

Austin City Life Partners Class

Why A Partners Class?

1. Why Partners not Members? Some churches do members classes; we have a Partners Class. The reason we call it a Partners class is that we believe the church is a partnership of Spirit-led disciples who follow Jesus. The church isn't a country club bound by exclusive membership; it's a missional community bound together by the gospel. Everyone is invited to be a partner. **It's about responsible partnership, not exclusive relationships.**
2. Three Reasons for a Partners Class
 - o **Cultivate Community:** lets us get to know one another more intimately, ask questions. It also allows us to shepherd you more effectively, so you aren't just some random person in a seat (1 Tim 5:9; 2 Cor 2:6-7).
 - o **Clarify the Gospel:** allows us to communicate clearly the gospel of Christ and what we consider essential and non-essential doctrines of the church.
 - o **Communicate Mission:** fosters sense of mission through ACL vision and explore how you can fit into that mission.
3. What to expect: In addition to Gospel, Community, & Mission, we will:
 - o Share the History and Vision of Austin City Life.
 - o Upon completion of the class we will not issue certificates. We will ask that your City Group Leader indicate your participation in the life and mission of your community. Your participation is evidence that you are, indeed, a partner in our mission.

Class Overview

I. Story, Vision & Values

Story of Austin City Life

The Vision of ACL

The Values of ACL

II. Gospel

Doctrine

Three Gospel Perspectives

What the Gospel Isn't

Repentance and Faith

III. Community

City Groups

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Missio Dei

Peoples & Cultures

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Why Partner?

THE VISION

The Story of Austin City Life

The vision of ACL started in downtown Boston, during a worship service. I turned to one of my best friends and whispered into his ear, “How about we plant a church in downtown Boston?” That was (2002). Here we are in *Austin* six years later, 2008. In the years that followed, that vision grew, transformed, withered, and was reborn. These were the seminary years, GCTS just north of Boston in a highly educated, secularist part of the country. A place where we had all four seasons, our first child, and many conversations about church planting. Robie put me through seminary working some of the ugliest and best jobs in downtown Boston, from selling Yellow Page ads door to door to serving people with muscular diseases as the Event Planner for the MDA.

This is all relevant because it’s where the story of this church began, with a family, in a secularist city, with a dream about how the gospel could change the social and spiritual fabric of cities all over the world. During these years I was leading teams over to SE Asia to do ethnographic research among the Shan-Dai, a folk Buddhist people, to inform OMF church planting strategies on the ground. The Shan-Dai are less than 1% Christian. During these trips I learned more about the Shan-Dai than I knew about Bostoners. It forced me to apply my Anthropology degree with redemptive focus, and during this time God expanded my missionary zeal beyond the nations to return to America, an unexpected sort of homecoming, the last place I thought I would serve Christ. Little did I know that it would boomerang all the way back to Texas, a state I had virtually sworn off to the Southern Baptists. I began to dream of a church that reached well-educated, secularist Bostoners and reconcile them to a pocket of Jews, Muslims and Hispanics in Allston-Brighton. We began gathering some people around us to dream with, to build community with, to eventually serve the city with. Those were sweet months, but they were in preparation for Austin, not Boston.

After surrendering the church plant to pastor a Korean-American Presbyterian church, I made a trip to Austin to interview for a pastoral position. After eating at Shady Grove, reading Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class*, praying for Austin from Mt. Bonnell, and resuming conversations with Robie, I began to feel a pull to Austin.

Once we made the decision to plant in Austin, we left Boston within a week! We parachuted into Riverside and got a two bedroom apartment, I worked a full-time job, we had Ellie, and began to learn from the city, get to know other church leaders, and begin to develop Austin-sensitive church planting strategies. That was November 2006. By July 2007 we had gathered about a dozen people to dream with us. We began meeting weekly by cultivating our community on meals and vision. A few months later about 15 of us committed to translating the vision of ACL into reality. We committed to one another to live out the vision of Austin City Life and a Jesus-centered, city-focused church was birthed. The following months were filled with shared meals, mission, vision, and life. We hung with the homeless, cleaned up the Ronald

McDonald House, spent time with our neighbors, all in an attempt to bring the gospel to bear on Austin. We began to live missional lives, to be a small missional church. As we grew, we organized ourselves into City Groups and eventually into public gatherings. In January 2008, Jonathan went full-time with ACL in order to devote more attention to growing, shepherding and leading the church. In April we began public gatherings at the Hideout Theatre.

Before Robie and I moved to Austin, we developed a family vision statement: ***To cultivate communities of Spirit-led disciples who redemptively engage peoples and cultures through Christ for the glory of God.*** We hashed this out through conversations, though she didn't always know I was documenting this stuff. This vision became the vision of our church. I think it is incredibly appropriate that a family vision statement became a church vision statement, because the church is a family, brother and sisters, a body of which Christ is the Head. The church is not buildings and programs; it is a *community* of Spirit-led followers of Jesus Christ. So what does this vision mean? This vision can be simplified into three main areas: Gospel Community, and Mission. Can you identify the parts?

Vision

Cultivating communities of Spirit-led disciples who redemptively engage peoples and cultures through Christ for the glory of God.

Community: *cultivating communities of Spirit-led disciples*

What has been your experience of community? I've been a part of great theological churches that were terrible at community. Something's wrong with that. The theologically rich church should be a community rich church. Your richest experience of community shouldn't be AA, college ministry, or ACL. Rich theology produced rich community in the NT: "*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.*"⁴⁶ *And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,"* (Acts 2:42-46). So we planted ACL on community—meals, mission, vision. For a while my wife did all the cooking, but as we began to take ownership in this thing called the church, everyone began participating, bringing food potluck style. These became times of real relational connection that led to conversations about sin, faith, life, and mission. We began to speak the truth in love to one another, to share life together in the gospel. We wanted to cultivate something that was so good it was worth multiplying, which is why we are *cultivating communitie(s)*. These communities are what we call City Groups. More on that in two weeks. Rich community also includes discipleship, peer and pupil discipleship, as we encourage one another to follow Jesus wherever he leads by the power of the Spirit, not by mere self-effort or out of religious duty. But we also want to avoid ingrown community, spiritual navel-gazing, because the church in the NT was a church on a mission. It was an outgrown, mission-minded community.

Mission: *redemptively engaging peoples and cultures*

What is your experience of mission? Most American churches that are missions-minded are great at sending missionaries overseas to plant churches, start orphanages, and point people to Christ. In many of these churches, “missions” is an appendix to the church. It’s optional, something that the super-spiritual do, something we pay others to do. This is unfortunate. We believe that everyone is called to be a missionary because a disciple of Jesus is a Spirit-led follower who follows Jesus wherever he goes and makes more disciples. They are compelled by the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5) or by the gospel of redemption.

Liberal churches are known for their social activity, the social dimension of mission. They house the homeless, feed the hungry, care for the orphans. This is changing. More and more evangelicals are addressing social needs. This is one-third of mission. The other two-thirds include people and culture. Fundamentalist churches are known for soul-winning, preaching hell, fire and brimstone and getting people saved. The focus on people. The Culture: we talked about we didn’t want our children to be afraid of culture or to be uncritical. Hewy Lewis & the News in 9th grade. No R movies, Rainman. Redemption/Christ/Glory: God’s plan for broken people and to display the riches of his grace in Jesus. (Eph 1) Trinitarian convictions.

Gospel: *through Christ for the glory of God* (see second class).

Values

1. **truth:** *All truth is Trinitarian truth.*
2. **christ-centered worship:** *All things are in, through, and for Jesus.*
3. **missional community:** *All peoples need meaningful relationships with one another and with Christ.*
4. **redemptive discipleship:** *All disciples are called to serve in the power of the Spirit and the pattern of Christ.*
5. **culture engaging:** *All cultures contain and disdain truth, beauty and virtue.*
6. **kingdom-building:** *All of the churches in Austin are needed to reach and renew the city.*

DOCTRINE & GOSPEL

What is Doctrine?

Evangelical theologian Wayne Grudem defines doctrine as: “*what the whole Bible teaches us today about some particular topic.*”¹ It is important that we know what we believe so that we are: 1) Directed by the Word of God, not merely tradition or opinion, on all matters of faith. 2) Be the church with theological integrity, shepherding, exhorting, encouraging, and correcting one another in love. Doctrine, then, is of the utmost importance in governing all matters of faith and practice. Doctrine is not at odds with practice, but rather should lead to doxology. Accordingly, John Calvin writes: “*It is what we know, not what we do not know, that subdues our pride and causes us to render to God the worship that he is due.*” The knowledge of God is practical, personal, and worshipful.

What Do We Believe?

We are first Christians, second Evangelicals, third Missional, fourth Reformed, and fifth Baptist.² Another way to state our beliefs is that we are: **Reformed in doctrine, Baptist in sacrament, and Missional in nature.** As *Christians* we distinguish ourselves from other world religions and cults by adhering to the historic, orthodox doctrine contained in the *Apostles* and *Nicene Creeds*. As *Evangelicals* we are in agreement with the doctrinal statement of the National Association of Evangelicals:

- We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.
- We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory.
- We believe that for the salvation of lost and sinful people, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential.
- We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life.
- We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life and they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.
- We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.

These primary points of doctrine are what we consider “essential” for partnership with Austin City Life. We believe that we should be unified in these historic essentials of the Christian faith and flexible on secondary matters. We strive to embrace and embody the saying by Puritan

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 25.

² This line of thinking has been adapted from the Acts 29 Network explained here: <http://www.acts29network.org/about/doctrine/>

Rupert Meldenzie (commonly attributed to Richard Baxter): *"In the essentials unity, in the non-essentials diversity, in all things charity."* How does this play out in Austin City Life? Essentials are required for partnership. Doctrinal adherence in certain non-essentials is required for leadership (Elder, Deacon, or Ministry Leader). Thus, we agree to charitably disagree within our community on non-essential points of doctrine, while also encouraging rigorous, winsome, biblical and theological reflection and conversation. The theological door is wide at the front of the church, while narrowing with the level of a disciple's commitment and responsibility. Leaders are held to a higher theological and personal standard on secondary points of doctrine.

As a *Missional* church, we believe that our local churches must be faithful to the *content* of unchanging Biblical doctrine (Jude 3), while also faithful to the continually changing *context* of the cultures in which they exist (1 Cor 9:19-23). We believe that our mission is to redemptively engage the peoples and cultures of the world with the gospel of Christ so that they can join the worldwide mission of the church.

As *Reformed* we believe in the five "Solas" of the Reformation: 1) Sola Scriptura/Scripture 2) Sola Fide/Faith 3) Sola gratia/Grace 4) solo Christo/Christ 5) soli Deo Gloria/to God be the glory and take the following stances on other key theological points.

God & Creation

- All things were created by, through, and for the Triune Creator.
- God is the unchanging Sovereign over all things.

Humanity & Sin

- Man was made in the image of God.
- Adam was the best representative of all humanity and fell from God's grace through willful rebellion against God. As a result, humanity has inherited Adam's sin nature and is naturally opposed to God. Creation groans under the curse of Adam's sin.

Christ & Salvation

- Because of man's rebellion God is not obligated to save, but rescues and redeems out of his electing love and mercy those whom he has predestined.
- The salvation of God's chosen people was accomplished by the sinless life, substitutionary atoning death, and physical resurrection of Jesus Christ in place of His people for their sins.
- The Spirit of God spiritually recreates those whom God has elected. This salvation necessarily produces sanctification, by grace, through a life of repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ. *"Not perfection overnight, but perseverance over a lifetime."* – Scott Hafemann

Mission & the Church

- The chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying him both now and forever. *"God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him."* – John Piper

- This God-glorifying joy is spread through redemptively engaging all peoples and all cultures through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As *Baptist* we believe that the sacraments of baptism and communion should be reserved for those who trust in Christ for their salvation. Only those who have professed faith in Jesus Christ should be baptized, preferably through immersion. Communion is memorial not mystical.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ

LCD vs. TOE Gospel

In our culture “gospel” is often associated with a kind of music, narrow dogmatism i.e. “gospel truth”, or the facts required for entrance into the Christian community i.e. what you say to St. Peter at the pearly gates. None of these actually reveal the true nature of the gospel. In the South the gospel is LCD *lowest common denominator* Christianity.³ If you just believe that Jesus is God, Jesus died for your sins, and Jesus rose from the dead, then you are a Christian; you are saved. This approach to the gospel is defective on two main counts. *First*, it assumes that mere agreement with the facts of the gospel is sufficient to “get you saved.” *Second*, it assumes a very narrow view of the gospel that does not comport with biblical teaching. Rather than LCD, the gospel is actually a TOE, a *theory of everything*.⁴ Technically, a TOE is a theory that explains the universe at the most basic level, the level of quantum mechanics. M-theory and string theory are examples of TOEs. One philosophical problem with TOEs is that they reduce all matter, including humans, to vibrating strings that are interconnected. It is a sort of crypto-pantheism at best, a very impersonal view of the universe that reduces our thoughts and emotions and spiritual experiences to pure science. The wonderful thing about the Gospel as a TOE is that it affirms the personality and soul of all individuals because they were made for relationship with a personal Creator. The gospel restores and renews that relationship over and over again. Tim Keller writes:

...we never “get beyond the gospel” in our Christian life to something more “advanced”. The gospel is not the first “step” in a “stairway” of truths, rather, it is more like the “hub” in a “wheel” of truth. The gospel is not just the A-B-C’s but the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom, but the way we make all progress in the kingdom.”⁵

³ LCD is a mathematical term that denotes the lowest numerical multiple held in common by two or more fractions. It is also a figurative rhetorical device in criticism of mass media. “When a media outlet has been charged with appealing to the “lowest common denominator”, it means they have targeted the lowest, meanest, crudest, most basic and perhaps prurient of all possible hopes and dreams of their intended audience.” - *Wikipedia*

⁴ TOE is “a quantum-mechanical theory that encompasses all forces and all matter. – Nova Brian Greene defines it as: “the ultimate explanation of the universe at its most microscopic level, a theory that does not rely on any deeper explanation.” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/elegant/everything.html>

⁵ Tim Keller, “The Centrality of the Gospel,” 2. <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/centrality.pdf>

So, according to Keller, the Gospel is not just how you get into Christianity, its how you stay in. It is the power for a salvation that we “work out with fear and trembling” all our days according to the “pleasure of God’s will” at work in us (Phil 2:13-14). The gospel changes us and everything we do, why and how we do it. As Paul’s rebuke of Peter’s racism in Galatians 2:14 shows, walking ‘in line with the gospel” affects both the social and the spiritual. Keller writes: “Paul shows us, then, that we must not just simply ask in every area of life: “what is the moral way to act?” but “what is the way that is in-line with the gospel?” The gospel must be continually “thought out” to keep us from moving into our habitual moralistic or individualistic directions. We must bring everything into line with the gospel.” The gospel, then, affects everything, guiding all our interactions with people and culture. The Gospel is not merely a LCD; it is a TOE!

The Gospel is God-centered

The gospel is God-centered because it is good news about a God-centered God. God is the most important Person in the universe.⁶ All things were created by him, through him, and **for** him (Col 1:17). When we say God is God-centered, what we mean is that there is no deficiency in our God. He is completely happy and self-sufficient in the community of the three persons of the Trinity. We also mean that everything exists for his glory creation (Ps 19:1), people (Isa 43:7), actions (1 Cor 10:31). He has unflinchingly asserted that he will not share his glory with another (). God is God-centered because God is most glorious. If he were not the most glorious Being in the universe, that would make something or someone else God. If he was not committed to his own glory first and foremost, then he would have to be committed to some other agenda i.e. the salvation of the world, and that would make him an idolater of people or creation. We would be the altar that the Trinity worshipped at. We would be God and would not.

The gospel is God-centered in that it renews peoples, cultures and creation to live for God’s glory, not our own. It rescues us from our own glory seeking (Rom 1), and places us in his kingdom where there is joy is honoring the King. The Gospel is uniquely God-centered in that it magnifies the person and work of each member of the Trinity. The Father’s choice and calling, the Spirit’s renewing and empowering, and the Son’s dying, rising, and ruling. The gospel rescues us from the lordship of the world, the flesh and the devil and places us under the safe ad soul-satisfying lordship of Jesus Christ.

Three Gospel Dimensions⁷

Doctrinal Aspect (Historical/Atonement/Justification)

The gospel is *news* rather than instruction (1 Cor 2:2; 15:1-5)

⁶For more on this see John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* and the following article:

http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/ConferenceMessages/ByDate/1993/2990_God_Is_a_Very_Important_Person/

⁷ For more see Tim Keller: http://www.redeemer2.com/visioncampaign/papers/Vision_Paper_1-The_Gospel-The_Key_to_Change.pdf

This first aspect of the gospel stresses the doctrinal content of the gospel. It shows us that the gospel is the news that Jesus Christ died and rose for our salvation in history.

Personal Aspect (Sonship/Adoption)

The gospel is *grace* rather than merit. (Rom 8:13-15)

This second aspect of the gospel stresses the personal individual impact of the gospel. It shows that the gospel is a transforming grace that changes our hearts and inmost motives.

Social Aspect (Kingdom/New Creation)

The gospel is *reversal* of the weak and the strong. (Isa 61; Luke 4)

This third aspect of the gospel stresses the social impact of the gospel. It shows that the gospel brings a new order in which believers no longer are controlled by material goods or worldly status.

Biblical Basis for a Multi-Dimensional Gospel

A central text for Austin City Life in understanding the nature of the gospel is Luke 4:18-19 cf. Isa 61. In these passages we see all three dimensions of the gospel as central to Jesus' ministry. In fulfillment of Isaiah 61, Jesus announces that he has come to: 1) Preach the **gospel** to the *poor* 2) release to the *captives* 3) recovery of sight to the *blind*, and 4) set free the *oppressed* in Luke 4:18-19. This announcement signals the inauguration of Jesus' kingdom ministry. He is a counter King with a counter-cultural message, not the political ruler the Jews were expecting or the angry street preacher of our day.

1. **Doctrinal:** This is a kingdom, Christ-centered message associated with historical message of Jesus. Jesus came to save us from judgment and give us salvation.
2. **Personal:** This message was good news because it liberates spiritual captives, resonating with the spiritual exile of Jews in the land. Restores the broken-hearted. Releasing us from heaviness to wear a garment of praise.
3. **Social:** This message resulted in renewal of social and physical dimensions of creation, recovery of sight for the blind. Rescuing the oppressed. As the context reveals, this good news was good for entire cities. It inaugurates the favorable year of the Lord repairing cities, and renewing vineyards.

What the Gospel Isn't

Keller Summary of Religion and Irreligion

"On the one hand, "moralism/religion" stresses truth without grace, for it says that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, "relativists/irreligion" stresses grace without truth, for they say that we are all accepted by God (if there is a God) and we have to decide what is true for us."

Gospel vs. Religion and Rebellion

Pleasure Lens:

1. Religion says God is hard to please.
2. Rebellion says God is an obstacle to my pleasure.
3. Gospel says God is the path to true pleasure.

Acceptance Lens: (adapted from Keller/Kaufman)

1. Religion says if I obey therefore I am accepted.
2. Rebellion says I disobey and find my acceptance in other things.
3. Gospel says, I am accepted perfectly in Jesus therefore I obey.

*Repentance and Faith*⁸

It is not simply enough to understand the facts of the gospel. Upon hearing the gospel, man must respond to the risen Lord Jesus. How is man to respond to the gospel?

*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; **repent** and **believe** in the gospel." (Mark 1:14-15)*

When Jesus preached the gospel of God he preached himself. He was the good news. Israel's king had finally come. The king demanded a response—repent and believe. However, what does this mean to repent and believe? When we hear repent and believe with our modern ears we assume that it means to quit sinning (repent) and believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead (believe). This is not what Jesus meant. How could it be when he had not yet died or rose from the dead? What Jesus meant was abandon your agenda and believing false promises (repent) and trust me and my agenda/promises (believe). This is the same response demanded of us today.

1. Repent

Give up on your agenda. Turn away, not simply from sin, but from believing false promises. God wants your heart, not just your morality. Repentance is a stepping stone to true joy. False promises like—Be bright, witty, and wise and people will give you the acceptance you need—steal our joy. No human can offer perfect acceptance or lasting joy.

2. Believe

Trust Jesus. Believe in the promises of God. Jesus' call to repent and believe was a call to give up on all other agendas and false promises and trust him and his agenda/promises. Notice that the facts of the gospel are not the object of our faith. Neither is our faith the object of our faith. Faith in faith or faith in facts is not saving faith. Faith in Jesus, who he is and what he has accomplished for us, is true saving faith. This sort of faith demands allegiance and therefore repentance is a necessary component.

⁸ See Tim Keller's article, *All of Life is Repentance*:
<http://www.greentreewebster.org/Articles/All%20of%20Life%20is%20Repentance.pdf>

G O S P E L – C E N T E R E D C O M M U N I T Y

A Vision of Biblical Community

What comes to mind when you think of community? Describe some of your best experiences of community, in or outside the church. How should church community be different? We are going to cover three main areas of community tonight: 1) A **Vision** of Biblical Community 2) **Practicing** Gospel-Centered Community 3) **Structures** for Steady State Community. Vision, Practice, Structure for Gospel-centered missional community.

Acts: The Early Church

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

Gospel Teaching

Apostolic teaching wasn't focused on the New Testament because the NT didn't exist. Their teaching was an outworking of Jesus discipleship and teaching (Luke 24:44), which was a Christ-centered explanation of the OT. So, we could say they taught the prophets and apostles (Eph 2:20; 2 Pet 3:2). They advocated a whole bible theology, Old and New, teaching their disciples how to read the along the grain of the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation. So when we read that the early church devoted itself to the teaching of the apostles, we are not intended to hear that they taught the NT or that it replaced the OT, but rather, that the NT explained the OT. Consider Peter's sermons in the book of Acts. Augustine put it like this: "*The New is in the Old contained, and the Old in the New explained.*" What then does a whole bible theology focus on? What do the sermons in Acts tell us? That the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus is the focal point of history and the Church (Lk 24:44; 1 Cor 15:1-5). It is radically Jesus-centered. How did they do this? Through the enlightening and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is all over Acts. In fact, the church was formed at Pentecost, in the outpouring of the HS, not when Jesus walked the earth. Where did all this teaching happen? In Temples, Schools, Homes communities of Spirit-led disciples gathered to devote themselves to the teaching of the apostles, to the study of Scripture in the light of Christ. **The communities of the Early Church were devoted to Christ-centered teaching.**

Community-centered Gospel

Notice the radical emphasis on community in Acts 2. It seems almost unattainable, and yet, it's enticing isn't it? The Early Church was devoted, not only to teaching, but also to fellowship. Fellowship is sharing life in the gospel. Notice that it is the teaching of the gospel that led to

radical community. We could say they taught a community-centered gospel.⁹ Christ is the cornerstone of the Temple, the Head of the Body, his life, death and resurrection created a new community, not just individuals, through the Spirit so that they could share life together. The text tells us they shared *meals, worship, prayers, possessions, joy, and mission*. The Didache: *"Give without hesitating and without grumbling, and you will see Whose generosity will requite you. Never turn away the needy; share all your possessions with your brother, and do not claim that anything is your own. If you and he are joint participators in things immortal, how much more so in things that are mortal?"*¹⁰ We have been made joint participators in things immortal, in the truth of the Gospel, how much more should we share in life? The community focus of the gospel is also present in the NT epistles. Paul frequently wrote from a community to a community, not individual to individual. His letters were not copied, passed out to individuals and taken home to study. They were read aloud, in community, and circulated among the churches (Josh 8:34; Neh 8; Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27). This fostered unity but not an idealized community.¹¹ There was plenty of "issues" within the churches. Consider the Ananias and Sapphira narrative three chapters later (Acts 5). Read Acts alongside the Epistles. The Early Church was an imperfect community clinging to a perfect Christ. They knew that Jesus was sufficient for their failures and strong for their successes. **The communities of the Early Church shared life and truth.**

Missional Community

The Early Church wasn't focused just on teaching and community; they also shared mission. Acts 2:27 says: *"added to their number day by day those who were being saved."* The church was missional. It redemptively engaged peoples and cultures. They were outwardly focused, not just inwardly oriented. They lived in favor with all the people. Their gospel changed their cities; they were good citizens. They raised the problem of mission, solved it with the solution of the gospel, in the context of community. The gospel creates missional communities, missional churches, that live out the redemptive implications of the gospel both internally and externally, within the community and outside the community. And the degree to which we are internally redemptive will determine how externally redemptive we are.

Four Gospel Principles

1. **We all are broken:** We are all more broken than we want to admit, and God is more holy than we comprehend.
2. **We all need Jesus:** In Jesus we are more forgiven and accepted than we can imagine, and God is more delighted in us than we understand.
3. **We all need one another:** We need each other to share our struggles and joys in following Jesus.
4. **The world needs the gospel:** The gospel offers the hope of justice, the clarity of truth, the comfort of grace, and joy of Jesus to a broken world.

⁹ This phrase—community-centered gospel—is taken from Steve Timmis.

¹⁰ Staniforth and Louth, "The Didache" in *Early Christian Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 192-93.

¹¹ See helpful article by Alan J. Thompson, "Unity in Acts: Idealization or Reality?" *JETS* 51 (2008), 523-542.

Practicing Gospel-Centered Community

In order to live out this biblical vision of community, it is necessary to translate gospel principles into gospel practices. How does the gospel change the way we live in relationship with one another, the way we have conversations, the way we shop, eat, exercise, and chill out? In Ephesians, Paul lays out some pretty basic principles for being a Jesus-centered, Spirit-empowered community. Redemption accomplished in Christ is applied in the Church.

Community Practices

1. SHARE life and truth
2. PRAY for one another and the city
3. ENGAGE peoples and cultures
4. LOVE one another

Ephesians: Speaking the Truth in Love

It's because we are redeemed (Eph 1:7) that we redemptively engage one another (4:30); we speak the truth in love (4:15, 25). The center of community is the message of redemption, the hope of grace, the presence of Christ. Consider Paul's words to the "church" at Ephesus. Note this is not a charge to individuals or a pie in the sky concept. (Eph 4:1-6) Walking with the Lord doesn't consist of quiet times and not doing bad things. It is a community affair—bearing with one another in love. How will we be challenged to bear with one another in love, if we don't share our brokenness, messiness, our need for humility, gentleness, and patience? We are one Body! That's why Paul prays that you 'may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.' (3:18) How do we grasp the love of Christ? 'Together with all the saints. How do we know the fullness of Christ? As a community. What is at stake? The glory of Christ in the church. Consider all the "one anothers."

Christian Community is the Best Context for Change

The Church is God's appointed context for your sanctification. Monasteries, Counselor offices, Group Therapy, etc are not God's primary context for change. We need to see "one another" as God's gracious gift to us and to our mission. Together, we can grasp the depth of the love of Christ (Eph 1). Begin reading the Bible with an "us" lens. Notice that the writings of the NT frequently refer, not to "me" changing or to "you" changing, but to "us" changing. Faith is a community project. In ACL this means that we see City Groups as essential to our discipleship and growth. Some CG's may not have all the gifts present, but that is why we are moving towards Clusters and why we bring our CGs together in a weekly service.

Differences in the Body Help us Change.¹²

Spiritual Gifts are Diverse for a Reason. We need different gifts for growth in different areas. We may want to "shuffle the pack" but these are the people God has appointed for your change and ministry. We often view those different as optional, not essential. This is part of our consumerist and part of our desire for intimate friendship. One is commanded, the other is

¹² The next two paragraphs are adapted from Tim Chester, *How You Can Change*.

elective. We need both. City Groups and Fight Clubs. “Ascended to heaven in glory, descended to earth through the Spirit in gifts.” – Tim Chester Your response to this may vary in three ways:

- I am Inferior: Christ has given you to the Church.
- I am Superior: Christ has given the Church to you.
- They are a Problem: Christ has given them to the Church.

The Full Stature of Christ brings us Joy and God Glory. This requires unity and knowledge; in other words, it requires community and belief in Jesus. What might that look like? Speak the Truth in Love. Speaking truth is what grows the Body. Eph 4:15-16, 20-21, 25 Why? Because we are surrounded by deceit, by lies, which we are prone to believe. Eph 4:14, 22, 25.

- Q. Can you think of some lies we tend to believe?
- Q. How can we speak the truth to these lies, in community?

“We need to be communities in which we encourage, challenge, console, rebuke, counsel, exhort and comfort one another with the truth. We need to be communities in which everyone is speaking truth to everyone.” – Tim Chester. This must be tempered by love, empathy.

Two Ways to Get at the Gospel (which assume repentance)

Who is Jesus? – Ask this question personally and in community. It is not an interrogative question, but an encouraging question. It helps us look at our circumstances in light of who Christ is in any given moment.

- Jesus is our Advocate (contra abandonment or loneliness)
- Jesus is our High Priest (contra guilt or depression)
- Jesus is our Righteousness (contra self-justification)
- Jesus is Lord (contra our rebellious, disobedient spirit)

Trusting in the Promises – The Gospel works to produce good fruit. One major way it works is through faith in the promises of God. Scripture is filled with commands, exhortations, songs, laments, and many, many promises. The promises aren't there to be glanced over, rubbed for warm fuzzies, or memorized, mainly. They are there to be trusted, to bring us into deeper communion with God, dependence upon his Spirit, and victory over the flesh. Look for them. Linger over them. Ask God to make good on them. After all, “All the promises of God are “Yes, and Amen” in Christ Jesus (1 Cor 1:20). The challenge is to identify the false promises we trust in and choose the true promises of god's word. Some Examples:

- Forsake fleeting beauty and you will bear the beauty of Christ ([1 Jn 3.2](#)).
- If you maintain purity of heart, you are promised God ([Mt 5.8](#))!
- If you choose the path of humility, God himself will honor you ([1 Pet 5.6](#)).
- If you trust not in your own abilities, but have faith in Christ, you will live like a new creation ([2 Cor 5.17](#))!

Structures for Steady State Community

Everyday Life

The context for community is Everyday life (coffee, dinners, phone, email, blogs, facebook, shopping, vacation, meals). Tim Chester notes: “Word ministry takes place in a variety of ways; not simply for 45 minutes on a Sunday morning. It takes place through group Bible studies. It takes place when two people meet to read the Bible. It takes place as people are mentored through the word. In our experience most character formation and discipleship takes place through informal and ad hoc conversations. This kind of word ministry requires relationships, time and gospel intentionality.” – TC What are some other ways?

- Eat, Shop, Vacation, Love Neighbors, Serve the City, Godly Entertainment
- Bring that into your workplace, stimulate community

City Groups

City groups are not Bible Studies, Community Groups, or Therapy Groups. They are local, urban missional communities of people that gather weekly to share life and truth, love God and one another, and engage the social and spiritual needs of our city. They are geographically-based and inter-generational, a place where the church can be the church to one another and to the city. City Groups are grounded in Four Principles and shaped by Four Practices. We have covered these already. As a reminder, here are the four practices: SHARE, PRAY, ENGAGE, LOVE. Since we have covered SHARE, ENGAGE, and LOVE, some more reflection on PRAY is in order. Richard Lovelace says: “*Deficiency in prayer both reflects and reinforces inattention toward God.*”¹³ In other words, the less we pray the more we ignore God. It also reflects and reinforces attention to the mission of God. *The point of prayer is God—becoming increasingly, intimately, dependent upon him, devoted to his people, and to his mission.* This kind of praying puts us in touch with God, others, and mission. To pray to God is to open your soul to a feast of infinite proportions, to draw you chair up to table spread with delicacies and difficulties, all worth the chewing. To pray for others and the city is to participate in God’s awesome mission to redeem all creation, which is precisely what was happening before and after in our text, early church prayer.

Fight Clubs

Fight Clubs are simple groups of two or three people of the same gender who meet regularly to help one another *beat the flesh and believe in the promises of God*. They are based on three rules: 1) Know your Sin 2) Fight your Sin 3) Trust your Savior. They are Christ-centered not application centered, in order to avoid a focus on works and cultivate a focus on faith in Jesus. For more see article, “[Fight Club](#)”. FCs are not a program. There is no sign up. There are not community groups. They are relationship-based. Read the article. Email Miranda to let her know you are starting one and with who. If you have any questions, feel free to contact Nate, Jonathan, or another person that is already in a Fight Club.

¹³ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*.

Sunday Gatherings

Our Sunday gathering is not the church, the primary place of community or change. City groups are where the church is the church to one another. Sundays are gatherings of City Groups, not services. Our aim isn't to service your perceived needs; it is to gather the saints for worship, prayer, communion, and the word, to proclaim and participate in Christ-centered worship. We hope that our gatherings are attractional; that outsiders are attracted to what God is doing inside our community. We hope and pray that they taste and see that the Lord is good, that the gospel is true, and the church is love.

Partner Expectations: SHARE, PRAY, ENGAGE LOVE, GIVE

As you consider partnership with ACL, we will expect you to pray, share, love, engage, and give. To give of your time, your resources, your creativity, your skills, gifts, and finances to see the gospel renew this city and the world. Pray over all these things. Ask us questions. We don't want to coerce or exert social pressure for you to partner with us. We simply want you to partner out of conviction, joy, and obedience to Christ. If ACL isn't a good fit for you, we understand and will be happy to recommend a different church body for you to partner with.

MISSION

Theology of Mission

What comes to mind when you think of mission? MI-3, The Quantum of Solace? Social justice? In order to understand what we mean when we talk of mission, we need to look at its biblical and theological roots. The big storyline of the Bible is a missional storyline. God has a purpose, plan, and process in creating all things; he has a mission. From **creation**, Adam was to fill the earth with God's image and rule over the earth modeling trinitarian community and creativity. He was placed in an imperfect world. Even in Eden, Adam and Eve had to work, to cultivate and keep the garden. Fruit did not fall off of trees. The creation project had somewhere to go; it needed to mature, to be perfected and reach its goal of being filled and subdued by the image of God. Then the image was marred; Adam fell. Rebellion against the Creator--Sin--was introduced into the storyline. Creation was cursed. Man separated from God. Enmity was created between man and the Serpent. Murder, Sexual sin, Pride, Exploitation, Anger flourished. The creation project was derailed and somehow would need to be put back on track. All this occurred in Genesis 1-11, which raised the need for **redemption**. In Gen 3:15-24 we see God's first promise of redemption, his mission for creation. At Genesis 12, we reach a turning point. God chooses to refocus his plan for creation through Abraham, to bless him and make him a blessing to the entire world. Paul tells us in Galatians that this was the gospel being preached to Abraham and that those who possessed the faith of Abraham in his promise would inherit a new world, a **new creation**. To summarize, God's mission unfolds *redemptively* along the plotline of Creation-Fall-Redemption-New Creation. He is intent on restoring and escalating the creation project to a state of new creation. This is his mission. What *began* in Genesis 1 and *fell* in Genesis 3, is *redemptively* addressed in Genesis 12 to Revelation 22. God's mission is nothing less than new creation. But what guarantees its success? How is it accomplished?

Missio Dei

The *missio Dei* guarantees the success of God's mission. The *missio Dei* is a Latin phrase that classically referred to the "mission" or "sending" of God—the Father sending the Son, and the Father and Son sending the Spirit. So the mission of God has to do with his nature and his work. He is a sending God. Karl Barth and other theologians sought to expand the notion of *missio Dei* to include the Father, Son and Spirit *sending the church into the world*.¹⁴ A sent God also sends *his people* on his mission. The result was actually to displace church from the center of mission and replace mission in the capable hands of the Trinity, where it began. God is a missionary God. By recognizing and embracing the notion that mission success begins, exists, and ends with God, we distance ourselves from thinking that the church is the hope of the world (Rom 11.33-36). Rather, it is God's missional commitment to his glory among the nations that forms the bedrock of our missional activity.

¹⁴ The concept of *missio Dei* was first advanced by Karl Barth in 1932 at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference, where Barth emphasized that mission is an activity of God himself, as opposed to a purely ecclesiastical task. For more on the history of *missio Dei* see Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 389-93.

Mission is not something we do; it is something that we are. Mission is not an option, an elective for super spiritual Christians; it is endemic to the church. The church is a missional community because God is a missional community. The triune God is a missionary God.

- The Father sends the Son,
- The Father and the Son send the Spirit
- The Father, Son and the Spirit send the church into the world.

As the Father sent me, so I send you and then Jesus breathes his Spirit upon them (John 17). In Acts, the Spirit falls like the big breath of God upon the disciples of Jesus and the church is born! The result is community of Spirit-led disciples redemptively engaging the peoples and cultures of the world. So, God has been on mission throughout history. The triune God expresses his mission through creation, redemption, and consummation. Mission is not a program of the church, a subset of church activity alongside children's ministry and discipleship classes. Mission comes first from God as he creates, redeems, and renews through the sending of his Son and his Spirit. The church, then, is a sent people that embody God's missionary heart; his missional identity. Therefore, the church is mission, not does mission. Bosch writes:

Mission [is] understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It [is] thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another "movement": Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.¹⁵

The Missional Church

The missional church, then, is "a people of God who are created by the Spirit to live as a missionary community."¹⁶ As the sent people of God, we are missionaries and citizens. As missionaries, we should be constant students of culture, lovers of people, communicators of the *gospel*. Our mission is not one of coercion or condemnation. By participating in the mission of God, we redemptively engage peoples and cultures. In order to communicate the gospel effectively, we must understand what people hear when we use words like "gospel", "Jesus Christ", "truth", "grace", "religion", "evangelical" and so on. Tim Keller says the missional church is the church that asks the question, "What is it like to not believe?" You cannot answer this question apart from anecdotal information, apart from relationships with non-Christians. Make a habit of asking them these kinds of questions. Press into their worldview, so that you can compellingly present a Christian worldview.

Attractional vs. Incarnational

There is considerable debate over how the missional church should engage in its mission. Some say that the church is to be *attractional*. They build buildings that look like the culture, preach messages that deal with cultural issues, and are often impressive. The goal is to get people to church. Other churches say the church is to be *incarnational*. That our mission should follow the example of Jesus by incarnating the gospel in local cultures, neighborhoods, cities through relationships. The goal is to get the church to the people.

¹⁵ David J. Bosch. *Transforming Mission*, 390.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 25

To be sure, Jesus is the paradigm for our sentness (Jn 20:21). He came neither as a soldier nor a spy, but as a servant, as a missionary of God. *Soldiers* enforce their message (fundamentalists). Soldiers see the church as a fortress. Build a doctrinal or ethical wall around yourself and tell others what they are doing wrong and how right it is to join them inside the walls of their fortress. *Spies* sneak in their message (marketers). Spies see the church as a product to be sold. They dress her up, dress her message down, and sneak truth in where it's comfortable. They often focus on ethics and morals, not on the gospel. *Servants* freely share and embody their message. Servants see the church as redemptive community under the lordship of Christ. Instead of protecting or marketing, they risk reputation in service of their Lord. Together they seek to serve others in service of Jesus. As a result, they share the gospel with words and actions. Their actions are motivated by love. As a loving community grounded in the gospel they are quick to forgive, slow to anger. Quick to serve, slow to assume. As a servant community, the church is *attractional* and *incarnational*. The question becomes, what are we attracting our neighbors, co-workers, and city to?

Practice of Mission

In 2007 Austin metro was 82.4% *unchurched*.¹⁷ I don't like the term unchurched because it assumes that the goal of mission is to get people into a building, not a missional community centered on Jesus. Attracting people to services, appears to not be working. Brad Waggoner notes that 54 percent of those surveyed do not participate in church outside of worship service, and that during worship service 47 percent admit they are only going through the motions.¹⁸

Local & Global Mission

David Olson states that only the largest churches (more than 2,000 in attendance) and smallest churches (up to 49 in attendance) are growing. The vast majority of churches are shrinking, according to his research which is based on church statistics. Why? "The smallest churches have *intimacy*—if you don't show up, someone calls you," he explained. The "large churches have *money and resources and people* to do really good ministry. Middle churches are too big to be intimate and too small to have money and resources."¹⁹ If these statistics are accurate, a church built on small, missional communities, such as City Groups, should flourish because they offer the intimacy of a "small church" and the inordinate multiplication and resource growth of a large church. The mission of ACL is to cultivate communities of Spirit-led disciples who redemptively engage peoples and cultures through Christ for the glory of God. In the end, our ultimate aim is the glory of God, not grand numbers. However, in the goal of glorifying God we want to redemptively engage as many peoples and cultures as possible. How should we engage people with the gospel?

¹⁷ David Olson. What is a realistic church number. Perhaps look to Africa and Asia? In 2007, the highest in the US is 21% church in GA and AL.

¹⁸ Ed Stetzer interview with Brad Waggoner: <http://blogs.lifeway.com/blog/edstetzer/2008/10/bh-church-leadership-book-inte-1.html>

¹⁹ David T. Olson address to Lausanne in 2008.

Austin City Life encourages mission locally and globally. In *local mission*, we approach evangelism, not according to memorized presentations or street preaching, but through what Tim Chester calls Three-Strand evangelism.²⁰ The three strands of Community, Social Networks, and Gospel intertwine to form a multi-layered evangelism. The point here is not sequential but multidimensional. Introduces non-Christians to Christian community, or the gospel or simply build relationships. Invite others into lively Xn community through natural social contexts such as neighborhood parties, barbeques, parties, etc. This community-centered evangelism allows us to build relationships and invite people into Xn community, where they may connect with people stronger in evangelism or with more in common with your friends. But most importantly, non-Xns are exposed to the beauty and depth of gospel-centered community. In ACL we encourage building relationships through your workplace, neighborhoods, and strategic social partnerships of City Groups. SSPs are the social-missional activities of your CG, which renew the city socially, culturally, and relationally as you build relationships with people in need. Local mission is also expressed through church-wide opportunities like Church Under the Bridge and other Mission Possible events. Ultimately, we want to impact all the domains of city life. Domains are the various spheres of society that enable civilization. Can you think of some domains in Austin? Education, Government, Arts, etc. How can we make long-term impact in these domains? This is a big part of the long-term missional vision of ACL. We want to encourage and equip you to make an impact in your vocational domains. In *global mission*, we are cultivating strategic partnerships with missionaries in Asia and Africa. We will send short-term and long-term teams in the summer to spread the whole gospel to the whole world. Our local work with the Burmese will, Lord willing, translate to international work in Burma through OMF. Eventually, we will have elders that oversee work in multiple continents.

Culture

In order to redemptively engage culture, we need cultural wisdom. How can we critically engage the cultures of Austin? We would benefit from the age old missiology of Gregory the Great. Gregory the Great (540-604) was the perhaps the most influential bishop of the 6th century. Some have argued he was the first Pope, in which case, he would not have been the best bishop. All this is debated. Nevertheless, Gregory would have made a great church planter, but instead, he was a kind of church planting coach. Gregory sent missionaries to Briton to "make the Angles into Angels". His choice emissary was Augustine of Canterbury, who with 40 monks, set up mission base at St. Tours. Like many of his Celtic predecessors, Augustine realized the strategic value of having a mission training and sending center among his target people. I'm willing to bet it was much better than most "church planting residencies" we have today. Why? He had better missiology, better contextualization. Augustine implemented the great missiology he received from Gregory. That missiology, as [Tim Tennent](#) has pointed out, can be summarized with three words: Adaptation, Gradualism, and Exchange.

- **Adaptation** - *To adopt a cultural form for Christian purposes.* In Augustine's case, he adopted heathen temples and turned them into church buildings. Gregory wrote to him:

²⁰ Tim Chester, *Total Church*, 58-9.

"Detach them from the service of the devil and adapt them for the worship of the true God." Many Christian leaders and Christians would frown on using a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall for a church building because their conception of church is so narrowly conceived. Since my first day in Austin, I began praying that God would give us the abandoned male strip joint called *La Bare* for our church. We are currently meeting in a downtown theatre where we frequently pick up beer bottles off the floor before people arrive. The bathrooms are covered in graffiti and smell terrible, but the aroma of Christ fills the *Hideout Theatre* every week and is slowly changing that part of the city. Not only have we detached the theatre from less than admirable ends, we have also boosted sales in the adjoining coffee shop, ministered to the homeless outside, and adapted the space for the worship of the true God. Adaptation isn't about being cool; it's about adopting cultural forms, creating common cultural space for mission, and using these forms for Christ-honoring purposes.

- **Gradualism** - *Implement Christian ideals slowly recognizing that individuals are undergoing and entire worldview shift.* Don't expect radical holiness from your new converts. If they have embraced Christ but still smoke pot or occasionally drink too much, don't beat them up for their behaviors. Instead, shepherd their hearts, lead them into the gospel, and allow their inner joy to transform their outer joys. Gregory wrote: "*If we allow them these outward joys, then we are more likely to find their way to the true inner joy... It is doubtless to cut off all abuses at once from rough hearts, just as a man who sets out to climb a high mountain does not advance by leaps and bounds, but goes upward step by step and pace by pace.*" Allow for the gradual transformation of the gospel, especially in post-Christian contexts. What you think is normative holiness, probably isn't the norm. It's not about leaps and bounds, but steady advance in grace.
- **Exchange** - *The creation of an entirely new cultural form in exchange for an existing idolatrous one.* It is one thing to use pagan temples for church buildings, it is quite another to participate in pagan sacrifices. For example, if your people consistently go to happy hours to get wasted and have a social life, create a more God-honoring context for socializing. Gregory wrote: "*People must learn to slay their cattle not in honour of the devil, but in honour of God and for their own food...*" Acts 29 and Resurgence have done a really good job of stimulating community through media. Just consider the creation of *The City* networking site and *Resurgence's* videos and blogs. Create new cultural forms and exchange them for sinful ones, for the sake of the gospel.

Finally, we are seeking to plant a church that plant churches. One of the primary ways we see this occurring is through the clustering of CGs that form the basis of new churches, provided a elder/pastor emerges or can be brought in. Pastors can emerge through internal cultivation or through church planter interns. By God's grace, we hope to cultivate a church planting movement through ACL multiplication and partnership with other Austin churches through the Austin PlantR Network and with Acts 29.