

A City Centre Church

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[0 : 00] This morning we're starting a new series called Vision and Values, and this is a very basic who we are and why we are.

This is a DNA series, and Derek and I thought it would be a good time to do it as we, Lord willing, and we've said this before, take steps towards normalcy and enter into Lord willing endemic stage and not pandemic stage.

It's a good time, we've got a lot of new faces and we want to revisit who we are as a church and why we're here in Edinburgh, and so we're going to do that in this series. Let me read to you our vision statement as we begin this new series, and it's this, we long to be a healthy city center church committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ in for Edinburgh in worship, community, discipleship and mission.

Now there is a real danger when you do something like a vision series of taking a vision statement and then going and hunting for that vision statement in the Bible, and we want to be careful not to do that, we want to actually let the Bible tell us what we're here for, and the elders have done a really good job over the years of crafting a vision for our church that has been exegeted, pulled out of the Bible and not put into the Bible.

So what we're going to do in this series is today look at the fact that we are a city center church committed to the gospel for Edinburgh, and then weeks two to five, how that works in worship, community, discipleship and mission.

[1 : 47] So we're going to come to the book of Acts for each one of those and see how Acts helps us to realize that vision. Luke wrote the book of Acts as he did the gospel of Luke, and he gives us a picture of what the first church is like, and while it's descriptive, the book of Acts also informs us because it is God's word to what we should be like even in the 21st century.

And so that's what we're doing in this series today. We're looking at Acts 11. Acts 11 offers us is exemplary, I think, of a model and a mission for a city center church in particular.

So let's look at those two things this morning, a model and the mission that we've been given. So first the model. If you have a copy of the text, you can see down in verse 19, the very first verse we read, it says, those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen.

Acts 11 is picking back up from a story that had happened in chapter seven and eight, and then there was a pause to look at the conversion of Saul, and we're coming back in Acts 11 to the end of chapter eight.

And what happened was that Saul, the text tells us was actually ravaging and raging over hunger for murdering the early Christians.

[3 : 12] The text uses verbs that are often used in Greek of an animal that's slobbering like a wolf. He hated Jesus and his church so much that he wanted to kill the early Christians.

In Acts chapter seven and the beginning of eight, he does that. He travels just north of Jerusalem to Judea, and he institutes the execution of Stephen, who was the first martyr of the church and one of the first deacons.

And what happened is exactly the opposite of what Saul had hoped for. In the early church for the first several hundred years, there was a common phrase that Christians would use, and that was that the sea, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, and a martyr is a person who bears witness to the facts of the gospel all the way to the point of death.

And when Saul murdered Stephen, the blood of the martyr became the seed of the church. It did not do what Saul had hoped and crush this insurrection of religion that was happening in Jerusalem instead.

It did two things. It emboldened the early Christians. They saw Stephen and thought that man believed in the resurrection, and they were emboldened and they had more courage.

[4 : 31] And then it also forced them to scatter. And so Saul killing Stephen spread the gospel to the other cities for the first time.

And that's actually very important because at the very beginning of the book of Acts, Luke gives something of a thesis statement for what the book of Acts is all about.

And it comes out of Jesus' mouth. He says, you are to be my witnesses. You are to take the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Acts 11 is day one of the gospel moving outside of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

And we are on year 1991 now of the same mission. And the reason the church in Edinburgh exists today is because Saul murdered Stephen and it spread the gospel to Antioch.

[5 : 32] And Antioch became the hub city for the mission to what we call Europe. And so we come to Acts 11 today because Acts 11 is a pivotal moment that's describing how Antioch becomes the Gentile mission city center church hub.

The man who started it all by killing Stephen will become the great missionary that the Antioch and church commissions for three different missionary journeys. And it's the background to why we exist here today.

So it's an exemplary passage. And what happens here, it's picking back up this story. And at the very beginning you see in verse 19 and 20 that when these Christians flee from Jerusalem and Judea, they go to Antioch.

And there are in this time Aramaic speaking Jews, which was the common language for Jews in Jerusalem. And there were Greek speaking Jews.

And the Aramaic speaking Jews go to Antioch and they preach to the Jews in the Jewish sector of the city and the synagogue there as they always did. The gospel, they were wrestling these three chapters before.

[6 : 44] They're all about how the gospel is for more than just the Jew, but also the Gentile. And they're awakening to that. And it's almost as if we're told here in verse 20, but there were some from some Christians, some Jewish Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene who really just didn't know better.

And they go to Antioch and they're Greek speaking. The New Testament calls them Hellenists. And they start telling the gospel to the Greeks and Gentiles and Romans in Antioch.

And all of a sudden the Gentile church along with the Jewish church, the Christian church comes together and booms and spreads throughout Antioch. And this is really the first moment that there is a blossoming of a Gentile Christian community within the first century.

It's when the church goes to Antioch and these Greek speaking Jews start to tell everybody, not just Jewish people about the gospel. And Antioch, why Antioch?

And that's the point here. Antioch was the Roman military and administrative capital of the East of the Roman Empire. And this time they called Antioch the Queen of the East.

[8 : 01] And it's very important to understand that the population in the first century was much less than half the world population today, the world population.

And Antioch has, it's estimated by most scholars, more than 500,000 people in its city. Meaning that it's the same size as Edinburgh, but it's in a time when there's about 30 to 40% of the global population as we have today.

Meaning this is Tokyo. This is Beijing. This is Paris. This is one of the massive metropolitan centers of the entire world. It's the, probably maybe the third largest city in the world.

It's definitely the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. And it was very famous because it was the center for trade for the whole East.

It connected to the Eastern part of the world as far as trade had come at that point. It was multi-ethnic. It was highly international and it was divided actually into ethnic sectors.

[9 : 06] So there would be actual walls throughout the city that divided different people groups from each other. There was a Jewish sector with its synagogue. And that's where we see the Aramaic speaking Jews go to tell the gospel for the first time.

But then there was a sector that had a temple at the center, a cultic center to Apollo and Daphne, Roman and Greek gods and goddesses. There was a sector that was the product of old Assyrian descendants that worshiped particularly Assyrian gods and goddesses.

And there were more than that. The city was highly divided and bifurcated between different people groups. And it was very famous that we have copies of first century poetry dedicated to Antioch that sing about its great immorality, that it's famous throughout all the lands for how wicked and immoral and dirty it was at its city center.

It was very, very much known for its public baths, which meant everything you could imagine and theaters and all sorts of public idolatry, public sin.

It was very famous in those ways. And this is where the church moved. From Jerusalem, the great hub, the mother city where Christ's gospel happened next to Antioch preaching the gospel along the way as they arrived as they made their way to Antioch.

[10 : 36] But Antioch becomes actually more than Jerusalem, the hub for the Christian mission for the rest of the book of Acts and really for the whole first century. One scholar, one New Testament scholar, he says this, the Christians, they are called the vision and Antioch of an empire wide mission.

Paul would be the one who would carry it out and Antioch would be the sponsoring church for the great missionary journeys. Antioch becomes the hub for the mission to the Gentiles for the mission to the end of the earth.

That means that that acts 11. And what we see here is actually exemplary of a model for what it looks like to be a people, the people of God on mission to the ends of the earth.

And New Testament scholars have talked a lot about how in the book of Acts, there's a very clear emphasis throughout the whole on the movement of the gospel from city center to city center.

And there is a debate about this amongst scholars on the book of Acts, but the majority agree that there's a very clear emphasis in the history and in Luke's writing and in what God has offered us to show that there is a model for city to city, city center to city center movement of the gospel.

[12 : 04] Okay, so let me just lay that out very briefly before we move on to looking at the mission. And that's this first. And I've said it. The apostles very clearly move the church from city center to city center from Jerusalem to Antioch to Thessalonica to Corinth to Athens, but ultimately Paul desires, as you know, to get to Rome to take the gospel all the way to Caesar's household.

And that's where the book ends. And remember, the book of Acts has no ending. It ends without an ending. And you're wondering, why is there no ending to the book of Acts? There's no conclusion. That's because Paul took the gospel to the city center of Rome to Caesar's household.

And we're left saying, okay, now we're to fill in the rest. We're to keep going. We're to take it to all the other cities to go everywhere that Paul ended.

We're to take the lead, the church is to take the lead from there. But actually, we've got to be very careful because there's a temptation in that emphasis of the gospel moving from city center to city center to say, well, what about the suburban as we call it?

The rural. And in no way is this model at the neglect or expense of the suburban or the rural. Instead what we see is that Paul will go to the city center and then he fans out.

[13 : 22] And he establishes churches in the suburban, if you can call it that, and then the rural communities. One great example of this is in Acts 14, verses six to seven.

Paul is preaching in a smaller city, the city of Iconium, and like many times he is under severe persecution and he's forced to flee.

And this is what it says. He says he fled to Lystra, Derby, the cities of Iconia, and then to the countryside. And he went throughout the countryside preaching the gospel.

And so he moves from the major city to each of the small cities and then to the countryside and visits all the rural establishments preaching the gospel and establishing the church in all of those places.

Now why is it like this? And it's very simple. And there's lots of conjectures and there's lots of thought. But why a philosophy of ministry like this? Well, because number one, Jesus Christ came into the world to save people.

[14 : 21] And you've got to go where the people are. And that's why they go to Antioch because there are 500,000 people. There is a population that makes up such a large percentage of the Roman Empire.

And so first off, they simply go where the people are. And then secondly, the city centers would have a diversity of people and enough people coming in every single day from outside that the gospel would spread very easily from the city center out.

And so in the city center, you have the poor and you have the middle classes and you've got the rich. And you've got the government officials and the artists and the poets and the scholars and you've got the immigrants and the refugees and the kings and the emperors and the politicians and the magistrates and the university professors and every single different type of people need the gospel.

And so it's in the city center that you find every single type of people with the possibility that those people will move and fan out from there and take the gospel to all the different places.

And so very clearly in the book of Acts, wanted to get to Rome. He wanted to go to Caesar's household. He even tells Timothy in his letter to Timothy, encourage the church to pray for the king, the emperor, so that you may know peace in the land, meaning pray that the king would believe on Jesus so that the Christian church would know peace.

[15 : 46] He wants Caesar, he wants the power of Caesar to know the power of the gospel. And so that's the model. Now secondly and lastly here, very simply, we've already said it, then the city center churches often would form hub mission churches that would be interested in sending people out everywhere to plant, to take the gospel to other places.

There was a deep relationship to the mother church in every single one of these episodes. And we see that here when Jerusalem hears about what's happening in Antioch, they say we've got to send somebody.

So they send Barnabas and Barnabas goes up, he trains the Christians that have become Christians. He makes sure there's a pastor in place. He rejoices with them. He stays with them. He recruits Paul.

Barnabas recruits Paul and then prepares to send Paul out on his missionary journeys. Antioch becomes a hub for church planning all across the Roman Empire. Now we here want to, if you've been around Sanctis for a while, you know we long and we are a church planting church by God's grace.

And we want to participate in that biblically driven model. And it's so important today to see this model afresh because in 1900, in the year 1900, the turn of the 20th century, 14% of the world population lived in an urban context, 14.

[17 : 19] In 1968, we reached a point where 50% of the world population lived in a city. And in 2011, 75% of the world population lived in a city.

If the numbers stay as they are in 2050, there will be more people living in cities than there is currently in the world right now.

More people living in cities in 2050 in urban centers than there is a world population today. And so many of us are very aware of the urbanization of the world that has happened over the last century.

And Edinburgh and Glasgow both, Edinburgh and Glasgow both are growing about one half percent per year in, which means 26 to 32,000 Edinburgh and Glasgow.

26,000 people are moving to Edinburgh every year, new people. And Scotland's population remains stagnant, which means that it's urbanizing.

[18 : 23] People are coming to Edinburgh and Glasgow about 30,000 every single new people year. And so as more people come, more Christians are needed. And we want to see more Christians rise up and we want to see more ministry happen and we want to see more churches.

And that's why we've shown this video today about the healthy church hopes and the 30 by 30 hopes for planting 30 churches by 2030. It's right here in the book of Acts.

It's a model. Now, at the same time, we could talk about this and really miss the point, which is the mission.

So let's let's think briefly about the mission that's also here. What does it mean? We are a city center church, but we're a church committed to the gospel in and for Edinburgh.

What does it mean to be in and for Edinburgh committed to the gospel? Acts 11 also shows us there's lots to say here. Let me just draw up four things briefly that acts 11 points us to what it means to be for Edinburgh.

[19 : 24] First, we've got to be a gospel, we're called, I think, in this chapter to be a gospel, sharp church. In verse 19 and 20, we're told very clearly, whether it was Jerusalem, Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch, they moved and they preached the gospel.

This is very simple, but the emphasis, the mission was the gospel, the proclamation of the gospel. So we've got to be to put it in this terminology, gospel, sharp.

This week marks one year anniversary of a surgery that I had to have February 12th of 2021.

Now some of you have had much more major surgeries than the surgery I had, but I did. I had to have six incisions in my abdomen for it. And you know, when you, if you're a person today that's had a surgery or you're facing something like that, when you, when that happens, you start thinking about the details of medical procedure unlike you in a way that you never had before.

And you want to know, you know, what are the instruments that are being used? How many times has the doctor done this? Have you always been successful?

[20 : 41] Right? I want to know numbers, I need to see stats, all of it. And one of the most simple things that you think about when you're facing surgery perhaps is that most of the time when you're wielding a knife, you really don't want it to be razor sharp.

You know, when you're slicing butter, when you put a knife in your child's hand to put butter on toast, you don't want that thing to be razor sharp, not at all.

But when, when the surgeon's coming, you, you want to know who sharpened the scalpel, you know, is it ready? Because what is the surgeon doing?

The surgeon is trying to cut you with the most sharp possible blade. Why? Because in cutting you with great precision, you're, you have a much better chance of healing perfectly.

Right? And with a great, great scalpel, he can go in and he can pull out the rot and the death and the disease and put it all back together again. Now, now the gospel is a sword, the word of the Lord, the word of the gospel is a, is a sword that pierces to the division of, of soul and bone marrow, but it is not a sword that kills.

[21 : 54] It is a surgeon's scalpel and it is sharp. It is razor sharp. It goes down all the way in order to pull out the rot and the power of the gospel can do that. We as a citizen, as a city center church, what does it mean to be for the city?

It means that we have to be gospel sharp, meaning that we have to actually know the gospel, which is God's great scalpel with sharp, sharp precision.

Now the gospel is that we are saved by Jesus Christ to work and not our work. And that, and that the gospel is good news, not good advice.

And it is that God has reconciled a people to himself because of Christ's free finished and costly work, not to us be glory and not by our works of righteousness.

Can we get in, but only by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has God offered the forgiveness of sins to the world. And that's the, the basic gospel. And what it means to be gospel sharp is that we've got to know that gospel really well, because if we're fuzzy about it to the right or to the left, we lose its power.

[23 : 07] And for example, you can go to the right of the gospel by being a religious legalist, by maybe talking about Jesus, but also having too much of an emphasis on, on works to the point where your morality becomes the thing that actually saves you.

That would be to move to the right, but there's also moved to the left. There's a legalism that's to the left. And Tim Keller calls it humanitarian legalism. And that's where we become a community that says, you know, we're all about gathering people together and we are, and we're all about cutting through the animosity that exists in our society.

And we want to see the different races and ethnic people groups come together and we want to see male and female come together, not an enmity with one another, Genesis three. We want to see rich and poor come together.

And there's a way of missing the gospel with that message. There's a way, in other words, to put it like this, secondly, we've got to let not only know the gospel well, but let everything else we do in worship, community, discipleship, and mission be gospel soaked and saturated, be founded by the gospel.

In other words, we love here at St. Columbus hospitality. And one of the reasons Heather and I loved this church from top to bottom when we moved here in 2013 was because we were so well loved by your hospitality.

[24 : 35] And we've come back in part because of that. And it's a unique place that has deep affection for one another. But there's a way of saying, you know, we love hospitality.

We love to bring people together and forgetting why. Why is it that we love hospitality? We love hospitality. We love hospitality because in Christ's death and resurrection, God has gathered a people once scattered by sin and set against one another by the power of the cross of Jesus Christ.

We love hospitality because in our hospitality, we say, I want you to experience the grace of the gospel like I've experienced, no matter who it is.

I want the sin and animosity that has separated us to be no more because of Jesus Christ, because of his death and resurrection, because we can turn to one another and say, he saved a wretch like me.

You too. You too. We can come together no matter what background American and Scott and English and wherever you might come from, whatever ethnicity might be and say, you too, you've experienced the power of this gospel.

[25 : 44] We've got to be gospel sharp and gospel soaked because otherwise we might just be humanitarian, a humanitarian social club.

But instead we're called here to be gospel sharp. Now secondly, and much more briefly, we've got to be an empty and hungry church. Acts 11 teaches us that.

You see here that the power of the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem to Antioch was the power. Where was it?

In part, it was subjective. It was that all these Christians saw Stephen martyred and they were actually emboldened. And so they would go preach, but the objective power, the real the power underneath the power were told very clearly in verse 21, the hand of the Lord was with them.

And we said it twice this morning already, we can build things, but unless the Lord be the real builder, we will build in vain. We've got to be empty as we take the gospel to the city before God and say without the hand of the Lord, this will not work.

[26 : 55] And so we've got to be hungry and ask God for that. That means we talk a lot around here about revival and revival is revival.

What is revival? Revival is simply an intensification of the work of the Holy Spirit through the normal means of grace, through preaching and prayer and witness and good work and intensification of the work of the Spirit where he chooses, he desires to bring an unusual amount of people into God's kingdom at one time.

That's a revival. And revivals, if you look at revivals throughout history, the precondition of revival is always the same. Revivals happen most often in history when people spend seasons before God and intense kingdom focused prayer.

And so this text says, without the hand of the Lord, we cannot do this. And so we've got to be big, bold, intense kingdom centered prayer people. Thirdly, afford.

Acts 11 calls us also to be a city center church. Why does it, how does it do that? How are we called? Why are we called to be a city center church? And the answer is very simple because we are a city center church.

[28 : 10] One of us planted St. Columbus. We received it and we're here and we are a city center church. We're on the royal mile and there are all sorts of audiences out there, students, tourists, university professors, the poor, the middle class, the wealthy, the immigrant, the refugee that come into the royal mile and into our church quite often.

And so we're called, we're called to do something very important with the gospel message and that's to contextualize. Now very, very quickly, let me show you this.

In verse 21, it says that when the Hellenists go into Antioch to preach, they preached the Lord Jesus. And that's a very key phrase because if you look at the way it's written every time the Christians take the gospel to the Jews, it doesn't say Lord Jesus.

It says they talked of the Christ. Why? Because the Christ is the word for Messiah, the anointed one. Meaning the Jews knew the Old Testament and so they contextualized.

They went to the synagogue and said, let me tell you about the one that your Old Testament tells you about. But when they came to the Greeks who didn't know the Old Testament, they spoke of the Lord Jesus because that word Lord in Greek is Kyrios.

[29 : 30] In Kyrios, the word Lord is the word that was very commonly used to refer to the emperor of Rome. And the emperor of Rome demanded that he be called Lord.

And you see what they're doing. They're saying, yes, you call this Caesar Lord. You Greek, you Roman, you Gentile. But I'm here to tell you that there is a greater Lord who's truly divine and it's Jesus.

And you see everywhere they took the gospel to every sector, they would contextualize. And contextualizing is not giving people what they want to hear.

But it's telling the truth, showing how the Bible answers the questions people are asking in a way that they can hear it. And we see that very clearly.

And how do we do that? That's a long answer. We hope to treat that on Wednesday nights in the next series. But we're called to be a city center church that speaks the gospel in every context that God has put each of us and as a community to the audiences that God has put us in front of in a way that they can hear it.

[30 : 38] Fourth and finally, Acts 11 teaches us that we've got to be abroad and not a narrow church. Very simply, in verse 22, we mentioned this earlier, Jerusalem heard what was happening in Antioch and they sent Barnabas.

And they said, we have got to be connected to this. And we've got to train the Antioch and church and we've got to support them. And Barnabas as an elder of Jerusalem becomes the planter in a way in Antioch, the establish or the pastor, and he sends out Saul Paul from that.

Now, a narrow church is an insular is a church that is insular and really disinterested in the work of other churches. It's one that is so interested in the particular institution of their church that they're not interested in what's happening in other places where God's hand might really be moving.

And what we learn here is that the church in Acts was always a Catholic church. Now don't run out on me on that. Not Roman Catholic, not at all, but truly Catholic.

The word Catholic in the Nicene Creed, it says the church is one holy Catholic and apostolic, meaning Catholic is just a word that means universal, everywhere, connected. What does it make?

[32 : 00] How do you get into that church? Believe in Jesus by faith. That Jesus Christ is your savior, you're a member of the universal church everywhere. And so a broad church sees that because the church goes everywhere, we want to celebrate what God is doing anywhere where God's hand is clearly powerful.

And so we want to go and plant churches and if we see a place where God's hand is powerful, we want to celebrate it, we want to send resources. We want to be a city center church that looks for the connections that the gospel makes all around.

First in Edinburgh, then in the surrounding communities, Haddington and Winchborough, and then all of Scotland. And we see the calling here to be a broad church, not a narrow church. That means that we are called to really lean into as empty, yet hungry people are calling to be a city center community for the gospel because, because, and this is the last sentence, because the gospel is the power of salvation.

And the gospel of Jesus Christ alone is the power of salvation to anybody who would believe, to the Jew and to the Greek. So let's pray and ask that God would do a great work.

Father, we ask that you would stir us up as a city center community, that we would be moved in love for our great city and for this, this land, Scotland and for the United Kingdom and for the world, Lord.

[33 : 36] And so we ask today that you would create a clean and affected heart within us by the power of the spirit as we turn to sing now of your great gospel.

And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.