

3 WAYS TO KILL A MISSIONAL CULTURE

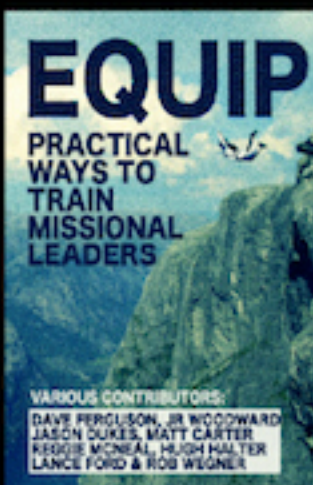
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3 Ways to Kill a Missional Culture

INTRODUCTION

I am from a very weird city down in Austin, and I have been a part of The Austin Stone for almost 10 years. I came to The Stone as an attender in graduate school, and have grown up with the church. I've basically gotten to watch as the church was born, became a child, and over the last few years has for lack of better words, kind of gone through puberty. We've got some pimples and our voice was cracking, but thanks be to God that we're moving past that stage as a church.

Rather than present our polished vision, values and practices, I want to take a little different tack – I want to candidly talk about putting these ideas into practice in a real church. More specifically, I want to be completely honest with you about our failures at The Austin Stone. Over the last 7 years, we have been in the process of transitioning to missional communities, and we've made plenty of mistakes.

The title of this ebook is “3 Ways to Kill a Missional Culture”, but it could easily be titled “3 Boneheaded Mistakes that We Made”.

Specifically, I’m going to:

- × Talk about 3 groups of people that transitioned to missional communities at The Austin Stone
- × Address 3 major mistakes we made in the transition to missional communities
- × Share 3 passages from Ephesians that have helped correct us

What Unifies Us?

Before we do that though, I want to remind you what unifies each of us.

I always face the temptation to focus on what makes my ministry different. You’ve probably already heard plenty of missional ideas. You may be excited, you might be evaluating what you’ve heard, or you may even be defensive.

But all of us want the same thing:

*We all want people to receive
the gospel and follow Jesus.*

Each of us has been saved by grace through faith in Christ, receiving the gift of God. Each of us simply want others to know, love and experience the hope that we have in Christ.

Everyone one of us is trying to make disciples of Jesus.

Anyone who has ever tried to make a disciple knows that mistakes come with the territory.

So I'm going to be transparent with you.

The Story of The Stone

In order to understand our failures, you'll need to know some of our story.

Matt Carter planted The Austin Stone almost 11 years ago with two overwhelming desires. First, he wanted build a church on the foundation of the Scriptures, not necessarily a model. Second, he wanted to plant a church where the only explanation for what happened was Jesus. In Matt's wildest dreams, he never thought we would be where we are today.

When it came to strategy, to be honest, we were pretty clueless. All we ever really wanted is for people to see Jesus for who he is and what he has done, and to help our church tell our city about him.

We knew we had a really great preacher and a great worship leader. That's about all we knew.

Pretty quickly people started coming. And then a lot more people started coming. I guess church planting isn't so difficult when you have Chris Tomlin as your worship leader.

To be honest, though, the idea of "missional" couldn't have been farther from our brains. I actually don't think it had even been invented at that point. But good stuff was happening so we were pretty thrilled.

Like just about every other church that grows, we built the things that churches were supposed to build. We had a small group ministry, were training leaders, we were going to build a facility and were continuing to grow like crazy.

And that's when we met this guy named Stew.

Story of Soul Searching and Asking Big Questions

I remember visiting our new pastor in his apartment down on South First Street in Austin. I knew something was a little off with this guy when I was greeted at his door by his son Wesley Grant who wasn't wearing pants. I felt like I stepped out of Austin into the third

world...Stew was a minimalist, so there wasn't much in there.

After getting some pants on Wesley Grant, we sat down to eat a meal together. Over some tacos, I listened to Stew's story of seeing how the gospel was rapidly expanding in places like India and China, and listened to his dreams for the church to become a "movement". I can say I had two primary thoughts:

- × Hesitancy, because this sounded a little crazy
- × Excitement, because it sounded like the church in Acts

Stew brought a fresh and exciting vision and strategy to The Austin Stone. He knew our conviction to be a church committed to the Bible, and led us repeatedly through the book of Acts, and light bulbs started going off. We had to become a movement, not just a great church.

Many of you are in that place now. You're likely here because you dream of seeing the Church in your city look like the church in the book of Acts.

Where We Began

I think the biggest realization was that we were well on our way to repeating the cycle of almost every American church:

- × *Great Sundays*
- × *Professional Christians*
- × *Immature disciples.*

But we wanted more, just like you do.

Stew and the Holy Spirit caused a great deal of unrest in our team – we wanted to be like the church in Acts, but didn't have a clue what to do. So we started talking with different people.

We hung out with Alan Hirsch and tried to digest his accent, white boards and big words. We met with Jeff Vanderstelt and learned about identities, rhythms and missional communities. These friends challenged us – a very successful church – to consider what it would look like to think like missionaries.

We began to evaluate everything that we did in light of movements, and we got very excited about change.

So like a young bunch of idiots, we went for it. Missional communities seemed awesome, so we told our whole church “GO AND DO”. We cast compelling vision, created some VERY intense curriculum, and then hosted a few trainings because we were such experts. Then we set people loose.

We lowered the bar for leadership, and invited many people to lead. We had communities baptize people, and adopt causes in the inner city.

We bet the farm on this missional idea, and some great stories began to emerge.

The Result

After the rush of a new vision had worn off though, there were some indications that something wasn't quite right. Have you ever had a meeting with a leader in your church that makes you scratch your head?

I knew we had some problems when I had to confront a leader of a missional community because she had been casting demons out of the backs of some women in her group. It turns out that she hadn't opened her Bible in 9 years, and claimed to hear directly from God, and thought she was the son of God.

It turns out she wasn't. Not even close.

We had lowered the bar for leadership, but I think we accidentally created something that resembled an "open bar".

Our Early Efforts

This story was simply evidence of a larger symptomatic problem. We had rushed into creating a missional culture, but the results weren't pretty.

After about 2 years, we checked our progress. About 10% of our communities had taken the vision and run. Most of this 10% was worn out, and some had even left the church because we "weren't missional enough". About 60% of our people wanted to try missional community but were confused and frustrated. Then there was the final 30% that just did business as usual.

So let's recap that:

- × 10% burned out
- × 60% frustrated
- × 30% just ignored us

We had the best of intentions, but had some pretty poor results.

In our zeal for movement, we did some serious damage to the people God had entrusted us with.

After some serious soul searching and a lot of reflection, here's where we went wrong in our attempt to create a missional culture.

3 Ways We Killed a Missional Culture

1. First, We Assumed the Gospel
2. Second, We Cast Vision without Practices
3. Third, We Didn't Love to Consumers

As I've spent time with other churches who are processing the missional conversation, these three dangers are present for just about everyone.

Let's dive into them:

WE ASSUMED THE GOSPEL

The first way we killed missional culture at The Austin Stone was assuming the gospel.

As I mentioned, the idea of "movement" was captivating to us. We had seen the massive explosion of the gospel in other parts of the world. We had read about these Jesus movements in *The Forgotten Ways*, and we quickly realized that was what we wanted to chase.

But here was our problem:

We spent so much time thinking about where we wanted to go that we forgot where our people were.

We had been telling people to be on mission, and they were burned out, confused and frustrated. We were telling people they needed to be in community, and they were still pretty isolated.

We spent some much time telling people what to do, that we forgot to remind them who they were.

I remember an elder meeting that I had, we were talking through our own struggles in life and mission. About an hour into that meeting, it struck me that we had only talked about ourselves. The name of Jesus hadn't been mentioned once. His atoning work on the cross wasn't mentioned as we talked about our own failures. In our everyday lives as leaders, we had lost sight of the gospel.

If it's bad at the top, then you can bet it's generally worse on down. During an early training, I was feeling kind of feisty and decided to do a "gospel pop quiz". I was shocked to find out that only 20% of people could articulate the gospel – Christ's life, death, and resurrection for us. I thought maybe it was just a fluke, but 20% held true through many different trainings. Most people either fumbled through the 4 Spiritual Laws, or would just rattle off random details they knew about Jesus.

We preach the gospel faithfully from our pulpit, Sunday in and Sunday out. We could sing the gospel in worship,

but we were assuming it in every day life and our people were confused about it.

Accepted, Assumed, Confused, Lost

There is a terrible cycle that has happened throughout all of church history in virtually all movements. Here's how it works:

- × First, the gospel is accepted
- × Second, the gospel is assumed
- × Third, the gospel is confused
- × Finally, the gospel is lost

First, people receive the gospel with joy – they celebrate it and accept. In Acts 19, we see Paul enter into Ephesus, clarify some misunderstandings for the disciples there, and then spends 2 years teaching the gospel such that it goes throughout all Asia. The ministry of Paul caused quite a scene in Ephesus, but it's clear that there were disciples who loved the good news.

Unfortunately, however, people are always tempted to move beyond the gospel. If you fast forward to Revelation 2, you see Jesus commends them for their work, their love for one another, their defense of the faith, but rebukes them:

Revelation 2:4-5

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.

The Ephesians had forgotten their first love. They were busy working for Jesus, but had assumed the most basic truth of the gospel.

Once the church begins to assume the gospel, inevitably it will be confused. This was the issue the Galatian and the Colossian churches were dealing with. The gospel was Jesus plus something. For many of our people, we mistake acts of justice for the death and resurrection of Jesus. The gospel became we should feed people. The gospel is confused with its implications.

Finally and tragically, the gospel is lost. Tragically, I've been to Ephesus, and I can assure you, that there is not an active, vibrant church in that region today.

The story of the church is often the story of our hearts – accepting, assuming, confusing and losing the gospel.

This is why Paul never assumes the gospel. In the book of Ephesians, he spends ¼ of the book unpacking the truths of the gospel story. Ephesians 1 and the first half of chapter 2 unpack thoroughly the gospel of Christ in all of

its cosmic, historical splendor. Paul reminds of a Sovereign God who sent his son Jesus to die on a cross in order to adopt us into His family, redeem us with His blood, and secure us for all eternity with the Spirit.

Paul concludes this glorious reflection on the gospel with a verse we all know:

Ephesians 2:8-9

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

As leaders, we are so easily tempted to assume that people know, love and act upon the gospel of Jesus.

*Subtly, we replace the gospel
with our vision or our strategy.*

Unintentionally, our gospel became “it is by missional community you have been saved.”

The Temptation for Leaders

We were so compelled by movement and missional community we missed the primary point – Jesus.

We were tempted by a new idea we really liked, and immediately put it into practice. You will be tempted in the same way. Our tendency was to emphasize our vision and how unique it is, forgetting the foundation it rested upon.

We fell into a trap of thinking that people can get the gospel anywhere but they can only get our vision here.

But the inverse is true in the church. Most churches aren't lacking in some sort of vision. Every church has a mission statement. But they are often lacking clear, passionate and specific application of the gospel.

There is no inherent power in our vision but there is inherent power to our gospel. This doesn't mean that the vision is unimportant or that it shouldn't be communicated, it just needs to be in its proper place as a result of the gospel.

May I implore you to learn from our mistakes – don't ever assume the gospel. In your pulpits, in your core team

gatherings, in your elder meetings, or in any ministry environment – don't assume the gospel.

Practically at The Austin Stone, we have decided to clearly articulate the gospel of Jesus Christ – his perfectly righteous life, his atoning death, and his glorious resurrection – every time we gather people together.

Conclusion

Keeping the good news central helped that first group of people.

Remember that 10% who were attempting the vision, but were burning out? They were great at mission, but needed to be reminded of their love for Jesus.

The gospel is the foundation and the fuel for those who pursue mission.

WE CAST VISION WITHOUT PRACTICES

The first way we killed missional culture was assuming the gospel.

Keeping the gospel central also helped the 60% who were frustrated, but we learned another lesson with that group of people.

The second way was casting vision without practices. We told people where we wanted to go, but not what they should actually do.

Our Story of Gospel-Centered

After casting a vision for mission, we kind of swung the pendulum to casting vision for the gospel. But we were still primarily were only casting vision.

We became a broken record for gospel-centrality. When anyone asked the question “what should I do?”, basically the answer was “repent, believe the gospel and go on mission”.

So if someone came up and asked:

- × How do I reach my neighbors? Repent, believe the gospel, go on mission
- × How do I serve the poor? Repent, believe the gospel, go on mission
- × How do I fix my car? Repent, believe the gospel, go on mission

We became annoyingly gospel-centered. To some extent, that’s a good thing.

But a vision of the gospel mission without practices is exasperating for people who want to be on mission.

People are told to believe the gospel, and they have a desire to be obedient to Jesus, but are left without any way to actually do it. Or even worse, they're killing it on mission but still feel like a failure.

We had told our people true things, but had forgotten to teach them helpful things.

Derek's Story

I recently had a coaching conversation with a friend who leads a missional community in my neighborhood. We sat down for an ice-cold beverage at a local establishment, and I asked him how things were going.

After taking a long drink, he looked at me and said "I feel like a failure as a leader."

When I asked him why, he responded "I can't get people on mission."

I started to ask him about some of the people in his community, and their stories. It turns out there was:

- × A couple who was in a rescue adoption situation – they were a newly married couple who was in faith adopting a family member's child out of an abusive home
- × There was a woman who was diagnosed with kidney stones in their group, and they prayed for her to be healed. The next day received a report from the doctor that the stones were gone!
- × They have had several non-Christians regularly join their community for a meal
- × Another guy in the group was currently studying the Bible with someone who didn't know Jesus

How in the world did this guy think he was failing???

I think it's because he heard vision and the gospel, but didn't have anyone affirming the basic practices of Christian discipleship. He had heard us talk about reaching our city, but hadn't had anyone regularly teach and celebrate simple acts of obedience.

Our city is going to be reached one neighbor, one conversation, one kind act of love at a time.

You see, we failed to equip him to act the vision in his suburban context – in the mundane of every day.

This is the work of equipping the saints for the work of ministry. The gospel certainly is the foundation of equipping, but it doesn't make practical stuff unnecessary. We had failed to help our people act themselves into a new way of thinking.

Equipping the Saints

Ephesians again is a gentle reminder for us as we pursue missional communities.

Ephesians 4:11–13

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ

I'm fairly certain Alan will unpack verse 11 quite a bit tomorrow, and we have rightly focused in the missional conversation on the 5-fold ministry. I want to draw your

attention to verse 13. Let's think about maturity for a moment.

The image Paul is using here is one of a maturing body – bodies function properly because the different faculties are being disciplined over time.

A healthy body is fed appropriately, trained repeatedly, and challenged consistently.

Maturity and health don't come from growing quickly. Maturity and health come from discipline incrementally over time.

Part of the way we failed in maturing our body was giving a simple set of exercises that we could stick to beyond church attendance. We had to teach consistently people A WAY TO read their Bibles, we had to teach consistently people A WAY TO repent of sin, and we had to teach people consistently A WAY TO share the gospel with real people.

For a church to be mature, we need to equip the saints in the gospel, yes, but also in simple practices. You can have a vision of being a church that makes Christ known, but

without consistent, thoughtful training and discipline, all you have is an unrealized desire.

*That's because vision without practices
is just a good idea.*

I want to implore you to cultivate a simple set of transferrable and reproducible practices that you equip people to do repeatedly over time. *Let me say that again:*

*Simple, reproducible, transferrable.
Repeatedly, over time.*

Alan says it this way – “you need to act yourself into a new way of thinking”. There are a lot of tools out there which are helpful. They won't magically make you missional, but you need tools to help people put vision into practice.

*Don't kill a missional culture by
casting vision without practices.*

For us at The Austin Stone, the simple community practices of Life Transformation Groups, Family Meals, and Third Places helped the 60% of people with a desire to change actually take steps of obedience.

Specifically, we taught people to gather in small communities in three different ways over time. The Life Transformation Group is where we gather to be a disciple, the Family Meal is where we gather to be a family, and a Third Place is where we gather to be missionaries.

Sticking to these practices over time, and applying them in a variety of different contexts has helped that 60% act on their desire to live differently.

WE DIDN'T LOVE CONSUMERS

So to this point, we'd committed two cardinal sins – we assumed the gospel, we cast vision without practices.

But what about the final group...that 30% who stuck their heads in the sand?

We learned our third lesson – we didn't love consumers.

To be honest, it's discouraging when people don't want to be obedient to Jesus. I think I spent a lot of time agonizing over that 30% - what do we do with them, how

do we convince them, should we kill those kinds of groups?

You can only hear a request for another bible study or another “fellowship group” so many times before you want to jump off a bridge.

So we didn’t cater to those consumers. As I think most of us know, catering to every person’s desires will kill a missional culture.

But here is what we didn’t realize: unreasonable expectations of people steeped in consumerism will kill a missional culture as well.

Ephesians is such a helpful book because Paul is centered on the gospel at the beginning, gets quite practical through the middle, then circles back around at the end to something very important.

Ephesians 6:12, Paul says this:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Our enemy isn't flesh and blood. It is the powers and principalities of Satan. The enemy has entrapped our church and our culture with the insidious evil of consumerism. We have bought the lie that we are what we can get.

But I made a mistake – I thought my enemy was consumers, not consumerism.

To be perfectly honest, I started to fight consumers...people...rather than the evil of consumerism.

Illustration of MC Training

Here's a quick story about how we failed in this area.

Early on in the transition, we also wanted to create a sort of Navy SEALs program to find some high capacity MC leaders. So we decided to recruit for a class that was going to be super hardcore. This was going to be the place of setting a high bar for discipleship, and we were going to throw everything but the kitchen sink at the people who signed up. We had about 50 people join us in this experiment.

The first week, we stood up and gave some guidelines. After casting vision for the class, teaching the Bible for a while, and letting the students process, we gave them

their homework – you need to share the gospel with 3 people this week.

But here was the catch – don't come back to the class if you don't.

Hardcore, right?

We waited and wondered that week at how many would show. Half? A quarter?

Unfortunately only 3 people came back the following week. It was a good ol' fashioned Scottish revival.

This new training program started with a bang, but ended with a fizzle.

To be candid about our heart, we self-righteously thought those people who quit were pretty much losers. They couldn't hack the missional life. They couldn't even share the gospel three times in a week.

To our shame, we didn't love the individuals. We just wanted what they could produce.

As leaders, we tried to force people to "come and die", and when they couldn't live up to the expectations, we wrote them off and moved on.

Can I be honest with you? We hurt a lot of people that way.

Some of those people were amazing, and now they're doing great things in the kingdom.

In our attempts to avoid catering to consumerism, we forgot to love consumers.

Consumers vs. Consumerism

Consumerism gave me a name for the enemy, but it was a gateway to self-righteously judging that 30% of people.

God is kind however to remind me of the speck in my own eye.

How can I stand in judgment and frustration over these people when in so many ways I am enslaved to the same sinful patterns? Sure, I've had some victory as it pertains to church, but if I'm honest, it's a daily battle against the powers and principalities of consumerism and I still fail.

The doctrine of consumerism is everywhere, the system of consumerism infects all our institutions, and is so ingrained in our patterns of thinking we can hardly see it. The reality of our culture is that everyone is a consumer. I know I am. I'll bet you are.

Whether we want to or not, we swim in an ocean of consumption, and can't help but drown in it.

Can I be honest with you? I think we do a great disservice to the church and to our Savior when we throw "consumers" under the bus. These are people whom God created in His image, who have rebelled against Him, and yet share our confession of the salvation and Lordship of Christ. Yes I have the responsibility to challenge and confront their sin, but I cannot stand in self-righteous judgment!

I think our tone in teaching subtly started to attack people, and it actually hurt the bride of Christ. The unintended consequence of our critique was that people felt belittled, judged and ultimately unworthy of the gospel to our shame.

You can kill missional culture by catering to consumerism, but we must fight to love consumers by the power of the Spirit.

Don't cater to consumerism, but love consumers. They need the gospel as much as anyone.

Two Ways to Fight

So here's two ways we learned to fight:

- × Pray for consumers
- × Confront consumerism with ministry systems that expect change

Prayer will give you an affection for your people and help you not treat them like objects.

Also, I would exhort you to build ministry in your church that challenges consumerism. Your systems must challenge the predominant actions where they aren't consistent with the gospel.

For us, when we think about discipleship, that means meeting people where they are, and taking them where Jesus wants them to go. So we have articulated our discipleship process this way:

*We are taking consumers and
helping them become missionaries.*

Almost everything we do attempts to love people where they are, but gently and firmly challenge them to take a next step of obedience. We don't lower the bar of discipleship, but we have realistic expectations now of how people change in a consumer culture.

Responses

The most freeing truth for me, as a leader in consumer culture, is that Jesus died for consumers so I don't have to. When you're leading consumers, remember the truth of the gospel:

Jesus died for consumers so we can be patient with them, but Jesus also rose in victory over consumerism so we can be free from it.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

Recap

So we killed missional culture by assuming the gospel, by casting vision without practices, and finally by not loving consumers.

So here's what you can conclude from this talk – The Austin Stone is one messed up church. We've made more mistakes than we can count. We wanted a movement so badly, but we foolishly pursued it without thoughtful humility.

Where Are We Now?

By God's grace, The Austin Stone has learned to repent of wanting something more than Jesus, to help others want Jesus more, and to be patient and firm as we walk forward together for God's glory.

So where are we now, 5 years later?

Through patient, long-suffering discipleship, the 10% of those living the vision has grown to almost 50%. The 60% who need some help is now 40%, and the 30% who ignore us is only 10%.

God has changed our people through the gospel, simple reproducible practices, and loving consumers but challenging consumerism.

Although we aren't perfect, almost 1/4 of our missional communities have made a disciple of Jesus. Many more are tangibly demonstrating the kingdom by adopting children, advocating for missionaries overseas, getting to know their neighbors, mentoring at-risk youth, and a variety of other things.

Above all, the gospel is being shared and many lost people are experiencing a broken, yet grace-filled community.

Conclusion

The good news for The Austin Stone is that Jesus reigns over His church gently but firmly. He will keep us from assuming the gospel, He will help us give practical direction, and He will help us overcome consumerism.

We've done so many things to kill a missional culture, but praise God for His unending grace.

In short, Jesus will build his church.

ABOUT TODD ENGSTROM



Although I was raised in the church and had a knowledge of God, I didn't embrace Jesus until I heard gospel preached and lived out by some Young Life leaders. God has proven faithful and good to me since that day, even in great suffering and loss. I have learned to treasure Romans 8:28 as a wellspring of hope and truth.

God has blessed me with an amazing wife (Olivia), three sons (Micah, Hudson and Owen) and a daughter (Emmaline). Growing up in the northwest, the thought never crossed my mind that I would have four children who are native Texans. Despite landing in the south, I still watch Notre Dame games with my children every Saturday in hopes they will land at my alma mater.

Since 2004, I have served in several capacities at The Austin Stone — leading a setup team, leading missional communities, overseeing the college ministry, directing our connections ministry, serving as pastor of missional communities, and now as executive pastor of campuses and communities.

I am humbled by all I have seen the Lord do in and through The Austin Stone, and yet eagerly desire to see Him worshipped by more people and the city of Austin transformed through the power of the gospel.

My passions include my family, discipleship, missional communities, the local church, and a host of other things. This blog is my exploration into many of those topics, and I pray it's a help to you!

If you'd like to interact with me, you can find me in these places:

Twitter (@toodus) | Facebook (toddengstrom) | LinkedIn (toddengstrom)