

Ministry Vision: City Groups

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- [0 : 0 0] Tonight, we are taking a break from the Ten Commandments because we're halfway through and it's a holiday weekend. And we're gonna take a moment tonight to look at Acts chapter two and think together about a very specific application, which is what Acts chapter two actually has to say to us about our city groups.
- So in preaching class, when you go to seminary and you take a preaching class, you learn that there is a difference in a sermon and a Bible study.
- And the difference between a sermon and a Bible study is a very thin line. It's a very fuzzy border. And it's hard to say. It's almost one of those things where you know it, you know it when you see it, but it's hard to capture it.
- Where's the border between a sermon and a Bible study? It's hard to say. It's an art more than a science. Tonight, we are definitely on the border between a sermon and a Bible study.
- So we're taking a moment to look at this and to do a Bible study that will hopefully roll into a sermon. It is a sermon, but you can decide it then, I guess. This is a really classic text that we read.
- [1 : 0 8] It is one of the most important texts in the book of Acts because it gives you a summary of what the early church was up to at the very earliest moment. So the first sermon has just been preached.
- The first people after Jesus's resurrection have just come to faith. And as soon as you read Acts 2, 42 to 47, you're being told what the very first church got up to at the very beginning of church history.
- So it's really important for that reason. What does the body of Christ do as soon as the spirit comes down at Pentecost and fills them up? What's the very first thing they do? And this is it. We just read about it.
- So the question before us tonight is what does a spirit-filled body of Christ look like? What do we do? What do we look like? How do we learn it from this passage?
- You can look at what we're about to see in Acts 2, 40 to 47 and read church history and look at the seasons in church history where revivals have taken place, where God has particularly come in in certain places at certain times after a period of stillness and intensified the work of the Holy Spirit in a community.
- [2 : 1 9] And typically what you'll find is that the church in that community returned to pretty much exactly the model we read here in Acts 2, 42 to 47.
- So this is a spirit-filled church, a revival-centered church that we read about. It's the very first church. And what we're trying to do tonight is ask, what does this tell us particularly about one aspect?
- So all of our application will be on one aspect of what we see here and that's really just small groups because we do find those right here in the passage. Why do we do them? What do they exist for?

We call them city groups for a very particular reason. So we're gonna think about that, but to get there, we have to ask first, we have to see first that Peter here tells us about a crooked generation.

So he says, beware and save yourself from the crooked generation, that's the first thing. And then secondly, that we are a counterculture. That's the second thing he tells us. And then finally we can think what that means for city groups here in our city.

[3 : 19] Okay, so let's do that first. You can look down at verse 40 and 41 and see. One of the first things Peter does is he says in our passage, the very last thing he does in a sermon, it says, well, in many other words, Peter bears witness and continues to exhort the people in Jerusalem saying, save yourselves from this crooked generation.

Now, why does Peter conclude his great sermon by saying, now all of you need to save yourself from this crooked generation that's all around you.

What does he talk like this? This word generation here in the Greek text is a word that means something very similar to culture.

So he says something like save yourself from this crooked culture, this crooked generation. Now, we talk about generations and cultures simultaneously when we say the word generation.

So when we talk about generation, we think about baby boomers and Gen X and Gen Y, AKA millennials, that's what I'm a part of.

[4 : 28] I'm an elder millennial. And then Gen Z, and I don't know if you know, but the newest generation that's alive today is anybody born from 2012 to 2024 is part of Gen Alpha.

So we've gone from Gen Z, which ended in 2012, 1996 to 2012, and now Gen Alpha back to the top of the alphabet, the Greek alphabet, oh, Gen Alpha, that's where we are now.

Every single generation is also a culture. Generations have cultures, and you could think about your own generation, whether you're a baby boomer or Gen X or Gen Y or Gen Z or Gen Alpha, and talk about the distinctive features of the culture that define your generation.

So Gen Alpha, for instance, will be the first generation in human history that is holistically born within the domain of what's called the technium, meaning a world that's completely immersed into the digital age.

They'll be the first ones, 2012 and on. What will that mean? Well, it's a particular culture, definitively. We could talk about that type of culture for days and days, and we could talk about other types of cultures, and that means that in every generation, every age, in every particular place, there is a generation or a culture that happens all around us, and that means that there are distinct aspects of language, assumptions, institutions, icons, codes of ethics, how you define celebrity, how you define the moral order all around you, all of those things are heavily, heavily weighted by culture, and by the intermixing of distinct cultures.

[6 : 03] Now here in Acts chapter two, this is the generation. Why does he say, beware, save yourself from this wicked, crooked culture, generation?

Well, for one, this is the culture in Jerusalem that had put Christ on the cross and had rejected in large cell the Messiah afterwards, all sorts of people, and now Gentiles and Jews, people from every nation are standing there in front of Peter, and he's saying, don't do what the culture around you has done.

In other words, what he's saying is that if you listen to the sermon, I've just preached the sermon about Jesus, and he's risen from the dead, and we all, he said in Acts chapter two just before this, even if you weren't in the city, he looks out at hundreds of people groups all around him in Jerusalem and says, even if you were not here, not very many days ago when Jesus was crucified, you put him on the cross.

He says, you all, he uses the y'all, the plural you, and he says, all of you, every single one of you, you put him on the cross, you're all part of it. He said, sin cuts through every single human heart, and we're all part of it, and he said, but save yourself.

Reject it, reject this culture, this generation that you've been a part of instead, come. And the very next thing he says is, come and be baptized. And it said that many, many, many of them were coming by the thousands at the time, and being baptized, and he said, you know what that means?

[7 : 35] It means that as soon as you believe in Jesus Christ and you're baptized, you are initiated into a counterculture, a culture that stands against the culture, a culture that both looks out at the culture and says there's lots of good things about my culture, but there's also a lot of corrupt things too.

And you immediately become a community that's both in the world, in the world, but not of it, your counterculture. That's what Jesus talks about in John 17.

And so as soon as the spirit and the truth come into your life, you're initiated into a new community. And that's what we're reading about right here. What is this new community, this counterculture, this spiritual family that gets birthed?

And every single week, we talk about, at least twice a month, we talk about something here at St. C's called city groups. Now if you're visiting tonight, this is in-house discussion, but we're happy you're here for it.

We have city groups and city groups are the fact that we've separated the entire city into communities, into sections, into parishes, that's the old word. And every week, even if city groups not on, we have the idea that we go out and we live as the organic church out in different parts of the city, in ministry, for the Lord in whatever little place that the Lord has put us out in our city.

[9 : 00] And that means that if you come here, and this is your spiritual home, this institutional church, St. Columbus, and then you go out into the city, whether you're here or whether you're out there, you are part of a living counterculture, called, called to be a living counterculture in the midst of a crooked generation.

And they're always crooked. You're called to be a counterculture, to be a living counterculture. And that's the basic idea of the city group. The city group simply says that we exist, we exist to not just worship here, but to go out into the city and to exist in every single pocket of the city as a living church, a living city of God, salt and light, a city on a hill, a counterculture, wherever we might be, whatever tiny little community God's put you in.

That's the first thing. The second thing is, okay, how does this counterculture, the church work? How does it exercise this counterculture? How does it do it?

Well, that's what verses 42 to 47 are. Now, here's where the very Bible study S dimension comes in. I'm just gonna run through and list all the different things I can find in verses 42 to 47 that the counterculture of the church does, anything that it does.

And this is what we learn. Verse 42 tells us that the church teaches and trains and educates. Verse 46, that the church comes together, Christians come together constantly, even daily.

[10 : 26] Verse 42b, 44a, that there are relationships. And those relationships are of mutual support and fellowship. And so that word fellowship in 42 is the Greek word koinonia, that that's at the heartbeat of the counterculture.

There's a family, a fellowship, a faith that he calls the koinonia, the fellowship. Verse 46b, he says that they're meeting in house to house and in large groups. They had small groups.

They were meeting in each other's homes, breaking bread together, eating meals together, feasting together. Verse 46a, they got together as a large group attending the temple, like a church service together at the very beginning.

This is an early form of gathered congregational worship. Verse 42, verse 46, they practiced the Lord's Supper. How do we know that? It said because they committed themselves to the breaking of bread.

And that definite article there means the Lord's Supper, the sacraments. Verse 42d, there were tons of prayer, lots and lots of prayer, group prayer, small group prayer, large group prayer, prayers for the city and all way, ships and form.

[11 : 31] Verse 45, a radical commitment to mercy and stewardship of resources. They were selling the things they had and sharing with one another. The boundaries were blurred on their resources inside the family, inside the counterculture of the people.

Verse 46 and 47 teaches that they have a general spirit of joy. They were happy people. Joy permeated their midst. They were evangelistically effective.

Verse 47, people were very attracted. People on the outside looked at the joy of the community and the counterculture out in the city and they wanted to be a part of it. They were evangelistically effective.

Verse 47, conversion then was always unto the community, never isolated. Anytime they shared the gospel with somebody, they tried to get that person attached to the community, the counterculture, the people of God.

They brought them in, they incorporated them into deep relationships. Okay, that's everything I could find. That's what the early church did. That's what it looked like. Now, I just wanna focus for a moment on two, just two of these things, because this is the heart of why we do city groups.

[12 : 39] And at the very heart, we learn here that the counterculture of the church, whether it's gathered or sent out into the city, has at its heart this work of fellowship, coinonea.

And he says that, he says fellowship. And fellowship here is when you've experienced the good news of the gospel, you become a member of that community, part of the counterculture, and immediately you engage, you are, no matter, you are, you're part of the body of Christ.

And so there's a call in that to deep, abiding Christian friendship. That's the fellowship that's being talked about here.

And we learned in verse 42 that it was intense. It says they devoted themselves. There's a real intensity in that verb. To the apostle's teaching and to the coinonea, the fellowship, the commitment to one another.

And it says in verse 46, they didn't just see each other on Sundays, that it was daily, that they were in each other's homes, house to house, day in and day out. That's exactly what we read in Acts 5.42, that day in and day out, they went house to house.

[13 : 52] They were amongst one another in their houses. This was real living, abiding Christian friendship. And it was economic and spiritual. And so anybody that had any need, it was covered.

The Christian friendship went so far, they said, you know, Jesus has done so much for me. I'm willing to give up my time and my talents and my resources and my treasures for everybody else in this community. And so nobody had any needs.

It was economic and it was spiritual. Verse 44, they feasted together. They broke bread in each other's homes. They sacramented together. In verse 46, they worshiped together in small group settings and they evangelized as a community.

So they went out and shared the gospel in communal ways, in communal forms. Acts 20, 20, Paul says as he is leaving the Ephesian elders for the last time, he thinks he's going to die in Jerusalem on his way back.

And he says, I want you to remember that. I went and taught regularly, daily, house to house. I went house to house. There was certainly a model in the early church in the earliest days for gathering as a large group in worship, as a corporate body, and then going out into different areas of the city and gathering in those spaces as smaller church communities, as small groups.

[15 : 13] We call them city groups. And they were incredibly sensitive to each other's needs, to the calling of Christian friendship, and to the call to evangelize together in whatever area of the city they were sent to.

Now, here's the, that's the first one. Second one and we'll move to the final thing. Not only did they go forward in deep abiding fellowship, Christian friendship, but we also learned that that dynamic ministry, and I just want to focus on this for a moment, was based in both words and deeds.

And so you can see that here in the passage that it was a dynamic ministry in that they were longing, praying, searching, going out, looking to bring people into the household of faith.

They were looking for conversions. They wanted to evangelize. And they were so highly attractive because of two big reasons.

Larry Hurtado, who was a scholar, a New Testament scholar across the street at New College that died a few years ago. He wrote a book called *The Destroyer of the Gods* before he died.

[16 : 20] And in it, he has the basic question. He records the movement of the gospel in the first and second centuries and asks one basic question. How in the world did this tiny little movement called the Way become the dominant faith in the Roman Empire within three centuries?

That's the question he asked. And he says ultimately it was about two things. One, they went forward and carried a unique message that had never been heard before, the message of the resurrection.

And he says, and secondly, the earliest Christians in every generation were people of radical mercy. They showed so much mercy, good deeds before others.

When the plagues hit the city and everybody left, the Christians stayed. And many of them got sick and died. Everything bad that took place in the empire, they stuck it out. They got through it.

The emperor Julian writes a letter a couple of centuries later to one of his pagan priests. And he says, I'm so upset because everybody's becoming a Christian. And he says, how, oh priest, oh bishop of the pagan religion of Rome, how do we win the people back?

[17 : 30] And he tells them, he says, here's what you're going to do. You're going to set up hostels and hospitals because that's what the Christians keep doing. And you're going to show mercy to their poor because they keep showing mercy to our poor.

You see, he said they keep winning souls because they have this message of resurrection and they're so kind, they're so merciful. They do so much good for the city. And you see in the very beginning right here and next to 40 to 47, we learn that the fellowship, the Christian friendship of the church moved out into the city in the witness of word and deed interdependently.

That we carry a great message, the message of the resurrection, and we carry it through word accompanied by signs and wonders, deeds, good works, mercy.

That's how it worked at the very beginning. Now, we didn't go through every single one of these, but let me just list for you. If we were to spend more time and go through, there are about five vital signs of a healthy church that I think you can take away from this.

And I'll just list them for you. They tell us that a healthy church ministers through worship in the Holy Spirit, joyous, spirit-filled worship. That's the first one. The second one we learn here is that a healthy church has a ministry of theological depth, learning the truth, being devoted to the apostles' teaching.

[18 : 52] So a ministry of teaching and preaching, things like that. The third thing we're told here is that a healthy church has a ministry of loving fellowship that's based in Christian friendship, where people really do care about one another.

They love one another deeply. Koinonia, and then finally, a witness by word and a witness by deed. These are the five great ministries of the early church that we see right here at the very beginning.

Now, let's apply, finally, city groups. We're trying to cast some vision tonight for our city groups, why we do them, why we have them. We've already seen why we do them, but how best can we do them?

That's really the question. And we read in Acts 542 that in the early church the Christians were going daily house to house. They were deep in communion with one another.

In other words, they had smaller subset communities set throughout all the city. There's moments in the book of Acts where there may have been as many as 15,000 new converts to Christianity at one time, 15,000.

[20 : 00] And how do you worship? They didn't do the mega church. They instead were worshipping in small communities and then breaking out into even smaller communities all across the city.

That's how they do it. And so that's the exact model that we try to take up here at St. Columbus. And at the heart of that ministry is the fellowship, Coenonia. So here's the first thing, the first thing to say.

Our city groups, we long, we long here that St. C's city groups would be fundamentally about Christian friendship, about deep abiding relationships with dear Christian friends, that we would grow together in Christian friendship over the course of the periods of time we're together so that we can help one another when we close our eyes for the last time in the hospital bed, go home to be with King Jesus.

You need Christian friendship in your life. You need worship and you need to go out into the city and have dear Christian friends so that you can walk alongside and they will help you make it all the way to the very end.

And that's the fundamental heartbeat, the Coenonia, the fellowship of the city group, that we go out into the city and that's what we exist for, to help one another, encourage one another in deep Christian friendships.

[21 : 18] They're for cultivating fellowship. Now, that's the baseline, but let me now give you something. Derrick in 2014 made a document about the difference in a Bible study home group in a city group.

And it's right out of Acts chapter two, 42 to 47, in Acts chapter five, in Acts chapter 20. And here's the difference. And just listen to this, this is the vision we have for the city group that Derrick cast from this passage a long, well, a while ago.

And here it is, a house group. On the one hand, a house group tends to be a weekly meeting. People talk about the house group night, the night that you meet for it.

It's the evening in which you do a Bible study, a small group together in which you attend. Now, that's a baseline, that's a very good thing. But a city group is not to be thought of as a meeting but a movement.

We long for city groups, not to just be a meeting but a movement, a movement. In other words, a gospel community that's about a shared life, real deep abiding networks of Christian friendship.

[22 : 28] A community of people that are actually doing life together beyond just the weekly meeting. That's the first thing. House groups are typically centered around just the time of the Bible study.

Now, in our city groups, we have Bible studies and Bible studies are baseline. They're so good, so important. The Bible is central to the life of a gospel community. But we want it to be a shared life where the Bible isn't just read on the one night and looked at together on the one night, but the real heartbeat of success in a city group is when the people in that city group are organically breaking away in even smaller groups and deciding, well, we're gonna get together and we're gonna pray and look at God's word together on a different day beyond this because we're trying to encourage one another.

We're just Christian friends. We're just meeting at the cafe in the middle of the day beyond the city group meeting. You see, it's no mere Bible study, but a shared life, a living relationship.

The third thing, house groups are often insular and focused exclusively on the mutual care of their own members. That's very important, that's the baseline.

Pastoral care of the members of every city group is so important. We want that, we desire that, but a city group. A city group is a community of faith that doesn't just care about the needs of the members but longs together to move outward into the community God's placed them for the sake of evangelism.

[23 : 56] So it's a community that's trying to go outward and take the gospel further than just the insular community that's gathered forth. And finally, house groups are normally managed centrally by the church leadership.

The leaders are often doing a lot of the organizing and stirring things along. But in a city group that's a movement, the gospel communities are given a mandate to exist and reproduce organically.

And so we gathered our leaders a couple of weeks ago and we talked about this and we said, when city groups are at their best, when city groups are healthy, it's when people like me and Derek have nothing to do with it.

We just hear the great news about what's going on in this city group and that city group. We hear that these people are doing this ministry in that part of the city. We hear that this group is gathering here. We hear that this group decided that they were gonna do something different and meet on a different night because it would fit better with the hopes and dreams of the evangelism in their context.

And we just hear about it. And that's when city groups move from a house group meeting to a movement, a movement. And that's the real goal and real hope. So let me conclude now with this.

[25 : 08] That means that in city groups going forward, we're longing to match as close as we can to Acts chapter two, to getting a vision from that by good and necessary consequence.

And so that means in city groups, we want to have more focus on evangelism, an evangelism component where at every city group, there's time where everybody, if you'd like, has a chance to talk about what's going on in your personal ministry, wherever you are in the city.

Right, in other words, we want to really focus on the fact that in every single one of our lives, God has put us somewhere into uni, into the workplace, into this group of flats, into this hobby.

And some of you have dear, dear friends in the midst of the hobby that you've come to grow and love. Now, what the city group movement calls on, every one of us to do, is to define the area God has put us and say, that's where I'm gonna go be a minister.

That's my area, be limited. Don't try to save the whole city, just save a small. Just go forward and word indeed towards a small segment of the city. And then when you gather as a city group, talk about it.

[26 : 20] What's gone well, what's been hard? Who are the people in your life you're praying for? Invite the city group to pray with you alongside of them. An evangelism component, that's really the focus that we want to add to the heartbeat of the city group meeting.

All right, so here's some final takeaways, and we'll be done. If you're not going to city group, maybe tonight, think about it, consider it.

Consider it based on the simple fact that we see in the book of Acts, that there is a calling towards small groups, towards house to house fellowship, towards coin and nea that takes place throughout the city that God's put us in.

These are places, Lord willing, you can be known. You can be deeply known. Second, come to city group then with a mindset that God really has given you a ministry, and that you're expectant in that ministry, and that there's gonna be news, every single city group you come to, good news, about what's taking place in somebody's ministry in the midst of your city group.

Come expectant for that, have a mindset. Take on a mindset for that, the mindset of the book of Acts. Think about developing intra-community discipleship in even smaller groups than your city group.

[27 : 39] So one way to think about this is that you could define your community. You could say, some of you are, this is very in-house Saint Seas, but some of you are live in Leith, but you go to city group in Stockbridge, for example.

Where do you live? What part of the city do you live in? Do you live in Stockbridge, Newtown? Cumbly Bank, Inverleith, South Queensferry, Fairy Road, Trinity, Cannon Mills, Broughton, Leith, Easter Road, Old Town, Newington, Marchman, Newtown, Meadows, The Grange.

We could keep going, right? What subset? The city group covers a wide area, but you live in a community. And so within your community, who are the other people that you could even gather with in even tighter circles?

You could gather with just the few folks that live in your little section of the city and pray for your little section of the city. And talk about ministry in your little section.

And then you come to the city group and you talk with the bigger section of the city about all that might be going on. All right, so consider in your little section of the city, developing even smaller groups.

[28 : 43] Lastly, one more is to consider then, for the sake of the city group in the ministry, committing to things like prayer walk, prayer walking, praying, praying for your area.

But a prayer walk is a great way because on a prayer walk, you can go out and you can say, this is the area that I've seen God has put me, this building maybe, this whole neighborhood, and you can walk it and pray and surround it in prayer and lift it up to the Lord.

And it will help you, it will help grow you into the ministry mindset of the city group, the city vision, the movement that we seek. Now, the last word is this.

When I look at this, when I look at this, I say, I don't know. I don't know if I have time, I don't know if I can get that active prayer walks. I'm not sure about this yet.

And I'm not sure who wrote this, but I have it across many of my notes in different occasions. And I'm not sure the original author of the quote. But one author writes this, he says, do not waste time bothering whether you love your neighbor.

[29 : 54] So he says, don't start with the question, do I really love my neighbor? Instead, just act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets.

When you are behaving as if you love someone, you will presently come to love that person. And you say, you know, I don't know if I've really thought about my workplace, my neighborhood, my section of the city, as my ministry outpost.

And I don't know how much, we have mixed motives, oh boy, do I have a heart for that? And sometimes, sometimes we're being told here, the decision is just go love your neighbor even when you don't feel like it.

And you will presently come to love them. So wherever you live, wherever you work, wherever God has called you, who is your neighbor? Everybody around you, anyone and God has put into your life.

And the command is to love them, to seek them out. Where will you get the power for this? Lean into city group because your city group community will help, Christian friendship will help give you lower case P power to do this.

[31 : 08] But even more than that, the power underneath the power is to say tonight, is to see tonight. I can only go forth and love because he has first loved me.

To see tonight that Jesus Christ loved you to the uttermost, that Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ loved you when you were least lovely.

You know, he loved you, he knows you to the bottom, he knows everything about you, all the way to the bottom, to the secret sins in the misdeeds dark, and he loves you to the sky, he loves you right through it, right through the heart of the cross itself.

And that's where you get the power, that's where you get the power to say, I wanna love my neighbor, I want to go forth and love because I've been loved. And just like this morning, if you were here, we said, where are we gonna get this power?

Only by every single day, stepping across the threshold and contemplating the cross. Let's pray together. Lord, we ask that you would bless our city groups and we ask that you would turn our city groups into a movement.

[32 : 14] We give thanks that you've done that. We know of moments and times in our city groups where people have been stirred and come to faith, where evangelism has happened, where prayer groups have multiplied.

You've done this work, Lord. We're talking about it because you've already done it. And so we ask for more, we ask that in each of our hearts, we would give us a vision to see that city groups is a way of fulfilling the mission.

So give us deep, abiding Christian friendship, Lord, and a big heart to go out in word and deed ministry in our little community. And we pray this in Christ's name, amen.