

Menlo Park Presbyterian Church
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Series:
Acts 2:42-47

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“A Vision for Ministry and Introducing ECO”

John Ortberg

These are words you all know:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as they had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

I fell in love with the church partly because of a small, passionate New Testament professor I had in college named Gilbert Bilezikian. His family had been victims of the Armenian Holocaust, and so he was driven by the beauty of New Testament community. He never got tired of talking about it. When he spoke, he sounded a lot like Inspector Clouseau. Anybody remember that character from the old Peter Sellers movies? In fact, one time at church a group of people had him go out and they said, "Just start by saying, 'Does your dog bite?'" He did and everybody laughed except him. He didn't know what was funny.

Dr. B is militant about the mission of the church. The first church I served full-time was a Baptist church in Simi Valley, and we had Dr. B come out one time and talk about the beauty of the vision of the church. He was talking about the church's need to change in order to achieve its mission in changing times. Somebody in the church raised his hand and said, "But what if I don't like change?" Dr. B said, "There are churches like that on every corner, and people have no trouble finding one of those. But I want to know who is going to reach the people those churches are not reaching?"

Then he just ripped off a string of adjectives. "Who is going to reach the whisky-guzzling, tobacco-chewing, child-neglecting, drug-dealing, wife-swapping, Playboy-Channel-watching, lotto-playing, profanity-using S.O.B.'s?" There was a moment of silence because nobody in our Baptist church was used to that kind of language. Then it's a true story. One of the elders in the back said, "You mean, 'Sons of Baptists?'"

You could not be around Dr. B without being shaken again by the wonder of this phenomenon called the Church. When he would teach college courses, sometimes at the end of a lecture if there were a few moments left, he'd put aside his notes, walk around to speak to the class, and say, "Students, there was a time when people became so devoted to God and so irrationally committed to each other that the Holy Spirit used them to give birth to a new community. Old barriers, old ethnic hostilities got broken down. No more Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. The rich were motivated to actually give to help the poor. Everybody just put a towel over their arms, and they all served. Spiritual gifts just flourished.

People were devoted to prayer. They took off masks. They got real and authentic and sincere with each other. They ate together with glad hearts. They changed the world."

Then he would say, "It happened once before. Can it not happen again? Has the Holy Spirit lost his power? Some of you ought to give your lives to build a church like that." When he taught at a college called Trinity College, a young college student by the name of Bill Hybels would go out sometimes from those moments, sit in his little old Volkswagen, put his head against the steering wheel, just weep, and say, "God, I'll give my life to that." I got to hear that vision, that beauty of the church.

But now this is our day. This is our church. Everybody in this room shares a uniting passion. We love the Church Jesus started. There is nothing in the world like the Church. It's why we give our lives to what we do. We forget this sometimes, sometimes because of the grind of all we have to do, the isolation of ministering in a rural setting with a mountain-high challenge of being in a blighted inner city; sometimes because we get beat up in the very process of trying to serve; sometimes because we're so aware of our own inadequacy or we try to compare ourselves to somebody else; sometimes because of criticism or opposition from inside the church or discouragement; or sin just wears us down.

But then we come back to Acts, chapter 2 and we know. It is a noble thing you do to give your best energies, your highest devotion, your most courageous persistence, with all of your strength and your weaknesses and your dreams and your fears and anxiety and vulnerability, to love and care for the bride of Christ. That is a noble thing.

I want to tell you why I personally am so honored to be here. I grew up in a city called Rockford, Illinois. I grew up in a Baptist church I am immensely grateful for. I cannot imagine what my life would be like apart from that, but it was not what you would call an *ecumenical* church. We did look forward to the day when we would be in heaven with all believers from every different tradition. Lutherans would be there represented by Martin Luther, and Wesleyans would be there represented by John Wesley. Maybe some Catholics would be there represented by the Pope, and Baptists would be there represented by Jesus.

If there was a thriving evangelical Presbyterian church in Rockford, in the little circle where I grew up I didn't know about it. I kind of assumed when I was growing up that Presbyterians sat in the basement, smoked cigarettes, and thought up ways to desecrate the gospel. Confession.

Then I grew up and I discovered there is this room in Jesus' church. Not the only room...he has a real big house...but I love this room. I never knew about it. I found out there were people like Peter Marshall, Robert and Edie Munger, Henrietta Mears, Earl Palmer, and Ken Bailey who wrote things I never dreamed of. Lloyd Ogilvie. You all know Lloyd Ogilvie who sounds like I think God will sound on a really good day. Dale Bruner, John Huffman, Roberta Hestenes, and Richard Halverson.

They loved Jesus. They were Christ-centered. They loved the life of the mind. They read great books. They were not afraid of ideas. They engaged the culture. They were reflective. They were theologically informed. They weren't fundamentalists. They weren't separatists. They were globally aware. They were concerned about corporate life and statecraft and the arts. They had deep convictions, but they would express them civilly because they believed civility itself was also a mark of discipleship to Jesus.

They were this egalitarian community where they believed in the authority of the Bible and that the correct understanding of the Bible will lead to a community of women and men serving together equally

on the basis of giftedness and not gender. They were concerned with integrating faith and work. They wanted to know...*How can the lordship of Jesus be extended and affect every sphere of life?*

They valued being thoughtful and informed about science and history, and they believed this actually strengthened their commitment to the authority of Scripture and the truthfulness of the faith. They were concerned for political processes without getting co-opted by any one political party line. They did not express their faith in careless, thoughtless, stupid, polarizing ways that make you cringe when you hear those words being said. They were unapologetic followers of Jesus without creating this weird, goofy isolationist sub-culture.

I love that. Everybody in this room understands the beauty of that. What a precious legacy we have been given. When I discovered it, I felt like I'd come home. I was so glad such a spiritual community existed, and I was so grateful I could be a part of it. It's dying. You all know what has been going on in mainline denominations including our own: shrinking memberships, fading churches, aging clergy, lessening evangelism, a preoccupation with survival, an internal strife, and an external irrelevance. It is not just theological drift.

We have not gathered together to do theological critique or blaming of anybody who is not here; we have gathered to try to listen to what the Holy Spirit who gave birth to the church at Pentecost is saying right now because our world changed. Culture changed. People changed. People don't know the story anymore. They started listening to different music. They stopped dressing up to go to church or anywhere else. There are churches going after them, churches being incredibly creative and bold and risk-taking, but not so much from *this* wing of the church we all love.

The church I serve now, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, was founded in 1873 against real formidable challenges. It was not easy. It began with 12 members. Fifty years later it had 13 members. That is not explosive church growth. There were many times over the years when they thought, *Should we just give up? Should we just fold? Should we just stop?* Somehow God would prompt somebody to say, "Nope, I think God wants to do something."

Then around the 30s and the 40s, World War II, it began to move. It began to grow. God began to work. The church I serve took on a nickname in those days. They gave it to themselves. They called it the *Church of the Pioneers* because there was this pioneering spirit. They said, "We're going to innovate. We're going to try some things. We're going to go on an adventure. We're going to live with open hands before God. We're going to risk. We're going to sacrifice. We're going to say, 'God, we will follow wherever the winds of your Spirit blow.'"

We had a meeting yesterday with a group of younger leaders, folks 45 and under in our church, although I'm not sure if 45 really counts as younger. One of the questions that got asked was...*When you think of our wing of the church, you think about having a thoughtful, reflective, educated, theologically-informed, articulate faith, how many of you would say that is a strong sweet spot of ours?* Hands went up all over the room. I'm just telling you what happened.

Then the next question was...*When you think about faith that's really bold and courageous and innovative and adventuresome and decisive ministry, how many of you think that is one of our strengths, one of our hallmarks?* Anybody want to guess how many hands went up? No hands went up. That's really serious and tragic business.

I'll tell you why this matters. There is a line from a book by a guy named Garrison Keillor. Anybody here ever read Garrison Keillor? *Lake Wobegon*? He talks about this church in Lake Wobegon. It's a Lutheran church because I don't know if they have a Presbyterian church in Lake Wobegon. It's pastored by Pastor Inkfist, and one of the critics of Pastor Inkfist says one time, "You know, he never just comes out and says it. He never pounds the pulpit when he preaches. It's a lot of, 'On the one hand this, and on the other hand that.' He never puts the hay down where the goats can get it." I love that line, "Put the hay down where the goats can get it."

Here is why it matters. There are churches in our day, in our world that know the goats, that are very clever about attracting the goats, that go after the goats real strongly, but they have no hay. What's worse, they don't know they don't have any hay. Then there are other places, ministries, churches, and they have wonderful hay. They have been thinking and reflecting and studying so deeply and so immensely. They have fabulous hay, but they're not reaching the goats. What's worse, they don't know they aren't reaching the goats. They're just living in denial. They don't really care they're not reaching the goats.

To be a church that has the good stuff, that has wonderful, thoughtful hay, that loves the hay, that knows the goats, that cares about the goats, that sacrifices for the goats, and that says, "We will give up our comfort, our convenience, the stuff that makes us feel at ease for the sake of reaching the goats," I think God wants that. I think God wants that.

I believe as someone who kind of came home to be a part of this group that you and now I are stewards of an unspeakably precious legacy. I believe we have a song to sing. I believe our world needs to hear it. I believe the church in our country, in our time, in our world needs to hear it, needs to receive the gift we all have been given to pass on. We're not the only room in the church. It's not the only gift, but it's our gift to give.

So what if there was a movement? What if God were to raise up a movement? What if that torch for a thoughtful, reflective, urgent, egalitarian, globally-active, culturally-engaged, Jesus-centered, evangelical faith got wed with courageous, innovative, bold, risk-taking, entrepreneurial ministry leadership, and the torch of this faith were to burn more brightly in the next generation than it did in the last one? We're not talking about a safe, easy, reassuring step from one denomination to another as a way of expressing denominational displeasure. Purity by separation has been tried before. If the new entity we're talking about is only that, it will just deteriorate a little more slowly.

I was talking to a friend of mine, a guy who used to be a great, world-class tennis player. He is about my age, in his 50s. He was telling me he now plays way more golf than he does tennis. I asked him, "How come? You were so good." He said, "It's because when I play golf, I'm getting better. When I play tennis, the best I can do is deteriorate more slowly." I don't think God's call for us is, "Let's deteriorate more slowly."

What if there was a movement? Now this is real important. People cannot manufacture movements. We cannot manufacture a movement no matter how badly we want to. We can't. Only God does that. But here is the thing. We're Presbyterians. We practically invented the notion of divine sovereignty. We are experts at the limitations of human finitude and fallenness. A good Presbyterian friend of mine says, "No one who believes in total depravity can be all bad." If there is any group that ought to believe our God can start a movement, it's the people in this room.

So let's just dream a while. Let's just dream a while, not asking *how*, just *what*. Imagine God were to launch a movement of Spirit-led, Jesus-centered churches where pastors and leaders took seriously the biblical injunction to become teachers of the nations so our world and culture could hear again there is such a thing as moral and spiritual knowledge that can guide human lives. Imagine that the claims of Jesus were to receive a fresh hearing in our day because they were being expressed in thoughtful, winsome, non-churchy, literate ways by Jesus' followers who had wrestled and studied and prayed and sought to follow Jesus with all of their hearts.

Imagine these churches were places where anybody could come, where people who read and had convictions and thoughts about science and culture and evolution and history, people who had doubts, people who suffer, could come and receive not glib Christianese formulas and empty clichés and in-house apologetics, not vaguely religious, kind of hopeless skepticism, but a clear, confident, humble expression of the wisdom of Jesus for our day.

Imagine a movement where church meetings and denominational meetings never waste anybody's time. Imagine a movement that says, "When leaders' and volunteers' hours of service are misspent in black holes of bureaucratic hoop-jumping, it is not excusable organizational behavior. It demotivates volunteers. It sucks life and energy out of mission. It repels leaders and creates an anti-leadership culture. It is not God's will for his church, and it is not okay."

Imagine a movement that when leaders gather together, it is to learn, to receive vision, to mentor, to get equipped, to be accountable, to encourage one another, and to fire each other up. Imagine when leaders gather together they talk about things like, "How do you reach people who don't know Jesus so they can get to know Jesus? How can you worship better? How can you help the under-resourced people more effectively? How do you make disciples? How do you do justice?"

Imagine a movement that says the church of Jesus matters so much it must learn the very best it can. It must learn about spiritual formation from people like Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, and Eugene Peterson. It must learn about theology from people like N.T. Wright, Scot McKnight, Neal Plantinga, and Rich Mouw. It must learn about leadership from people like Jim Collins, Patrick Lencione, Ken Blanchard, and the Leadership Summit.

It has to find partners like World Vision, Habitat for Humanity, Fuller Seminar, InterVarsity, Young Life, and International Justice Mission and learn about stewardship, mission life, justice, family life, mental health, and entrepreneurship from the best resources on the planet because we believe Jesus' church deserves the best it can be given.

Imagine a movement where churches are being planted right and left, where ministry experiences are being run every day (sites, venues, missional communities), where risk-taking, where willingness to fail for crying out loud, where the hunger to dare greatly for God once more makes ministry a joyful race. Imagine hundreds of thousands of people being won to discipleship to Jesus Christ.

Imagine a movement where when bright young people come out of school, they want to make an impact. They want their lives to count for something bigger than just themselves. They're also committed to being honest and thoughtful about all they have learned, about all the questions eager young minds have. They also want to be part of a community of faith where women and men are equally valued and equally serving. They're committed to justice, evangelism, and spiritual formation. Imagine they look at this movement and say, "I have to be a part of that. I will sacrifice to be a part of that."

Can God not do that? Has the Holy Spirit lost his power? So we try to discern, "God, what are you saying to your Church?" As a group of us have talked and prayed about a new denominational entity, the idea, the prayer was that it be not just a denominational alternative, that there might be a structure that could be a vehicle and a servant of a movement. We thought about a name. I'll say a word about that. It's been kind of just called *NRB* for *New Reformed Body*. That didn't seem real snappy.

So we thought about three words. *Evangelical*. When I was growing up, in my circle *evangelical* was a really good word. Increasingly in our culture there are a lot of questions around that, but the *evangel*, the gospel of Jesus remains the best and only hope of sinful human beings. "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel.*"

Then we thought about the word *covenant* because we all treasure that our God is a covenant-making, covenant-keeping God. We believe about churches that they ought to be in covenant relationship with God and with one another, that there ought to be accountability, that God leads through community.

Evangelical, covenant, and then order. Order is a great old word. Historically it would describe communities that would commit to a way of life together so Christ could be formed in them, so they might grow toward union with God. We believe God wants to raise up in our day a new order that makes a spiritually-forming, Jesus way of life accessible to people in our day.

Evangelical Covenant Order. Put them together and you get a little acronym *ECO*. Interestingly, it comes from the New Testament word *oikos* which was used to describe the church as a household of God. The Church is a living organism, and every organism lives in a bigger ecosystem. The job of a healthy ecosystem is to filter out toxins and to provide abundant, rich resources so the organism can thrive. It's about thriving organisms. That little word *ECO* is kind of a reminder, kind of a pledge.

The job of a denomination is to serve the local church, not the other way around. The job of a denomination is to add value to the local church, not the other way around. The idea is real, real simple: to build flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ. The church has really one job: to make disciples, followers of Jesus. There ought to be an ecosystem that helps flourishing churches do that, to build flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ. We want to make sure everybody carries that away, so can you all say that phrase out loud together with me? *To build flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ.*

The full legal name for this entity would be the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians. That gets Presbyterians in there. If *ECO* sounds too edgy when you're talking about this idea, if you do at your church, then you can just use the full name, Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians. We actually thought about that acronym, *ECOOP*, but it sounded kind of like eBay for chickens. So it didn't seem like a really good idea. What if God were to raise up a spiritual ecosystem that could build flourishing churches that would make disciples for Jesus Christ?

Now you may be part of a church that is trying to pray and discern, "God, what is your will for our church?" I am at a church that is doing that. At our church we are currently in process on this one. We're talking and thinking and studying and praying. You may wonder, *Is there a simple, easy path for us to get from where we are to the new day?* There is a real simple answer to that question, and that answer is *no*. It's going to be messy.

For one thing, the people who are working on this have been doing it in their spare time while they're still leading churches. I'm speaking at this conference, but there has been a whole team of people putting a ton of work into putting this on. They're doing it in their spare time for the most part while they're leading other churches. Don't you think we owe them a big expression of gratitude?

It's also going to be messy because, how do I say this, decision-making in Presbyterian churches can be a tiny bit complex...did I say that in the right way?...and because we want to walk through this in a way that honors God, that honors and treasures our brothers and sisters in the PCUSA, and that brings life and not dishonor on the bride of Christ in the eyes of our world. That's going to take God.

It does lead to one last question a lot of you will be thinking about. *Why bother? If it's going to be messy, complicated, difficult, risky, and hard, why bother?* Often at a gathering like this, in discussions like these, the question will surface...*What problem are you trying to solve?* Better be real careful. Better get real clear on knowing what is the problem you're trying to solve. This is real important. The problem is not denominational ambiguity. The problem is not ecclesiastical dividedness. The problem is not even ineffectiveness.

The problem is people are going to hell. You all understand that is not a glib statement about cartoonish pictures of afterlife that call for simplistic methodologies. It is about spiritual reality that was defined for us a long time ago when Jesus talked about what he was going to do. This one rabbi and a couple of fairly confused followers. What are the odds we'd be here 2,000 years later?

I think about this sometimes. If you were a visitor back in the first century and you could see on the one hand here is Jesus and 12 disciples and on the other hand here is the great, powerful Roman empire, who would you put your money on would still be around 2,000 years later? Yet here we are after two millennia. We give our children names like Mary and Peter and Paul, and we give our dogs names like Caesar and Nero.

Jesus said he was going to do this a long time ago, and whatever anybody thinks about him, here we are. When he asked, **"Who do you say I am?"** which is always the great question for the human race, it's not simply about affirming a particular formula. It is about the hope of humanity. It is about the truth that we have been made by a God who loves us, and we have been defeated and twisted by sin. The hope of redemption must come from beyond us. It has in Jesus Christ, living crucified for our sins and resurrected for our hope.

When Jesus said, **"Who do you say I am?"** Peter said, **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."** Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Peter. Flesh and blood have not revealed this. There is something deeper, bigger going on. The Spirit is starting something. I say you are Peter the rock, **and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."**

Jesus says he is building his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail. Our problem is hell, and hell is at work wherever the will of God is defiled out there or in here. Every time a little child is left unloved, unwanted, uneducated, unnoticed; every time a marriage ends; every time racial differences divide a street or a city or a church; every time money gets worshiped or hoarded; every time a lie gets told; every time generations get separated, get divided, get suspicious, get standoffish; every time a workplace becomes dehumanizing or fear-based; when families get broken down; when virtue gets torn down; when sinful habits create a life of shame or a culture of shamelessness; when faith gets undermined, hope gets lost, and people get trashed, hell is prevailing.

It is not acceptable to Jesus that hell prevails. It is not okay. People will ask sometimes, "How is your church doing?" Real important to think about, *What does it mean for our church to be doing okay?* Our job is not to do okay. Our job is not to meet a budget or run a program or fill a building or maintain the status quo. Our job is not to do pretty good compared with other churches in the denomination.

Jesus did not say, "On this rock I will build my church, and it'll do pretty good compared to other churches in the denomination." He said, "I'm going to build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Our job is to put hell out of business, and that's why Jesus went to the cross on a Friday, lay in a tomb on Saturday, and was raised to life on Sunday.

I have zero desire to be part of a church that is okay to be doing okay while hell is prevailing all around me. I do not believe God's will for us is to think in terms of survival or comparison. Like a lot of you in this room, I have reached a point in my life when I am keenly aware every day counts.

Every year a group of real close friends of mine from college days get together for about four days. This last year, as a little surprise, I took all the guys surfing. It's kind of interesting. I still think of us as young bucks not long out of college until we got in the water at Cowell's Beach in Santa Cruz. I'm not making this up. One instructor whispered under his breath to another instructor, "I guess it's AARP day at the beach." I said, "Well I guess it's not big gratuity day at the beach, is it?"

This is our day. Paul says, *"I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, redeeming the time because the days are evil."* I wonder who here wants to be a part of a community that says, "We will give everything we have. We will not choose what we're giving our one and only life to based on how good the pension plan is and how nice the benefits are. We will give everything we have to realize the redemptive potential God has set before us."

I wonder who here would say, "I want to be a servant, a brother, a sister, and a fellow soldier in an army of Spirit-breathed compassion that is rolling back a tide of secularism and fear and doubt and cynicism"? Once there was a day when the Holy Spirit fell on a group of people with so much power that all divisions melted away.

Ethnic groups and other folks who had always been divided came together and became like family, like brothers and sisters. People devoted themselves to God and to each other. Masks came off. They got real. Sin got confessed. The rich gave away their money to help people who didn't have it. Everybody served. They changed the world. God has done it before; can God not do it again? Has the Holy Spirit lost his power? Will you devote the rest of your life to be part of such a church?