of working alongside your Creator—in pushing back darkness and calling rebels to lay down their arms and live. We once had abandoned such a high calling, building towers of Babel instead of temples of God. “I’d rather be in business for myself than partner with You!” But now, in Christ, we’ve been called off the bench and put back in the game! Our lives have regained their grand meaning.

We value Mission in this church.

The Larger Ecosystem

Our Values, while they can be distinguished, cannot be divided. They are distinct, yet inseparable. You might think of them along the lines of an ecosystem. There’s an interdependence among them such that, if ever we abstract one from its larger ecosystem, the whole system collapses. A church is either pursuing all of these at once or it is truly pursuing none of them at all.

- Some churches make it all about Faith. They want to teach the Bible, spend hours in prayer, encounter Jesus in musical worship, etc. But they don’t go anywhere with it. It’s just a doctrine, or it’s just a warm fuzzy feeling, but it doesn’t propel them into community or out on mission.
- Other churches make it all about Community. They’ve got the warm fellowship, the support groups, the coffee hour. But, at the end of the day, they’re more like a social club than a church. The gospel is rarely mentioned and their mission to the lost seems irrelevant.
- Still other churches make it all about Mission. They’re tired of the institutional church. It just gets in the way. They want to finally get out from within the four walls and do something! So they’re active in the city, they’re serving at the soup kitchens, they know the poor by name. But somewhere along the way they stopped reading their Bibles and doing life with God’s people. Their Christianity got reduced to a movement for social reform or philanthropy.

Faith is meant to flow into Community. Community is meant to flow out on Mission. When even one of these three Values is distorted or disregarded, you no longer have the church as God designed it. The whole ecosystem unravels.

Truthfully this is a good diagnostic grid even for our own lives. What the church is to be corporately, in a sense, each member is to be individually. How are you with Faith, Community, and Mission? Which way do you lean? Beware of leaning towards one at the expense of the others.

Now don’t misunderstand me, your leaning is not in and of itself a bad thing. Often it is a sign of God’s calling and gifting you. But, in all of your passion for one of these Values in particular, don’t neglect the others. That’s why

we need each other. I'm prone to lean towards Faith. I need people in my life leaning towards Community and Mission. And, perhaps, you need people like me.

The church is that blessed assembly that exists in the Presence of God, as the People of God, for the Purpose of God. Therefore, Mercy Hill values Faith, Community, and Mission.

Faith is meant to flow into Community. Community is meant to flow out on Mission. When even one of these three Values is distorted or disregarded, you no longer have the church as God designed it. The whole ecosystem unravels.

Our Ministry Strategy

Let me now address our ministry strategy at this church. How are we going to get Gospel Amplification going? How are we going to develop Faith, Community, and Mission? How are we going to grow the church—both qualitatively and quantitatively?

I have a three-part interlocking Ministry Strategy that I want to present to you at this point.

1. Strategic Focus: We Are a One-Issue Church

One Issue

Churches can be known for all sorts of things—“That’s the church where the band is radio-quality”; “That’s the church where the pastor is pure comedy”; “That’s the church where they give away fresh pour-over coffee that tastes like it just dripped down from heaven.”

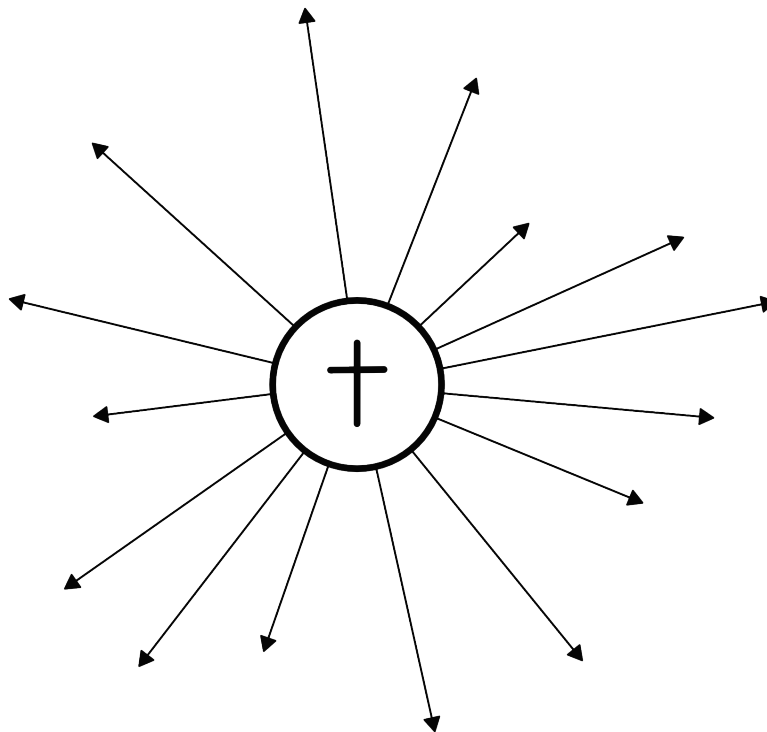
Do you know what I pray people come to say about us? “That’s the church where they just can’t get over the cross. They’re always teaching about it, singing about it, talking about it, moved by it, showing it, sharing it.”

*Do you know what I pray people come to say about us?
“That’s the church where they just can’t get over the cross.”*

In this sense, then, I want to be a one-issue church. There are so many things our focus could drift to, but I will labor with all of my might to keep us focused here. Because I think God is focused here.

- Do you remember Jesus’ rebuke of the Jews? “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). “Everything in the Bible—every word God ever said—is pointing you to Me and what I’m about to accomplish for you on the cross!”
- Or do you remember what Paul says is of “first importance” in 1 Corinthians 15:3? “The gospel” (v. 1)—namely, “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (vv. 3–4). Whatever else we believe or do as a church, this gospel is to take first place!

- Or when Paul knows he's leaving the church in Ephesus, never to see them again, what does he leave them with? "And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). "Oh I know you've already heard the gospel Ephesians, but you need to hear it again and again and again. For it is not only how you get saved, it is how you are sustained unto glory." When I preach the gospel in this church, Paul is saying, I might as well be mixing cement and laying down bricks. For it is the word of His grace that builds us up!
- That's why he would say to the Corinthians: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). And that's why the first sermon series I ever preached through at this church was on this same verse! The cross of Christ was the first note I struck, and I pray by God's grace I will strike that same note until the day I drop! May my ministry be a never ending riff on this one master theme: "Jesus Christ and him crucified."



One Million Implications

This is not to say that we will not talk about anything else in this church. We most certainly will. It is to say, however, that whatever else we talk about, we will approach it through the lens of the gospel. You see, this one issue touches every issue. We may focus in on this one issue, but this one issue has one million implications.

This is the flow of almost every epistle in the New Testament. First, let's get the gospel right. Then, let's talk about what it implies for your Faith, Community, and Mission. What does the gospel imply for your relationship with God, with your spouse, with your kids, with your work, with your finances, with your neighbor, with the orphan and the widow, and on and on?!

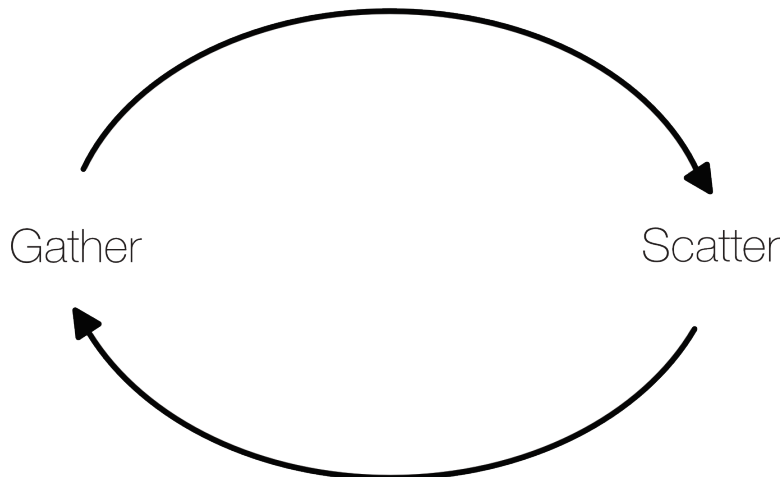
Knowing God's unconditional, even counter-conditional, love for us in Christ is what gives rise to fire-hearted Faith, deep-rooted Community, and life-sacrificing Mission.

By God's grace, we will keep this one issue at the center. But, in the years to come, we will set out to discover the one million implications that flow out from it.

Knowing God's unconditional, even counter-conditional, love for us in Christ is what gives rise to fire-hearted Faith, deep-rooted Community, and life-sacrificing Mission.

2. Strategic Rhythm: We Gather and Scatter

With the gospel as our Strategic Focus, we operate within a Strategic Rhythm. As a church, we gather and we scatter. We gather together as believers and then we scatter out into the world for Christ. Both sides of this rhythm are critical to our pursuit of Faith, Community, and Mission.



I want to help you see how the two relate by putting an image on it. When I speak of our gathering and scattering think of the ebbing and flowing of the ocean's tide. The water recedes out into the depths and then pushes back onto the land. But even as the water recedes it leaves something of the depths on the shore—shells, sand-dollars, even sea creatures in some of the tide pools.

My dad's side had a family reunion this past summer in a place called Fripp Island off the coast in South Carolina. At low-tide we would walk the beach looking for these sorts of things. If we got there too late, the best treasures would have already been taken by other tourists. But without fail, the tide would come back up from the depths, with more shimmering treasure in its flow.

Think about our Strategic Rhythm along these lines. We have gatherings—some larger, some smaller—scheduled throughout the week—opportunities to move towards the breathtaking depths of God's glory with His people. But we don't stay out in the depths anymore than the tide stays out at sea. The tide returns, it comes back in towards land, towards the world. And when we move back in from the depths we bring tokens of our time with us—precious shells, as it were, that speak something to the world of the beauty and glory of our God. And we lay these shells out along the banks, like a trail of crumbs leading back to their source in Him.

Our family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers see our faith, our hope, our love, our joy, our peace; and they hear us speak of a world they've not yet seen but always longed for. They hear us speak of the love of God for sinners, of a redeemed and reconciled community, of a mission bigger than our day-planners and board meetings. They hear us speak of the church gathered.

And perhaps they'll be inclined to follow the crumbs, the shimmering shells, the sightings of glory, back out to the sea. Perhaps they'll want to catch a glimpse for themselves. Perhaps they too will find themselves breathless before the vast expanse of God's glory and grace. Perhaps they too will come to know the love of God for them in Christ. Perhaps they too will start to bring shells up from the deep and lay them out for the world to see.

I am not one of those that pins the gathered church against the scattered church. Some think that Christians spend so much of their time gathering that they have no time to scatter out and reach the world. Now this is a legitimate concern. But many overreact in the other direction and start to spend so much of their time scattering that they lose the glow and shimmer that comes from spending time in worship with God's people.

Both extremes are problematic. We gather so that we can scatter, with renewed energy and zeal. We scatter so that we can gather—so that more and more people might come into the redeemed community of God.

We gather so that we can scatter, with renewed energy and zeal. We scatter so that we can gather—so that more and more people might come into the redeemed community of God.

Beyond this, I believe that the gathering is equally as missional as the scattering. We might be prone to think that the gatherings are where we really work out our Faith and Community, and the scattering is where we finally do Mission. But the Bible knows nothing of this disparity.

The gathered church is, in fact, a compelling witness to the power and validity of the gospel. It is the theater of God's glory, the showcase of a new humanity. What the unbelieving might not get from our tracts or gospel presentations, they just might get from witnessing our gatherings!

Read Acts 2:42-47. It was in light of the gathered church—their apostolic Faith, their radical, self-sacrificing Community—that they were given “favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (v. 47). Faith and Community worked out in the context of the gathered church is not at odds with the mission, it's a critical component of it!

Paul Himself assumes unbelievers will come into our gatherings. And he imagines some “falling on [their] face[s] . . . worship[ing] God and declar[ing] that God is really among [us]” (1 Cor 14:25).

John Bunyan describes how, before his conversion, he came upon a gathering of poor Christian women talking about the things of God: “I thought they spoke as if joy made them speak. They talked with such pleasantness of scriptural language and with such appearance of grace in all they said that they seemed to me as if they had found a new world.”¹ Don't you want people to come in here and say that of us?

¹ *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1993), 25.

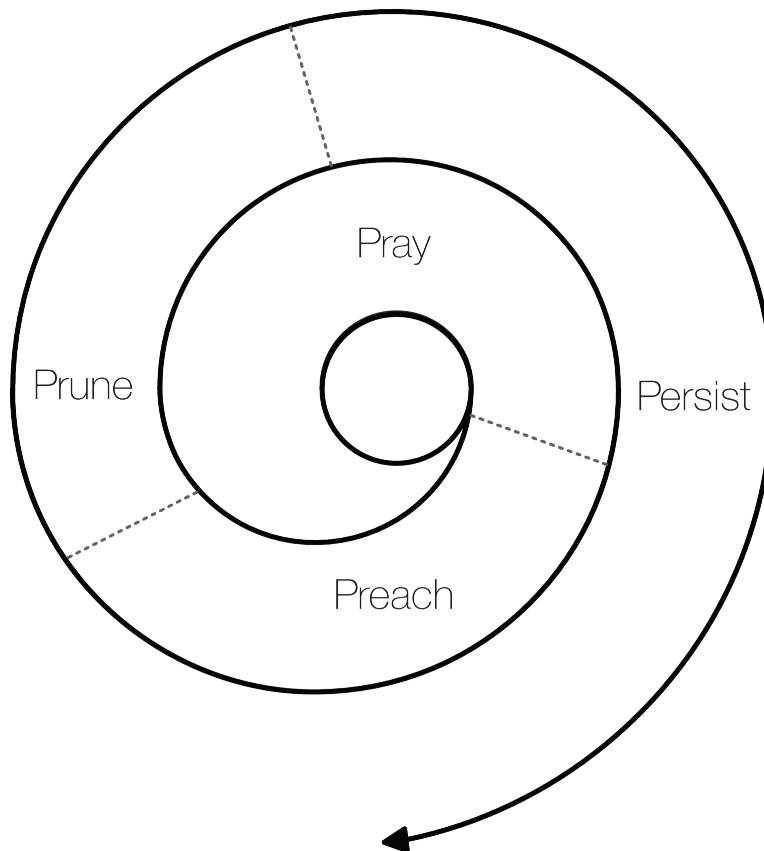
So we gather in our services, in our Home Groups, in our DNA Groups, in our prayer meetings; and we scatter into the city, into the neighborhoods, into the workplaces, into the grocery stores. We are not either/or on this issue. We are both/and. We gather and we scatter.

3. Strategic Activity: We Pray, Preach, Prune, and Persist

So many are scrambling these days, looking for new ways to grow the church. If I'm honest, I must admit that I feel the pull myself. But we have to know that God cares infinitely more about church growth than we do. As such, He has not left the subject up to us. We do not need, nor should we dare, to reinvent what He has already laid down for us on the matter in His Word.

The book of Acts is concerned at a fundamental level with church-growth. It's grand thesis is Acts 1:8: "[Y]ou 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 the book is given over to detailing the unfolding fulfillment of this thesis. The gospel, the church, is growing.

While I would never claim that the book of Acts is a manual for church growth, I do think it identifies a dynamic, a strategic activity, that should not go ignored. It's an activity that works out in four key steps: (1) We Pray; (2) We Preach; (3) We Prune; (4) We Persist.



Let me just give you one illustration of this from the book of Acts, though it really runs through the whole thing.

1. We Pray

It's interesting that, though Jesus says these disciples are going to be His witnesses even to the ends of the earth, His first order is that they "not . . . depart from Jerusalem, but . . . wait" (Acts 1:4). And after Jesus ascends and they are waiting in Jerusalem, what is it that they are doing? Praying: "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer" (v. 14).

In a very real sense, growing the church, whether in quality or quantity, is not in my job description. That privilege belongs to God alone: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Cor 3:6). If this is true then, more important than any of my planting or watering, is my praying: "O God do what only You can do!" That's why my first move as pastor here was to start the Sunday evening prayer meeting.

2. We Preach

As they are praying and waiting, the Spirit of the risen Christ falls upon them. And what to do they do? They preach: "Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice . . ." (Acts 2:14). He proclaims the gospel, and three thousand souls awaken from the dead.

I don't care what the modern world thinks of preaching. It is the God-ordained means by which He calls this world full of Lazarus' out of the tomb. So, God help me, I will give myself week in and week out to the preaching and ministering of His Word.

3. We Prune

They Pray, they Preach, and thousands are added. The church begins to grow. The gospel takes root and starts to bear fruit. By Acts 6, there's so many people to take care of that the Apostles have to appoint others for tasks. They develop systems and structure. In other words, they Prune the growth to keep things going strong.

In this church, I want to Pray, I want to Preach, and then I want to sit back and watch how God stirs your heart. I want to see what kind of fruit crops up in your life. And then I want to tend the branches and help you flourish.

While I am unswervingly rigid on certain points of the ministry, I am actually quite flexible in my approach. Outside of the broad parameters I'm laying here with our Mission and Vision, Our Values, and Our Strategy I don't have the specifics worked out.

I know we want Faith, Community, and Mission. But who's going to preach, what studies are we going to have, what events will we do to grow together, what kind of outreach should we get involved in? I might have things God puts on my heart here or there, but I am trusting God to put things on your heart as well. I am not only to be a source of the congregation's vision, I am to be a steward of it. I want to see what God is moving in you and then equip and release you to do it!

4. We Persist

We minister in a fallen world. It's going to be hard. After Acts 6 comes Acts 7, and the stoning of Stephen—the first martyr of the New Testament church. Now you might think that such a thing would cause the church to lose hope or give up. But instead they Persist.

It seems only to get stronger. For the great persecution that arises in all of this actually serves to help the church break those first barriers that Jesus mentioned: "[T]here arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria . . . [And] those who were scattered went about preaching the word" (8:1, 4).

I can't tell you how important this fourfold Strategic Activity has been for me throughout this last year. I get discouraged. I get tempted to turn to other methods. But then I come back to this: "Oh Nick! Don't lose heart.

Pray, Preach, Prune, and Persist! Stay the course for the long haul and let God do what only He can do. Let God bring the growth.”

I live in those words that the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:16).

Will you join me, will you join this church in executing this interlocking strategy? Will you make the gospel central? Will you gather and scatter? Will you partner with us in praying, preaching, pruning, and persisting? We so hope that you will!