

To Love God

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[0 : 00] Alright, we are in a series on our new vision statement here at St. Columbus, so we're looking at passages from where our vision statement comes, and we're in our fourth sermon on this, the third part of the vision statement.

So let me read, again, the vision statement to you, and it says this, St. Columbus and our family of church plants exist to seek a city-wide movement of the gospel by helping people find and follow Jesus, love God, and one another, and seek the peace of the city.

And so we've looked so far at what it means to seek a city-wide movement of the gospel, and to help people find and follow Jesus and be a witness unto that, that's the last couple of weeks, and then this week, the third piece of our vision is that we are called, every human is called, to respond to God's love expressed into the world by loving God in return.

So we want to help people in our city to love God. And so that's what we're focused on for a bit today. We read, Colin read for us a very classic text, Acts chapter 2, and I want to particularly look at the very end of it, verses 40 to 47, and this is the short summary of the earliest moment of the church.

So as soon as Jesus ascended into heaven, what you get in Acts 2, 40 to 47, is what the first church did. So the Holy Spirit came down in Acts 2 at Pentecost, and immediately we get to read what a church that's been filled by the Holy Spirit does.

[1 : 43] So this is what the first church ever in human history after Jesus's work was finished did. And so you could say the old theologians, the Puritans would talk about, this is what a church experiencing vivification does.

Vivification, the word to vivify means to make alive. And so when the Holy Spirit comes into your life, the life of the community of a city and makes people alive, they're vivified.

This is what they do. And that's where we get our word revival. Revivify, revivification, revival. And so another way to say it is anytime a citywide movement of the gospel happens, which is what we've been talking about, a revival happens, the church ought to and always will in some sense move back to what verses 42 to 47 says.

This is what a church filled by the Holy Spirit ought to look like. It's what the first church looked like. And so one way to say it is what you get here in 42 to 47 is the vital signs of a healthy church. It's a way to ask our questions. It's a way for us to look at St. Columbus, all of us as part of this church and ask, is this what we look like? Are we a church that's alive? Do we have the principles of what the first church filled by the Spirit had?

[3 : 04] And so that's what we see here. It's key for our vision. It's really the source of our vision statement. And so let's think about it. Peter preaches a sermon and then he says, he applies it.

That's what we're focused on, the application. And he says, flee from a crooked generation. That's the first thing he tells them. So that secondly, you can be a counterculture versus 42 to 47.

And then finally, if we're to summarize that in one phrase, it's that humanity, we are made to love God. So let's think about those three things. First, Peter says here, flee verse 40 to 41 from this crooked generation.

All right. We won't focus as much on the sermon Peter preached, the first sermon ever preached in the church that Colin read the first half of the passage. But if we were to summarize it, up to verse 39, Peter says, you crucified Jesus and God raised him up from the dead.

Therefore, repent and be baptized. And then in verse 41, he applies that and says, now it's time to save yourselves. The Greek actually says, be saved.

[4 : 19] Be saved from a crooked generation, a bent generation, a broken generation. Now what does he mean by that? That word generation is a word that could be translated also just as culture.

Be saved, when you say that Jesus, I crucified Jesus, but God raised him from the dead. And you repent and you seek baptism, you've immediately entered into a life where Peter says now, be saved from a crooked culture, a generation.

Now the reason it uses the word generation is because we do that too in modern English, don't we? We talk about the generations. We talk about baby boomers, Gen X, millennials, Gen Z, Gen Alpha, the most recent.

Gen Alpha are kids who were born from 2012 up till now. The age, the generation, the culture. The current culture, Gen Alpha is a culture who was born inside the technium.

They don't know a world without social media. They've never seen that. They don't know what it's like to have dial up internet or anything even before that. So we talk about generations still.

[5 : 35] That's exactly what this word is here. And Peter says, be saved from a crooked culture, a bent culture. Every single generation has good things and bad things about it.

So the baby boomer culture was a culture that rose up after World War II and experienced probably more change than any generation in human history maybe has ever experienced. And we talk about the millennial generation.

I am an elder millennial standing before you. And the elder millennials know that we transition from the age pre-computer, very earliest moments of our lives, were pre-computer right at the dawn of the computer age, right?

And then we could talk about Gen Z, the TikTok generation, and Gen Alpha, right? Different ways of qualifying the cultures that we've all grown up in. Now Peter says, if you experience the love of God in your life, flee, save yourself from the generation that you were raised in, from the cities, the bad things, the hard things, the sinful things about the culture that you were raised in.

In other words, he's saying, be awake to the fact that every single one of us are born into a world, into a city, into a town, into a culture where we naturally exist by walking in a stupor.

[6 : 52] You know, what's a stupor? A stupor is when you walk in a fog, you're just not conscious about the ways, the world, the culture, the time you live in, the social media you engage in, the Netflix you always come back to is changing you, is shaping you, that it is your discipler.

And he's saying, but when you see, when you say that Jesus Christ really did die and rise from the dead, he's saying now it's time to see it, to get out of the fog, to know that this world is shaping me in sinful ways and that God has now set me apart to be a counterculture for my city, to be different, to be a new community, to be part of a different genera, generation, culture than the one that I've grown up in, than the one that I've been trained in.

And that's what he means here. In other words, the question in verse 42 to 47 is what does humanity look like when it's been rescued from the sinful generations of every age?

And it looks like the church, it looks like the church had its best, it looks like the church vivified, made alive in the midst of revival, in the midst of a citywide movement of the gospel, that's what it looks like.

Now how do you enter into this countercultural movement? When he tells us in verse 38, he says right before, save yourselves, be saved from the crooked generation, he says the entrance is repentance and baptism.

[8 : 20] So if you want to be a part of the countercultural community and have a new vision, a fresh vision, a different way of seeing life in reality, he says the entrance into that is repentance and baptism.

And repentance, if you've been in the church for a long time, it's a word you've said so many times, but repentance means metanoia, it's a total change of heart and mind.

Repentance is not just a change of behavior, it's not just a change of the way you feel, it's actually a change of your mind, your intellectual life too. And so you might be a person who once said, I just don't know what to think about the claims of the resurrection of Jesus, and repentance is to say, I have changed my mind.

And so the change of the life of Jesus Christ really did rise from the dead, and I want to live my life in the light of that. And then he says also baptism. Repentance and baptism, this is an experience. There's a wonderful book that was written in the middle 20th century by, or maybe as late as the 70s, 80s by an author named Sheldon Van Alken.

[9 : 27] This is a forgotten classic of the 20th century, I think. It's called A Severe Mercy. This book absolutely rocked me when I first read it.

Sheldon Van Alken met his wife, Davy, that she was called, her real name was Jean, but they called her Davy. And they fell in love.

Sheldon and Davy were madly in love. They were the epitome of a modern romance story. And they described themselves as pagans, and they said this, we worshiped human love, we worshiped the spirits of the earth and the sky, we worshiped beauty, very much like most of the people in our modern city of Edinburgh.

And then they moved to Oxford in England, and they met C.S. Lewis. And this book is very famous because it has 18 letters between Sheldon and Davy and C.S.

Lewis that have never been published anywhere else that we didn't know about until Sheldon gave them to the world. And then this experience with C.S. Lewis, Davy, his Sheldon's wife, she came to faith in Christ, and Sheldon did not.

[10:39] And year after year after year, Sheldon describes his experience in this book as he interacts with Lewis, where Lewis is trying to bring him along to see the truth of Christianity.

And he writes, he says, I wanted to believe. Sheldon said that. And then one night, many years later in their marriage, one night, this is what he wrote, he said, one night I was staring into the fire, and I wondered with a strange mixture of hope and fear whether Christ might be in very truth my God.

My God. He said, suddenly I became aware that my wife Davy was praying beside me, and she had stolen into the room, she had snuck into the room, and her nightgown, and she knelt down by the sofa, and I looked at her, and I had never seen her pray before.

She paused a moment, and she said, oh, dearest, please believe, and moved to tears. I whispered back, oh, I do believe.

And when I said that, he writes, I was shaken by this affirmation that had swept over me. He said, I wondered that night. He looked in the fire, and he said, I wonder if Jesus could be my God.

[11:58] Not the God of the philosophers, but my God. And that's repentance. It's a change of mind. And then you come and you're baptized publicly, Peter says, and one New Testament scholar puts the entry into the counter-cultural community, the church, through baptism like this.

He says, the real enemy in the first century, after all, was not Rome, just like it's not the generation you live in. It's the powers of evil that stand behind human arrogance, that stand behind all violence, and on the cross, the kingdom of God triumphed over every single kingdom of this world by refusing to enter into the spiral of violence.

On the cross, Jesus loved his enemies. He turned the other cheek. He went the extra mile, and so the cross became an upside-down pattern.

It contradicts the way normal humans expect culture to go, because at the heart of the cross is costly forgiveness. The cross beckons a reversal of all values.

The world, the Roman Empire, said power, wealth, class superiority, recognition, these are the ultimate goods. And the cross subverted every culture of the age and created a counter-cultural community.

[13:17] When you go to be baptized, it's the moment where you say, I've entered a counter-culture, repentance and baptism. And so the church is a counter-culture.

The church is a new vision. The church is a place that's different from the culture of this world. And so secondly, what does that counter-culture look like? These are the vital signs of a healthy church, verse 42 to 47.

This is what to look for. Some of you today are here evaluating churches. You're in that phase right now in September. What do you look for in a church?

Acts chapter 2, verses 42 to 47, tells you exactly what to look for. And here it is. This is a glimpse of humanity under Christ. Now there's five. I'm only going to do two of them very briefly, but I'll list the other three we're not going to do for you very quickly.

And if you look down at the text, you can see in verse 42 to 47, it says they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship. That's the word *koinonia* in Greek, quite a famous word, and it means an intense devotion to community, to loving one another.

[14:23] And so in our vision statement next week, we will say that our calling is to love one another, intense commitment to the local community of the church, generous hospitality.

That's one of the aspects of healthy churches, the ministry of fellowship or hospitality, deep internal Christian friendship amongst the body. Also in, if you look down at verse 46, day by day they were attending the temple together and they're breaking bread in all their homes and they received their

food with glad and generous hearts, hospitality.

And then verse 47, they had favor with all people and the Lord was adding to their number day by day. Last week we looked at the ministry of evangelism or witness.

So the first church had a commitment to helping people day by day come to faith. They added to their number day by day. The ministry of evangelism, the ministry of witness by word.

And then just before that, they shared all their possessions with anybody who had need. And that's the ministry of mercy, the ministry of giving your stuff away because you've been changed by the gospel.

[15:26] Three ministries we won't talk about anymore today, the ministry of mercy, the ministry of evangelism, the ministry of fellowship or intense commitment to the local community. But let's talk about the other two for just a minute.

And you see in verse 42, they devoted themselves first to the apostles teaching. Now that word that Peter uses, sorry that Luke, the writer of this book uses, that verb they devoted themselves is a verb of extreme intensity.

So some scholars talk about this word as meaning intense perseverance through long segments of time. And so there's this verb of intensity, they intensely devoted themselves to the apostles teaching.

And what that means is that they were committed to growing in theological depth. So the very first thing we read about the first church filled by the Holy Spirit is it says they intensely devoted themselves to the apostolic teaching.

And that's found in the Bible. So we learn here that one of the marks of a healthy church, a spirit filled church is an intense devotion to theological depth and rigor, to the truth.

[16:42] And so what we see I think is that we should never apologize, never feel like there's a competition in the Bible and in the Christian life between the head and the heart.

Never. And if you go back to the sermon that Peter gave in chapter two about Jesus, one of the things you would notice is that the whole thing is structured as an argument.

So Peter says, know this, use your mind, and realize that Jesus was attested to you by signs and wonders that he fulfilled the conditions of the Old Testament Messiah ship that we've read about all throughout the Old Testament.

And he says, and listen, you crucified him, but he came back to life. He's talking about the empirical evidence, and he's saying the mind is never set against the heart in Christianity, not at all.

And instead what we have here is a commitment that a healthy church must be intensely devoted to theological depth, to teaching the whole of the scriptures, to exploring it.

[17:41] That means I think that we've got to see that the Bible teaches that oftentimes, most often, we are cut to the heart, verse 37, when we've worked through the mind.

So what does Peter do? He gives you a logical argument for believing in Jesus, and then in verse 37, the end of the sermon, he says, so they were cut to the heart.

And one of the dangers, I think, in our time is that we can become so anti-intellectual when it comes to words like theology, the hard things of God, the hard sections of scripture, that you may actually find that you're in a season of numbness, maybe to the things of the Lord, of being a little bit dull with the gospel.

And that may be because of thinking everything is so simple. And instead what we have in scripture is a gospel, a good news that a child can understand, that a child can enter into, and at the same time, depths that, well, the famous quote, it's often attributed to Augustine, but it was Gregory the Great who said that the gospel, the good news, the scripture is shallow enough that a lamb can wade, and deep enough that an elephant can swim.

And oftentimes when you realize that, that a five-year-old can understand the gospel, amazing, but boy, there is depth to the gospel, dimensions to the gospel that you will never understand.

[19:12] And when you realize that, the theological depth, the rigor, that is what strikes your heart all over again. It's realizing that theology is nothing but the pursuit of the knowledge of God in all its depths, and to know the world and the light of all that God has said about the world.

You realize, boy, there is so much I don't know. And it's realizing how much you don't know that cuts you to the heart to say, look at the God of the gospel.

Wow, amazing. I love, we'll move on to the second one. I love how Peter, who preached the sermon also in his second letter, he says that the Bible is sometimes difficult to understand.

So the Bible says the Bible is sometimes hard to understand. So John 3.16, very famous, 2 Peter 3.16, easy to remember.

And in 2 Peter 3.16, Peter says, I know that you've read Paul's letters, and sometimes Paul is hard to understand. That's what he says. The Bible says the Bible can be difficult at times to understand. [20 : 15] Ah, but yes, theological depth. Diving in intense devotion, that's our calling. Now the second and final thing we'll say today is we see here also, they devoted themselves to the apostolic teaching, intense devotion.

And then it says, and notice the definite article in each of these lines, the, the, the, they devoted themselves versus 42 to the apostolic teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers.

And the reason that the definite article is there, the, the, the, is because it's talking about, it's talking about liturgy, as we say, it's talking about formal worship.

The apostolic teaching is the opening of the Bible in public worship. The breaking of bread is what? It's the Lord's Supper. It's the meal of the people. The prayers is the Lord's prayer.

It's the formal prayers of God's people gathered together. The fellowship is the gathering on Sundays, on the Sabbath day. So what we learn here, intense devotion to theological rigor, secondly, and then secondly, an intense devotion to worship.

[21 : 24] What's the, what's the life of a healthy church? It's a devotion to coming and worship, to breaking of bread, to the prayers, the ministry of worship. And in verse 43 it says that all, this word all or holy fear came upon every single person as they gathered.

And so we see here that there's a commitment to the ministry of worship where holy fear, reverence, and joy comes upon God's people as they gather.

And so here at St. Columbus, in our values, we say that we long for joyful Sundays, holy worship, all in reverence coming upon the people.

Now we'll move to the close. What tends to happen is the personality of, every single one of us has a different personality to some degree.

And churches all tend to have different personalities as well. And what can often happen when all of us gather with different personalities, the church takes on a certain personality, and we tend to think, we tend to become a church that has only one or two of these five emphases.

[22 : 36] And so if we did this exercise, probably we could talk about the theology church in town, which I know has sometimes been attributed here.

The theology church, people talk about the community church, the place where there's just an intense devotion to the community. People talk about the worship experience church in town. People talk about the social justice church, the mercy church.

People talk about the evangelism church, the place that does the biggest best evangelism. And when you come to Acts chapter two, 42 to 47, what you learn is that the only right answer is yes.

All five, a commitment to worship, to evangelism, to witness by word and deed, to the fellowship of the saints, a deep intense commitment to communion, and all of that grounded by theological rigor. And it will always be the case that a church will tend towards one or the other, and it will always be the case that revival, revivification, a movement of the Holy Spirit means bringing us back to balance, bringing us back to all five.

[23 : 43] And this is the heart of where our vision statement comes from. And so let me close with this thirdly. If we were to summarize these vital signs of a healthy church, a spirit-filled church, we'd get here a glimpse of new humanity where we could simply say it like this, God calls us.

We realize the love of God, we realize we were made to return God's love for us with our love for God. And that's the way we do that. These five areas, these five ministries, how do you love God? You do it through worship, witness by word, witness by deed, an intense devotion to God's people and a love for the apostolic teaching.

To love God, that's how it's expressed here. There's a writer in Virginia, Catherine Sonderrager, and she writes a lot about God's love. I love what she says about it.

She says, love is the lesson that the Lord has taught us, that we should love God and love one another because he first loved us.

[24 : 44] And then she says this, first John teaches us, along with the rest of the Bible, that we do not know God if we overlook or turn aside from divine love, if we do, we have missed the centerpiece of the fiery heart of the living God.

And then she writes, can we imagine, can we imagine that we could live as those unscathed, unhard by divine love, loveless citizens of an icy cold and indifferent world, and yet say that we know God?

The truth, who is God, is not within our minds, should we be loveless, even as the living one is not in our hearts or in our deeds. What is love?

What is God's love for us? How do you describe it? You remember what Farner said, they said, I want to know what love is, right?

And you come to the Bible, you say, I want to know what love is, I want you to show me. The apostolic teaching, I want to know, I want to find out. And I think for most of us, we find that answer more in Elton John.

[26 : 00] Can you feel the love tonight, the Lion King? That's where we get our answer. That for us, most often, love is just a feeling. It's a chemical, it's a brain synapses firing.

That's what most of the people in the modern world think about love, it's the way you feel. It's romantic. And when you come to the Bible, what you find out is that the love of God is not primarily expressed first in the noun, but actually in a verb.

And there is one little line in this passage that conveys that to you, and it's so easy to pass over, but it's in verse 39 that headlines this whole counter-cultural movement.

And in verse 39, Peter says, the promise of the Spirit is for all of those who God has called to himself.

And that's love being described. And it's love being given to us, the love of God in the language of pursuit. The love of God, all those God calls to himself.

[27 : 02] And if you go from Genesis to Revelation, what you see is that the love of God is, of course it's a noun, of course he feels love, of course he has affection, but boy, we primarily see it in this verb, this action, this agency that he takes up in chasing us, in pursuit, in calling us to himself.

And you can think about all the metaphors in the Bible like Luke 15, where the woman flips her house over to find one coin, where the shepherd goes out for the one lamb when he has 99 others, where the father in reckless love runs out to his prodigal son to say, I want you to come home, I want you to come to the feast.

You can think of the types and shadows of this love of pursuit in the Bible like when Ruth clung to Naomi and said, wherever you go, I will go, I will not let go of you.

Or when Jonathan clung to David and gave away his armor to David because of friendship, every single one of these moments is a type and a shadow of the radical verbal love of God which is pursuit love, chasing love.

And here we learn that when the Spirit comes into your life and you with Sheldon Van Aak and say, could Jesus really be my God? It is because God has chased you.

[28 : 20] It is because the love of God has pursued you all the way to the bottom. And let me just leave you with one moment from Peter's sermon. The love of God, Peter says in verse 23 and 24 that it was the definite plan and foreknowledge of God from before eternity that you would crucify Jesus and that God would raise him from the dead.

Now when he says you crucified Jesus, he is talking to all sorts of people that are gathered in the city of Jerusalem 50 days after the crucifixion.

And so many of them actually were not physically present for the crucifixion. He's talking to thousands of people that were not there the day that Jesus was crucified.

And yet he says you, in English it's hard to see because it actually says y'all crucified him. That's the best way to say it. Y'all crucified him.

You crucified him. It's the plural. He's saying to people that weren't physically there, you crucified him. Y'all crucified him. You know what he's saying?

[29 : 32] He's saying human beings of 2024, you crucified him. Everybody, your sin put him there. Your evil put him on the cross.

And you see repentance is when it's that personal when you can say the love of God has so chased after me that I can say I crucified him yet God raised him from the dead for me.

That's the love of God for you. The ministry of worship, the ministry of fellowship, the ministry of witness by word and deed and the ministry of intense theological devotion is the way we respond to God with our love for him because he loved us all the way to the point of death.

And so our counter-cultural vision, taking up this counter-cultural vision, your love for God is not the means of your salvation, not at all.

Not love for you is the means of salvation. And yet the measure of your growth in this life, the measure of your love for God, your love for God I should say, is the measure of your joy in this life, of your growth, of your sanctification, of being changed, of taking on a counter-cultural movement, the church, the life of the church.

[30 : 44] Let's pray. Father, we ask that you would raise up a counter-culture and we ask, Lord, that it would start today, right here with us, that we would be changed by the power of the gospel.

And so we ask, Lord, that we would just taste as we sing to close a bit of your love for us, that we would be changed by it. And that in response to it, I pray that someone here would know the sweetness of repentance on the one hand, the joy of baptism perhaps if they've never been baptized on the other, and from that, that they would enter in, we would enter in together to a counter-cultural vision expressed in seeking a citywide movement of the gospel.

And so change our hearts, Lord. Don't leave us the same. We pray and we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.