



The Core Convictions of The Austin Stone

Covenant Community

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ 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, ⁴⁷ 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)

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

(Acts 4:32-34)

We see that the members of the early church had a common identity in Christ. They valued the Lord and His commands above everything. And what happened? “The Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” This was a tangible fulfilling of the Great Commission Jesus had given the disciples in the moments before He

ascended into heaven. This is still the mission that God has for us today. Until Christ returns, we are to spend our lives for the sake of bringing more people into the family of God: making disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded.

In John 17, Jesus prays for His disciples only moments before He was handed over to be crucified:

¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. ²⁰ I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

(John 17:16-26)

Community is so important that Christ prayed for the unity of believers. As followers of Jesus, we give those who are not yet God's people a glimpse of God's future kingdom. As brothers and sisters, we live together in such a way that it points to the reality that things will not always be as they are now. The good news is that God has shown us how His family should function so that we accurately display that picture to the world.

The church is not here to simply benefit us. Rather, in view of all that we have received from Christ, we should seek to meet the needs of others. In this way, we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He Himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Our gifts and callings should serve to edify this body. This is how God has designed community to function.

²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

(Hebrews 10:24-25)

¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

(Hebrews 3:12-15)

Christian covenant community is different from other forms of community. What brings us together is the fact that Christ has purchased for us a new identity that connects us as brothers and sisters, from now until eternity. This is a community that

will not end. Partnering with a local church is a participation in a community that will be perfected and enjoyed forever.

Covenant community is a community based on a promise to one another. In the Old Testament, the two parties of a covenant would stand in the blood of a split-open animal and say, "Let what has happened to this animal happen to me if I'm not faithful to keeping this promise." Now, don't panic! No one is going to be killing anybody! But the image tells us a covenant community isn't something to be entered into lightly.

At The Austin Stone, we believe that consistent involvement in community is imperative for the health of your soul. Through different seasons of life, you will feel tempted to avoid opening yourself up to other broken people. When we are hurting, we often fear that no one will understand us, or if they do, that they will be horrified by what they see. While this feeling is understandable, it fails to recognize God's plan for community. He has made it so that people will function better together than apart.

At The Austin Stone, we believe that consistent involvement in community is equally imperative for the health of other people's souls. You are needed. God says that without your participation, the body of Christ will suffer. God has spiritually gifted you in unique and essential ways, so your participation in community is vital for the flourishing of those around you. To neglect community is not just to damage your own soul. It's to cripple the body of Christ as well.

In covenant community, we love and watch out for one another. We encourage each other to treasure Jesus above everything else. We endure unimaginable sorrow together. We celebrate new life and new seasons of life together. We look out for the needs of one another, and when we are able, we meet those needs. We pray for God to add to our

fold, and we go out and tell others about Him. We do this so that “the world may believe” that Jesus is who He says He is.

For these and many other reasons, we at The Austin Stone are committed to covenant community.

How This Is Lived Out at The Austin Stone

Annual Partnership Renewal

Partnership at The Austin Stone is not a lifetime promise we make to each other, but rather a commitment we renew each year. As we discussed earlier, a covenant community should not be entered into without careful consideration and prayer. We are not standing in the blood of an animal while making a promise, like in the Old Testament. But we are taking the commitment we make to one another seriously. Look at the way the apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonian church:

⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

(1 Thessalonians 5:8–11)

Each year, we enter a season as a church family where all partners are asked to soberly reflect on all that the Lord is doing in and through their life. This is called Annual Partnership Renewal. It is an opportunity for partners to share the good, bad, painful, and joyful moments of the year with each

other, and to encourage one another. Annual Partnership Renewal is a chance to assess what the Lord is doing in your life before renewing your covenant with each other. It is saying that you want to renew a covenant with this community of believers for another year.

Missional Community

Many churches have a version of small groups that meet throughout the week. At The Austin Stone, we call our version Missional Communities. For us, a Missional Community is not just a Bible study. It's not a fellowship group, a social club, or a support group. While healthy Missional Communities include all of those things over time, its primary identity is a family of missionaries learning to follow Jesus together in every area of their lives. A Missional Community is a small group of people trying to live out Acts 2:42-47.

We live in Missional Communities together at The Austin Stone because we see the church of the New Testament gathering in larger settings for corporate worship and in homes doing life together. We firmly believe that a covenant community involves more than just one kind of gathering for God's people.

Missional Communities are a natural outworking of the kind of church we want to be in the city of Austin. But the church isn't complete with Missional Communities alone. We also need to gather together to hear the Word of God preached and to exalt Christ in song corporately. This leads us to the next way a commitment to covenant community is lived out in the life of our church.

Committing and Contributing to a Congregation

We gather on Sundays to worship together and hear the Word of God preached. When the local church gathers, it's like a rehearsal of the worship that will take place for all eternity when Jesus returns. Jesus came to gather all of His people from every tongue, tribe, and nation. When we corporately gather, we're longing together for that day when we will be together with all of God's people to worship Him.

In order to make this "rehearsal" happen, it takes the active participation of hundreds of people serving at each congregation every week. There are teams of people at each congregation who set up chairs, make coffee, help with parking, pray, change diapers, teach kids, lead worship, and do countless other tasks so that we can gather each week to worship together and hear the Word of God preached. It has been said that "Sundays come with alarming regularity." They do. Thus, we have a great need for faithful men and women to help fill these needs.

If it were not for the dedication of our partners, Sunday gatherings would not happen. We believe that God has given each person unique expressions of His grace through various talents, gifts, and passions for the sake of serving one another and glorifying God. When we commit to a congregation and volunteer our time and talents, we display our commitment to covenant community and we prepare our hearts for heaven.

Benevolence

One final way that a commitment to covenant community is expressed at The Austin Stone is through how we actively provide for the needs of each other. At The Austin Stone, we take seriously the mode of covenant community that was lived out in the early church.

³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

(Acts 4:34)

We declare and demonstrate the mercy of Jesus by laboring together with our neighbors for their physical, social, emotional, and spiritual reconciliation. Partners at The Austin Stone are called not only to provide for the needs of those around them, but also to explicitly ask for help when they are in need.

There are literally countless stories of partners who have been in need and have seen God graciously provide for them through the support of their Missional Community. There are stories of people who have been devastatingly shocked to learn of seemingly insurmountable medical expenses. What an amazing joy it is when a Missional Community rallies together and says, "You have a need and we can help you meet that need."

The above situation is not at all uncommon. If the need is bigger than the Missional Community can meet, it is taken to the larger body of The Austin Stone. The benevolence team then coordinates ways in which the whole body of believers can help the partner in need. There is almost no limit to where our church will go to ensure there is not a needy person among us.

Partnership Agreements

Partnership is a commitment to participate in covenant community. A partner is different than a casual attender in our church in several distinct ways. More than just a title, a partner is asked to agree to several specific things. Partnership agreements are not commitments made to elders of the church, but commitments partners make to each other.

Because we are committed to covenant community, partners at The Austin Stone agree to:

1. Actively participate in biblical community that provides accountability with other believers and aligns with the vision and mission of The Austin Stone

Missional Communities are one of the primary ways we shepherd our church body to be faithful disciples of Jesus and to grow in Christlikeness. The rhythms of Missional Community that we have outlined help ensure accountability to the basic disciplines of the Christian faith. A few times a year, we work through content together, under the direction of our elders, to keep our entire church aligned toward Missional Community.

In some cases, partners may not be able to participate in a Missional Community at The Austin Stone, but will pursue biblical community through other means.

2. Engage primarily with one congregation through regular attendance and service

The Austin Stone exists as one church expressed in several congregations. This particularity of our church is advantageous for several reasons. For example, we are able to reach a number of different neighborhoods and communities throughout the city of Austin, because we are strategically located in north, central, south, and western corners of our city. Each congregation is able to reflect distinct qualities of the region they are trying to reach.

This is not without its challenges. At a church our size, it can be easy to attend but not be engaged with anyone else. We have frequently seen

this play out in two ways: (1) Some people may attend multiple congregations with no regular engagement in any of them. (2) Some people may attend inconsistently on Sundays.

Partners at The Austin Stone are asked to commit to one congregation and regularly attend Sunday services there. This doesn't mean that partners are permanently bound to one congregation every Sunday. Rather, this means that partners should seek to be familiar faces at their congregations, knowing their leadership and other partners. A covenant community will not exist if people are inconsistently meeting together.

Additionally, all partners commit to serving at least once a month in a specific role on a Sunday service team. The exception to this is when partners are highly involved in other forms of service through the church, like leading Missional Communities or leading in non-Sunday programs like RBI.

3. Refrain from speaking or acting in a manner that would weaken the unity of the Spirit in the body of Christ

Augustine, a second-century theologian and early church father, famously hung a sign on the wall of his dining room that read:

Whoever speaks an evil word of an absent man or woman is not welcome at this table.

Gossip is cancer to unity. It is hurtful to the individual, and it is hurtful to the testimony of the church. Gossip has no place in carrying out the mission of Christ in our church. In order to discern if something is gossip, ask yourself

if it is true, necessary, and beneficial. If it isn't, then it is probably dangerous to the unity of the Spirit and should not be shared.

Every day, churches around the world die from the cancer of disunity within their church. Therefore, partners at The Austin Stone agree to submit themselves to the accountability of other partners. Partners can also expect to be disciplined if they speak or act in a manner that weakens the unity of the Spirit in the body of Christ.

4. Submit to the care and direction of the elders of The Austin Stone, knowing they are charged by God with the responsibility of leading, feeding, and protecting our partners

The Austin Stone is a church led by a team of people known as elders. Partners are asked to submit to pastoral care and direction of the

elders. This means when something is amiss in our lives, we should seek the elders' guidance, help, and wisdom.

We are a church that believes we need each other to remain faithful to Jesus until the end. We are committed to Jesus, His mission, and each other. The mission God has given us is to know, love, and obey God, by declaring and demonstrating the gospel wherever God has us. To see this mission lived out, it will take the active participation of all our covenanting partners. For us to go where God has called us, we must go together.

The Holy Spirit

NEAR THE END of His ministry on earth, Jesus said something to the disciples that must have shocked them. He said:

⁵ “But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’
⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. ⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.”

(John 16:5-7)

How could it possibly be advantageous for Jesus to go away? What is better than Jesus in the flesh?

The disciples must have been shocked when they learned that their Savior was leaving them. But listen to the precious promise Jesus gave them about the Holy Spirit immediately after telling them of His departure:

¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authori-

ty, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

(John 16:12–15)

A personal relationship with God did not end when Jesus went away. The relationship deepened and became more intimate. The Holy Spirit—God Himself—lives in us. He takes the righteousness of Christ and declares it to us, who were once separated from God.

We believe the Holy Spirit has eternally existed as a member of the Trinity, being fully God and indwelling all believers since the day of Pentecost. We believe the Holy Spirit is not a force of energy. He is a person, and He is God. It is important for every believer to understand the unique ways in which the Holy Spirit is empowering us every day to glorify Christ.

As a church, without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we will bear no fruit and will cease from being a church. If you are a Christian, the Holy Spirit is present right now in your life. He is working in countless ways to help you see, love, and obey Christ through His Word, to become conformed more into His image, and then to display His glory to the world.

We will now discuss another explicit value of our church. It is one closely related to the Holy Spirit. At The Austin Stone, we are ruled by God’s Word.

Biblical Authority

You will find that most Christian churches include a reading or teaching from the Bible in their weekly gatherings. However, not every church believes the same thing about the Bible. So what does The Austin Stone believe and teach?

We believe the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts, written by men under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. The Bible, including all the books of the Old and New Testament, is Holy Scripture and the inspired, true Word of God. It is fully authoritative and our only absolutely trustworthy guide for life and faith.

This means in the life of a Christ-follower, there is nothing as important as hearing, reading, and meditating on the Word of God. There is no substitute for it. God has communicated to us through the Bible everything necessary for salvation, faith, and obedience.

¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

(2 Timothy 3:16-17)

¹⁹ And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

(2 Peter 1:19-21)

We strive for the Word of God to guide all that we believe and do at The Austin Stone. We also go to the Word of God to be nourished and hear God speak each and every day. We believe the Holy Spirit is at work in every believer, opening eyes and hearts when believers open and ponder the Word of God. So where the Bible speaks, God speaks. Where God speaks, it is good news to those who love Him. We invite all our partners to participate with the psalmist who wrote, “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Psalm 119:97).

This discussion is by no means a comprehensive treatment of what we at The Austin Stone believe concerning God’s Word. Rather, the hope is that you would see that we aspire to treat the Bible for what it is: the living Word of the living God. We want to be people that, if God speaks, we listen—and God has spoken. Therefore, we let what God has clearly spoken rule over everything we believe and do.

When we gather on Sundays—God’s Word is taught.

When Missional Communities meet—God’s Word is studied.

When tragedy strikes—God’s Word comforts us.

When we’re living in disobedience—God’s Word convicts us.

When we’re confused—God’s Word instructs us.

Where our culture is at odds with the gospel of Jesus—it is God’s Word we stand on.

Prayer

What is prayer? What is the relationship between prayer, the Holy Spirit, and God’s Word? Why is The Austin Stone reliant on prayer? We won’t be able to answer each of those questions fully here, but we will talk about each of them briefly.

We define prayer as personal communion with God. Prayer is not made so that God can find out what we need. As Jesus tells us, “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8). God wants us to pray, because prayer expresses our trust in God. It is a means by which our trust in Him is expressed and can increase.

Prayer is the act of not hiding yourself from God. Sin tells you that you don’t need God, He is not good, and He can’t be trusted. Prayer opposes that mentality. Prayer involves entrusting your life to God, bringing your sins, struggles, wants, and needs before Him, and then submitting to His wisdom, power, and goodness in all things.

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 4:6-7)

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

(Romans 8:26–28)

If we pray little, it is probably because we do not believe that prayer accomplishes much. But if such things are accomplished through prayer, then consider how much spiritual opposition we face every day to keep us from praying. If you were the enemy, where would you concentrate your attack? The enemy would much prefer a prayerless, busy Christian than a Christian who prays.

Now look at the way in which the apostle Paul prays. Notice the specific things he says and the way he acknowledges the God to whom he prays.

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. ¹ I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

(Ephesians 3:14–4:1)

At The Austin Stone, we have seen God move in miraculous ways. The prayer from the beginning of our church has been this: “God, would you do something so great that no one could take credit for it but you?” God has answered that prayer, doing so many great things that no one in our church can take credit for them.

We are not done praying this kind of prayer, because we know that God is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or could imagine. Right now, in each and every believer, the Holy Spirit is presently working within you, and He has unimaginable power to do immeasurably more. God is sovereign and does all that He pleases. And yet, He has set it up that much of His will is sovereignly accomplished through the prayers of His people. His power is both expressed and accomplished through prayer.

Prayer is communion with God, and one aspect of that communion involves believing that God’s power is still manifested in the here and now—that He is still actively working in our world. We are arrogant when we try to accomplish the works of God apart from relying on God Himself. This is why we say we are reliant on prayer—both in our everyday lives as Christians and as a church with a mission to see Christ glorified.

How This Is Lived Out at The Austin Stone

Life Transformation (Accountability) Groups

²² Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. ²⁵ Therefore, having

put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

(Ephesians 4:22–25)

One of the most fruitful ways we have seen the Spirit empower our people to put off the old self with its deceitful desires and to put on the new self created in the likeness of God, is through Life Transformation Groups. Also referred to as “Discipleship Groups,” Life Transformation Groups (LTGs) are small groups of two or three believers of the same gender who commit to meeting together consistently to hold one another accountable to being faithful disciples of Jesus in everyday life. It is a consistent relationship with trusted friends who set time aside each week to do primarily three things:

1. Hear from God’s Word and share how you obeyed it
2. Repent and confess your sins, and share your belief in the gospel
3. Consider how you can tangibly serve and pray by name for nonbelievers

We believe regular participation in an LTG is an effective way to grow in Christlikeness. It puts into practice the command given in Galatians 5:16 to walk and be led by the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, we will neither have the eyes to see God’s words as truth nor the power to obey them. Apart from the Holy Spirit, we won’t have the conviction to repent of sins or the courage to confess them to others. And we need the Holy Spirit to effectively serve the world and share the gospel. In other words, being empowered by the Holy Spirit is the only way to adhere to the basic disciplines of the Christian faith, and we need other Spirit-empowered believers holding us accountable to these disciplines.

Although there are many ways being empowered by the Holy Spirit is expressed in our church, an LTG is one of the most tangible. If you are interested in participating in an LTG, you don’t have to wait. Consider the people God has placed in your life and prayerfully consider asking one or two of them if they would be interested in committing to an LTG with you.

Next, we will cover some of the ways we see the value of being ruled by God’s Word lived out in the life of our church.

Daily Intake of God's Word

We can’t love, worship, or obey what we don’t know. From the beginning (Genesis 1), God has chosen to reveal aspects of His character to us through His Word, the Bible. Jesus says His Word is the Bread of Life, meaning that it sustains us and gives us life.

Our ambition at The Austin Stone is to be people who love the Scriptures and not people who see His Word as an optional supplement in our lives. The more we read God’s Word, the more we learn about God. The more we learn about God, the more glorious we see that He is. The more we behold God’s glory, the more we worship Him. In addition, His Word nourishes our bodies and souls and instructs us about all things necessary for salvation, life, and evangelism.

How do we do practice submitting to God’s Word as partners at The Austin Stone? We read and meditate on Scripture daily. We give our best energy and time to studying God’s Word and to prayer.

Many people in our church use a Bible reading plan for their daily intake of God’s Word. Our website and church app offer an easy way to read the Bible

each day, taking you through the entire Bible in a year by reading portions of the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Psalms each day.

Not only do we read God's Word, but we also study it and strive to trust and obey all that God says in it. To do this, many people in our church use a tool called REAP. REAP stands for read, examine, apply, and pray. While REAP isn't the only way to read and study God's Word, it is a method we commend to you as an excellent tool to be in the Word regularly.

Preaching God's Word

You can expect to encounter several elements each time we gather together on Sundays. One of those is the preaching of the Bible. The only assurance we have of God speaking to us is by speaking God's Word. Where Scripture speaks, God speaks. The Word of God speaks to people infinitely more than human wisdom ever could. God's Word transforms. Through it, we behold the glory of Christ in the Word of God, and through the empowering work of the Holy Spirit, our affections are set on fire!

Our preaching and teaching ministries are built on the foundation of God and His gospel being central to our message. Primarily, this is done through *expository preaching*. Expository preaching goes through entire books of the Bible verse by verse. This method of preaching lets the biblical text determine the direction of each sermon.

As our preachers preach through entire books of the Bible verse by verse, they model how we, the congregation, can approach daily Bible reading and prayer. Preaching this way teaches us to study all of God's Word and to ask questions like the following ones: What is God's standard? How have I failed to live by that standard? How is Jesus my perfect

Savior who obeyed God's standard perfectly? When we study entire books of the Bible verse by verse, we say, "God, if you would speak, we will listen."

Singing God's Word

The Austin Stone has been blessed with a number of gifted worship leaders and musicians. Songs written for our church are sung all around the world! We believe singing together is so important to the life of our church that we spend nearly half of our Sunday services singing. There is a high value in our church for musical excellence, and great care is taken each week to consider environments, music, and liturgy.

In addition to prizing musical excellence and worshipful environments, we value songs with good and rich theology. What is good theology? Good theology is measured by how closely a song adheres to the clear teachings of Scripture. The Word of God is powerful, because where Scripture speaks, God speaks. We want to hear God speak when we gather on Sundays. Therefore, good theology in worship is not only important. It is crucial.

The elders carefully consider every song written and sung in our church to make sure they doctrinally align with what we believe is true from the Bible. We seek to sing God's Word explicitly or to sing words that point us to God's Word. While this may seem like an unnecessary rigidity to corporate worship, we are ruled by God's Word. This value has been a part of who we are from the beginning of our church, and we have seen it bear much fruit.

We will now talk briefly about one way we live out a reliance on prayer at our church.

Prayer Gatherings

As was mentioned earlier, prayer is an integral part of a Christian's daily devotions with the Lord. Partners are encouraged to have a set-apart time each day for individual Bible reading and for prayer. But there is another element to prayer: praying with other people. Partners at each congregation are regularly called together for a time of prayer. During this time, congregation elders and leaders share vision and updates on what God is doing in and through our church in our city and beyond. These gatherings are also an opportunity to meet other people at your congregation and to join together in praying for specific things.

Since the beginning of The Austin Stone, God has been at work, not just according to, but far beyond the prayers of His people. Were it not for the faithful prayers of many saints, the story of The Austin Stone would not be a story at all.

Partnership Agreements

Because we are empowered by the Holy Spirit, ruled by God's Word, and reliant on prayer, partners at The Austin Stone agree to:

- 1. Follow the example of Christ in personal holiness in all of life, and pursue accountability from one another**

This commitment means we will submit to the authority of the Holy Spirit and repent of the times when we don't submit. We will be sensitive to the Spirit's conviction. We will surrender ourselves to the Scriptures, which the Holy Spirit uses as a means to develop our character and conform us into the image and likeness of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. We will live

in community with other believers. We will also join smaller accountability groups where we confess sin, tell each other how God is moving, and pray.

- 2. Abide in Christ daily through the reading of Scripture and prayer**

Jesus says in Matthew 4:4 that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God." We want to be disciplined people who seek God in the Scriptures every day. We want to depend on the Word of God in the same way we depend on food to nourish our bodies. Who has ever approached eating breakfast with a sense of duty? We don't eat breakfast out of duty. We eat breakfast because it nourishes our bodies and is usually an enjoyable experience!

Partners at The Austin Stone acknowledge we are dependent on Christ for everything. In John 15, Jesus says, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me." But what does it mean to "abide in Christ"? The word "abide" means waiting, staying, dwelling, lingering, and remaining. To abide in Christ means we seek daily communion with Him through Scripture and prayer. We see the commands in Scripture to seek after God and cry, "Yes! I need that!" Disciples of Christ want to grow in intimacy with God and conformity to His Son. When those things feel like a burden, we continue reading the Scriptures in faith, remembering God has commanded we come to Him.

1 Chronicles 16:11 says, "Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually!"

Psalm 16:11 says, “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

The command to abide in Christ is the command to find deep and lasting joy and pleasure. Who doesn't want that? Partners at The Austin Stone agree to pursue pleasure in Christ by abiding in Christ each day through the reading of His Word and prayer.

3. Consistently pray for one another and our church leaders, and regularly attend congregation prayer gatherings

Our access to God in prayer reminds us we don't worship some far-off deity. We worship a God who is intimately close to us. Prayer connects our hearts with God's heart. We acknowledge God is our Father, and He is holy. He is the King, and we live in His kingdom. He gives us everything we need. Everything that happens to us is working together for our good. We can trust Him.

When we pray for one another, we take the call to intercede seriously, knowing that it is the preeminent work of the church to pray. When

we pray for our leaders, we pray for their joy and perseverance, knowing they have been called by God to shepherd our souls.

We also remember God hears the prayers of the righteous. When God's people pray, He moves. He moves in ways we can't imagine, and He does more than we can even think to ask.

What do partners at The Austin Stone do? We pray really big and bold prayers, knowing we speak with a God who has unimaginable power to do anything He wants. We look at what God has promised to do in His Word, and we ask Him to do it. Our Father loves when His children ask Him to do the things He has already promised to do. Prayer conforms our will to His.

No matter what our prayer lives look like today, there is no end to the depths of intimacy we can enjoy with God. Each one of us can take another step toward connecting our hearts with God's heart through prayer.

If you are a Christian, the Holy Spirit is present right now in your life, working in countless ways to help you see and love Christ through His Word, and He is producing in you faith that causes you to call out to God in prayer.

Christ-Centeredness

WHO IS JESUS? The importance of that question cannot be understated. Everything hinges on it. Few reputable people will argue about the existence of Jesus. There is simply too much evidence that proves Jesus was a man who lived during the first century. That is not what people argue about. What

people argue about is whether or not Jesus was more than just a man. Who is Jesus? This is the question we all must answer. It was even being asked in the first century.

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”

(Matthew 16:13-17)

Who is Jesus? Jesus answered that question by saying, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6 ESV).

Jesus is the greatest teacher the world has ever known, but a distinction here should be made. Teaching was not Jesus’ primary mission. Many people want to accept Jesus as a teacher or moral guide, but not as a Savior. Calling Jesus “Savior” implies people need to be saved, and that is a foolish thought for many. Other people don’t like that Jesus is the only Savior for mankind. They suggest we limit our adherence to Christ only as much as it helps us to love and be good to other people. However, people who acknowledge Jesus as only a teacher fail to acknowledge the claims Jesus made about Himself. Jesus said He was the Son of God and the only way to God. Someone who was only a good moral teacher would never say something like that. C.S. Lewis describes the situation this way:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral

teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

—C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic, or He was who He said He was.

We believe Jesus is who He says He is. He is the Christ. He is the eternal Son of God. He is the one whom the prophets spoke of, and He is the only name in heaven or on earth by which we are saved. That is who Jesus is, but what did He do, and why was it necessary? As believers, both Jesus’ divine personhood and finished work play an essential role in our daily lives. What did Jesus do for us?

²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

(2 Corinthians 5:21)

³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

(Romans 8:3-4)

The gospel is the news that Jesus Christ, the righteous One, died for our sins and rose again, eternally triumphant over all His enemies. There is now no condemnation for those who believe. Those who trust in the gospel of Jesus, the good news, are set free from the slavery of sin, filled with the Holy Spirit to do the works of God, and eagerly await the day when they will be with Jesus forever.

Therefore, the gospel is not only the necessary knowledge for how a sinner can be saved. The gospel is good news that continuously works in the life of all believers and the church (Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 1:18). The gospel must be applied to all of life. To be Christ-centered in focus means that the ambition of everything we do is aimed at valuing Jesus, His work, and His glory above everything else.

The gospel isn't only for us, either. Jesus' precious blood did not simply buy our ticket to heaven. In reconciling us to God, Jesus bought for us freedom to serve, love, and live for His glory for however long He keeps us here on earth.

Look how Colossians 1 brings together the Christ-centeredness of all things with the salvation of His people.

¹⁵ He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. ²¹ And you, who once were alienated and

hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

(Colossians 1:15–22)

Although we can know some things about God by looking at nature and creation (Romans 1:19–20), we learn the most by going to the Bible. There, God speaks most specifically about Himself and His glory. From the beginning of creation, everything has always been about Him! Look at the first words of the Bible: “In the beginning, God ...” And in the last chapter of the Bible, Jesus says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Revelation 22:13).

If we were to look at all of the words in between the first and last chapters of the Bible, we will come to see the Bible is not a book primarily about you and me. The Bible is a book about God. He is at the center of everything, and all that exists and occurs does so to display the riches of His glory.

John Piper describes it like this:

Sometimes people say that they cannot believe that, if there is a God, he would take interest in such a tiny speck of reality called humanity on Planet Earth. The universe, they say, is so vast, it makes man utterly insignificant. Why would God have bothered to create such a microscopic speck called the earth and humanity and then get involved with us? Beneath this question is a fundamental failure to see what the universe is about. It is about the greatness of God, not the significance of man. God made man small and the universe big to say something about himself. And he says it for us to learn and enjoy—namely, that he is infinitely great and powerful and wise and beautiful. The more the Hubble Telescope sends back to us about the unfathomable depths

of space, the more we should stand in awe of God. The disproportion between us and the universe is a parable about the disproportion between us and God. And it is an understatement. But the point is not to nullify us but to glorify him.¹

At The Austin Stone, we believe Jesus is the one by whom and for whom all things exist. Therefore, our ambition as a church is to treasure Him above all else and to obey His command to go and tell other people this glorious truth.

Mission

THE WORD “MISSION” is a word you don’t often hear outside of a church. Churches have mission statements and missions pastors. They organize short-term mission trips and take up mission offerings to send to missionaries. But what is mission? Is it possible to be so saturated by a word, that you begin to forget what it means? It’s like asking a fish to describe water. “What is water?” the fish asks.

The word mission is used a lot in the church—and for good reason. Mission is not one of the things we do as a church, it is the thing we are doing as a church.

We have briefly covered who Jesus is and what Jesus did. To explain what we mean by “mission,” we are now going to look at why Jesus did what He did. What was His mission, and what mission has He given us?

Christ is at the center of everything, and we are not. This truth does not make people insignificant. On the contrary! Jesus at the center of everything proves how significant we are to God. Jesus is the best thing for us. Jesus Himself said, “I have come that you might have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). It is only when we center our mind’s attention and our heart’s affections on Jesus that we flourish as human beings. We are a Christ-centered people, because that is what God designed us to be. We will never be fully happy if we set our gaze elsewhere.

Jesus came to save sinners. That was His mission. He has done all the work necessary to accomplish that mission, and He has promised that it will be done. Jesus did everything that was necessary to save a people for Himself. When He hung on the cross and cried, “It is finished,” He meant:

- **His obedience was finished.** We could never obey the way Jesus did. Now the fullness of His obedience has become ours in salvation.
- **His suffering was finished.** Christ died once, for all. There will never be another Savior for humanity.
- **The wrath of God was removed from His people.** Christ took on the wrath for the sins of God’s people. God is just. He will not punish the same sins twice.

1. John Piper, *Don’t Waste Your Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 34.

- **Satan was struck down with a death blow.** We no longer fear Satan or the consequence of sin, which is death.
- **A new covenant began.** The new covenant says that all who trust in Jesus are given eternal life.

Jesus has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. He did everything necessary to purchase salvation for His people, and yet Jesus Himself did not take the gospel to every individual who would be saved. In other words, Jesus is saying:

It is finished, and because it is finished, the mission begins. I have done everything required to save my people, but guess who is going to tell them about it? You are! I want you to share in this with me. I want you to have the joy of seeing dead people come to life, blind eyes being opened, and hardened hearts made soft when the knowledge of the glory of God becomes good news to them.

Until Christ returns, we are committed to being a church that is relentless in His mission. We are on God's mission for seeing Habakkuk's prophecy fulfilled: "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14).

Christ entrusts this mission to us. His plan is for the Spirit-empowered people of God to bear witness to the world of the supreme value of Jesus Christ above everything else. All people need Jesus. The mission we aim for is to boldly and joyfully declare the good news of the gospel to everyone, everywhere. This gospel is good news because we get Jesus. He becomes the center of our lives

When you bring these two convictions—gospel centrality and God's glory—together, our ambition as a church becomes clear. We want the glory of God

to extend to the ends of the earth, and we believe that will only happen as Christ becomes the center of more and more lives.

We see God's passion for His own glory in this world from the beginning. He created men and women in His image to declare His reign and rule in all of creation. He told them to be fruitful and multiply to fill the earth with more image-bearers of Himself. Every place we see this image, we are to be reminded of God's good and sovereign reign. But sin ruined everything. God's image-bearers rejected God. We chose to pursue our own glory rather than God's. Since then, we have been actively ruining and being ruined.

As 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." The image-bearers have been abusing their privilege, trying to dethrone and kill the King. In the process, we suffer and die from our rebellion. The problem is so deep that we can't see the light of the glory of Christ.

But God has a plan to establish His glory. 2 Corinthians 4:6 goes on to say, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

God had a plan for redemption. The Father sent Jesus, not as a broken image-bearer like the rest of us, but as the exact image of God. He lived the perfect life that Adam, Eve, and all of us have failed to live. Then Jesus did something that no one expected. The Son of God—perfect and blameless—died a gruesome death on the darkest day in history so that sin could be paid for and God's justice could be satisfied. All of this was God's plan from the beginning. Despite the callous way we sought to ruin His image and defile His name, He loved us. Only

God could take the most evil act in history and use it for the greatest good. Only He could conceive a plan for our redemption that forgives us of our sin and adopts us as His children. People are uncommonly valuable, and God has gone to great lengths to prove it!

People all around the world are dying to hear this gospel. They are dying to know there is a God who would go to such great lengths to love them, who has an answer to their sin problem, who can heal their sickness, and who can set them free from Satan's grip. Our mission, as a church, is to take that good news to people everywhere. Our mission is His mission.

If you are in Christ, God chose you to be a part of this mission. He redeemed you for good works. He has filled you with His Spirit to testify of His goodness. He is on a mission to glorify Himself through you. One day, the earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of God, because God's image-bearers will cover it. This is the mission of God, and He is using us, the church, to accomplish that mission.

This mission is a joyful mission! Ask anyone who has been praying for years to see a beloved friend or family member come to trust in Christ. Ask them what it was like to see that person believe in Jesus. Ask anyone who has gone overseas and witnessed to someone who has never heard about Christ. Ask them about the joy they experienced as they saw eyes opened. When this happens, God gets glory, and we get joy. We serve a God who does not make us choose between obeying Him and being truly happy. We serve a God who grows our happiness as we follow Him.

At the center of the universe is the glory of God.

- **Why did God make everything, including us?** For His own glory.

- **Why did Jesus come to die?** For His own glory.
- **Why does Jesus command us to love and obey Him?** For His own glory.
- **Why does Jesus save sinners?** For His own glory.
- **Why does The Austin Stone exist?** To show His glory.

The ultimate aim of the gospel is not for sinners to be saved. It's for God to get glory by sinners being saved. In this, we come to see that to be Christ-centered in focus is to be relentless in mission.

How This Is Lived Out at The Austin Stone

Baptism

Every time a person enters into a new life with Jesus Christ, the Bible says all of heaven rejoices. Baptism is an expression of being Christ-centered in focus and being relentless in mission. Baptism is Christ-centered in focus, because it is an outward proclamation of an inward reality. God has given that person new life. As believers are immersed in the waters, they proclaim that the old self, enslaved to unbelief and sin, has died. As believers are raised up out of the waters, they are proclaiming that the new self, freed from sin and death, has been raised in the resurrection of Jesus. They are proclaiming that they now belong to Jesus.

Baptism is also an expression of being relentless in mission. In the Great Commission, Jesus commanded us to make disciples of all nations and to baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Communion

One of the ways Jesus instructs His church to center on Him is through the regular practice of communion, or the Lord's Supper. When we break the bread together, we are reminded that Jesus' body was broken for us. When we drink from the cup, we are reminded of the precious blood our Savior shed for us. This memorial practice keeps our hearts and minds centered on the finished work of Christ!

The Austin Stone regularly celebrates communion in our Sunday gatherings and at our congregation prayer services.

Local Mission

The Austin Stone is committed to making disciples of all nations. This means we are committed to making disciples in our neighborhoods and in the city around us. We are held accountable to mission in our Missional Communities, and we corporately make disciples through participating in the church.

We also collectively seek to make disciples by demonstrating God's kingdom through mercy and justice. For the City helps partners at The Austin Stone serve the poor, the orphan, and the widow in our city. Each congregation also participates in unique, local service opportunities that are aligned with our mission as a church.

National Mission

The Austin Stone is known around the country for its commitment to planting other churches. We are involved with initiatives like the North American Mission Board (NAMB). We are able to provide meaningful financial support and leadership training to called and qualified people planting churches all over the United States.

Global Mission

The Austin Stone is also committed to seeing disciples being made among every nation around the world. Jesus said we would be His witnesses throughout the entire earth, and by God's grace, The Austin Stone has sent over 200 people to the nations. Isn't it amazing to think that with all of our missionaries around the world, the sun never sets on the ministry that God is doing through those He has sent out through The Austin Stone?

You can participate in this global mission by praying, mobilizing, sending, advocating, and giving. Your congregation leadership can provide more details, but many of our partners choose to support our goers through advocacy in prayer. You can also go to the nations yourself through our For the Nations team.

Advocacy Teams

An advocacy team is the most tangible expression of our church's commitment to support our goers. This team is a group of 6-12 individuals who take the responsibility to coordinate our church's support and encouragement of one of our goers (single, couple, or family). Because of the strong personal relationships, the goer can be open and honest, sharing successes and defeats and allowing his or her team to meet needs. Many goers say they could not persevere without the support of their advocacy team. Advocacy teams also serve as representatives of the goer to The Austin Stone. The team is our primary link between the goer and the rest of our church.

Tithing and Mission

The convictions of being Christ-centered in focus and relentless in mission naturally lead Christians to consider the stewardship of what God has given our

church. Because God's glory is central, and because joining Christ in His mission to seek and save the lost is of the utmost importance, we should ensure we are stewarding our resources toward these ends.

What percentage of the budget at The Austin Stone goes to mission? The answer is 100%. One-hundred percent of our budget goes to mission. Does this surprise you? Do you wonder how this is possible? Here's how we explain this statistic:

When we say 100% of our budget is devoted to mission, we mean 100% of our budget is devoted to the expansion of the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. That expansion might happen in a home in Pflugerville or a home in North Africa. It might happen with one soul over the course of many years, or with a thousand souls in the span of one day. Ultimately, when we budget, we do so with souls in mind—the souls of our flock and the souls of the lost—both here in the U.S. and around the world.

Mission is the task we are all called to do, and each partner at The Austin Stone is called to declare and demonstrate the gospel wherever they are. Every dollar we receive is spent with the goal of furthering God's mission.

Partnership Agreements

We use the term *partner* instead of member. We believe it will require the proactive engagement of everyone in our church to accomplish the mission God has given us.

Because we are Christ-centered in focus and relentless in mission, partners at The Austin Stone agree to:

- 1. Announce and celebrate Christ's salvation by being baptized as a regenerate, confessing believer**

Many people at The Austin Stone come from a number of different church backgrounds. As a Baptist church, we believe that baptism is a joyful step of obedience that people should consciously take after they profess faith in Jesus.

While we honor and respect other traditions within Christianity, we believe and teach that only those who profess faith in Christ are candidates for baptism. If you decide to partner with The Austin Stone but have not been baptized as a regenerate, confessing believer, we want you to talk with one of your congregation pastors to discuss what it might look like for you to get baptized.

- 2. Remember Christ's work by regularly taking communion corporately at The Austin Stone**

About once each month, all faith-professing people are invited to remember Jesus and His atoning work at our Sunday gatherings through taking communion.

- 3. Grow in biblical generosity, starting with a tithe (10%) of one's annual income, prioritizing The Austin Stone's general offering for supporting kingdom work**

We are not saying that this is a commitment for a Christian, but it is what we are asking of partners. We all give our money to what we value and treasure. One of the ways we test our hearts is by giving generously. All money comes from God's provision, so our question

should never be, “How much do I give?” but rather, “How much do I dare keep?” The New Testament example is to give everything and keep nothing for our own selfish desires.

If you don’t believe in the mission of this church enough to give to it, then it probably isn’t the mission God is calling you to. We call our partners “partners” precisely because they are called to spend themselves on the mission this church has been called to. Spending yourself includes spending a portion of your income. As a partner, you’re saying you trust us with your time, your children, a portion of your money, and your role in the local church.

4. Proactively declare and demonstrate the gospel to non-believers

People are desperate, hopeless for good news. We believe the only one who will satisfy their longing is Jesus. To proactively declare the gospel means to open your mouth and share how important, how essential, and how supreme Jesus is. To proactively demonstrate the gospel means to serve and love, and to keep serving and loving even when it’s inconvenient or people don’t reciprocate. After all, this is what Jesus does for us.

The Austin Stone wants to take the name and Spirit of Christ into this city as well as to the nations. That will only happen when we reach out in our spheres of influence and spend time declaring and demonstrating the gospel to those around us.

5. Support and pray for people sent out by The Austin Stone to mission locally, nationally, and globally

Not only are we committed to sending workers into the harvest, but we also are committed to caring for the people we send. The Austin Stone is actively engaged in mission in our city, our country, and all around the world. When partners support, advocate, and pray alongside our goers, they are directly participating in the mission of reaching the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Partners get to experience the joy of seeing God rescue people from death and sin in the farthest corners of the earth. All partners at The Austin Stone are asked to engage in the mission by supporting, advocating, and/or praying for those sent out by The Austin Stone to mission locally, nationally, and globally.

We will not find joy in our efforts to be Christ-centered in focus or relentless in mission apart from the presence of God. This is why God commands us to seek His presence continually (1 Chronicles 16:11), and then He tells us that in His presence is the fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11). He commands us to experience the fullness of joy. Who doesn’t want that? We’re talking about a God who is more committed to our own happiness than we are!

We serve a glorious God who has given us a mighty mission. He has shown us His glory, and we can’t take our eyes off of it. The more we see Him, the more glorious we realize that He is. He is our focus, and everything we do as a church is committed to making known the riches of His glory to the city of Austin and to the ends of the earth. That is our ambition.

Gospel-Saturated in Discipleship, Devoted to Equipping the Saints

BEING GOSPEL-SATURATED in discipleship means that we make, grow, and multiply disciples of Jesus by faithfully declaring and demonstrating the good news of Christ's work for us. Being devoted to equipping the saints means that the pastors and elders of The Austin Stone commit—whether through preaching or teaching—to prepare our whole church to participate in the ministries and mission of God's church. Partners, likewise, are called to intentionally invest their gifts to see the whole body of Christ participate in ministry and mission. Both of these convictions are ways our church forms people to progressively reflect the image of Christ.

We were made to glorify God by loving Him and reflecting His image. Sin entered the world and broke everything, including our relationship with God, our view of ourselves, our relationships with others, and our relationship with the physical world.

Nothing in creation went untouched by sin. The good news is that Jesus has come, not only to provide a means of forgiveness for the stain of sin, but also to redeem and restore the brokenness caused by sin.

When God wakes a person up to the reality of their sin and to the glory of the gospel and the person professes faith in Jesus Christ, they are saved. But the gospel does not stop there. From that moment on, God is actively redeeming and fixing the brokenness caused by sin, shaping them more and more into the perfect image of Christ, and drawing them to love Him and reflect Him. That is really good news!

The Austin Stone is gospel-saturated in discipleship and devoted to equipping the saints. These convictions are linked because discipling and equipping shape people to look more like Jesus. These are not the only means by which people are made more into the image of Jesus, but they are ones commanded by God for the church to participate in the work of sanctification.

Whether you are new to the faith or have been walking with the Lord for decades, God has graciously used ordinary people empowered by the Holy Spirit and the truth of His Word to help us grow in knowledge, love, and obedience to our Savior. Before we get into a conversation about discipleship or equipping, let's first discuss an issue that affects every church and follower of Christ. We have an identity problem.

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have

put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

(Colossians 3:1–10)

Every true Christian has been forgiven and justified for every sin. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). Or as Matt Smethurst puts it, “The gospel changes heaven’s courtroom proceedings from a criminal trial to an adoption ceremony.”

By adopting us into His family, God has transformed us from His enemies into His sons and daughters. He has given us a new identity. The Holy Spirit is present in each believer. He convicts us of sin, creates in us new desires for holiness, and gives us new abilities to enjoy the glory of Jesus.

Look at the way we are to consider ourselves in light of this new identity:

¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

(Romans 6:11–13)

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Every Christian will struggle to see themselves and others in light of the new identity Christ has purchased for us. We either don’t know or forget the precious truth of our adoption. Part of our sanctification is coming into a fuller knowledge of and trust in the fact that God has given us a new identity. Colossians 3 calls this identity the “new self.” Let’s do a quick activity to see what Scripture tells us about our new identity in Christ.

- John 1:12
 - **Old self:** enemies of God
 - **New self:** children of God
- Romans 6:18
 - **Old self:** slaves to sin
 - **New self:** slaves of righteousness
- 1 Peter 1:8
 - **Old self:** haters of God
 - **New self:** lovers of God
- Colossians 2:13
 - **Old self:** spiritually dead
 - **New self:** spiritually alive
- Romans 8:35–39
 - **Old self:** powerless against Satan
 - **New self:** victorious against Satan

We are children of God. We are slaves to righteousness. We are lovers of God. The Spirit of God lives within us. We are victorious in Jesus. These are glorious realities that are true for every believer. Christ has purchased not only salvation and eternal life for us, but He has also given us a new identity. We are in Christ, and He is in us. We are with Christ and becoming more and more like Him.

God could have simply rescued us from the sin and death and that would have been gloriously merciful. But that's not all He did. He saved us and gave us a new identity. But why did He do that? What was God's purpose for this identity change?

John Piper answers that question like this:

[God] has given us our identity in order that his identity might be proclaimed through us. God made us who we are so we could make known

who he is. Our identity is for the sake of making known his identity. The meaning of our identity is that the excellency of God be seen in us.

Therefore being a Christian and making the greatness of God known are almost identical. We can do it in church services with preaching and singing and praying and reading. We can do it in our small groups as we tell each other what God has been for us, or what we need him to be for us. We can do it at work as we tell people what we love about God and why we think he is great. And we can do it in a thousand different ways.²

We have started our discussion with the issue of identity, because identity is addressed in both discipling and equipping. Moving forward, we are going to see how this new identity shapes what we value and what we do as The Austin Stone.

Gospel-Saturated in Discipleship

LET'S TALK ABOUT how our church understands the command to “make disciples of all nations” and the tangible ways this is expressed throughout our church. To do that, let's look again at the Great Commission.

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

(Matthew 28:19–20)

Discipleship is God's chosen plan for the gospel to spread to all nations. To make disciples means “to make learners.” Jesus could have said, “Go there-

2. John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, 34.

fore and make converts from every nation,” but that is not what He said. He said to go and make disciples, teaching them to observe all that He has commanded.

All Christians take part in making disciples, because all Christians want to make much of Christ. We believe that Christ deserves worship from everyone on earth. As long as people are not worshipping Christ, we still have work to do. Jesus has decided that life-on-life discipleship through His church is the way in which the kingdom of God will continue to advance until the day when “the earth [is] filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14). We believe every believer is to make disciples, not just church leaders and pastors. This is how we fulfill the Great Commission.

What do we mean when we say that The Austin Stone is gospel-saturated in discipleship? We could have said that we are “proactive in discipleship” or “obeying the call to make disciples.” Instead, we have chosen to say we are committed to a discipleship steeped in the knowledge and application of the gospel.

We were made to glorify God by loving Him and reflecting His image. But sin entered the world and broke everything, including our relationship with God, our view of ourselves, our relationships with others, and our relationship with the physical world.

Because nothing in creation went untouched by the effects of sin, we approach every discipleship situation with this understanding in mind: life is hard because sin is in it. There are no easy fixes, and the road of discipleship is long and arduous. Christ told us to take up our cross if we want to follow Him and His way.

But the good news is that Jesus can redeem the brokenness caused by sin. With this understanding, we saturate every discipleship conversation with reminders of the redemptive work of Christ. The gospel is the power of God. It permeates every facet of life. To be gospel-saturated in discipleship means we are proactively participating in the work of redemption and restoration by showing others how the gospel addresses every aspect of brokenness.

A convert is a person who has been saved. A disciple is a person who has been saved and is increasingly being shown how the gospel not only saved them but also shapes them to look more like their Savior.

At The Austin Stone, we believe discipleship and the gospel are inseparable. We proactively look for people God has sovereignly placed around us and ask ourselves, “How can I intentionally help others apply the gospel to their lives, teaching them to know, love, and obey Jesus?”

Every follower of Jesus is called to be a disciple-maker. Don’t let that overwhelm you, though. The Austin Stone is committed to helping people grow in the likeness of Christ and to equipping people to do the work of discipleship.

Devoted to Equipping the Saints

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, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

(Ephesians 4:11–16)

²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

(Colossians 1:28)

From the pulpit to the classroom to every Missional Community, The Austin Stone desires to teach our people to know, love, and obey God. Various equipping opportunities are available at The Austin Stone, including classes, seminars, and other environments that cover topics such as doctrine, leadership, finance, marriage, singleness, and countless others.

Because sin has broken our knowledge, emotions, and actions, The Austin Stone pursues equipping as a means for applying the gospel to specific needs in

each area of brokenness. In this sense, equipping is an act of redemption. We are engaged in the pursuit of seeing people restored to godly knowledge, affections, and actions.

Equipping is not ultimately about knowledge transfer or a Christian version of self-help. Biblical equipping is about empowerment. It's about releasing the saints into the areas of society where they reside. The Austin Stone equips the saints, because the saints must be doing the work of ministry. It's too hard for a handful of people to try to do it all.

Again, we aren't equipped to just grow in our knowledge of God. Knowledge alone puffs up. As Ephesians 4 tells us, equipping cannot be divorced from ministry, mission, and making disciples. Being devoted to equipping the saints means that the pastors and elders of The Austin Stone commit—whether through preaching or teaching—to prepare our whole church to participate in the ministries and mission of God's church.

Not only that, but we worship an infinite God. It will take an eternity to know the depth of the richness of His glory. We want to start that learning process now, because, as 2 Corinthians 3:18 says: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

The more we behold the glory of God, the more it transforms us to look like Him.

Sanctification is the process of being made more into the image of Jesus. Sanctification has been described by some as “horribly slow,” and we

know that no single class or equipping environment can grow a person into maturity. No sermon or lecture will ever be able to fully display the glory of our glorious Savior. Conformity to Christlikeness will never be complete in this lifetime. But little by little, people begin to grow as each member of the body of Christ uses his or her unique gift of God's grace to participate in the work of sanctification. The process may be slow, but we are devoted to equipping the saints.

How This Is Lived Out at The Austin Stone

Evangelism and Discipleship

God has given each of us influence with specific people. Partners at The Austin Stone are asked to prayerfully consider these people and how they can love them through regularly declaring and demonstrating the gospel.

Many people at our church have the conviction to fulfill the Great Commission, but they don't know where to start. Some think they are not personally qualified to invest in another person. But consider this: God is actively saving people each day in our city. If you have been walking with the Lord for any amount of time, then you are further along in your relationship with Jesus than many others. Discipleship starts with teaching other people what God has been teaching you, and showing other people how the gospel is transforming your life.

Jesus gives both the command to make disciples and the model for how to do it. Looking at the model Jesus demonstrated, partners at The Austin Stone are trained to pursue discipleship in the same way.

1. **He was selective**, choosing to focus specifically on only a few people in order to reach the many.

- We prayerfully consider whom to disciple and when.
 - We disciple with intentionality.
2. **He lived among them**, not only teaching them but also letting them see the way He lived, day in and day out.
- We invite those we are discipling into our lives and homes.
3. **He made obedience essential**, not requiring His disciples to be the smartest or most gifted but to be faithful.
- We clarify expectations up front.
 - We continually make obedience to Christ our chief aim.
4. **He gave Himself to them**, sacrificing His time to help His disciples grow in His likeness. Not only that, He laid His life down for them.
- We set aside time and energy for the people we disciple. It is a priority to us, even when it is inconvenient or challenging.
5. **He led by example**, not asking them to do anything that He Himself would not do.
- We do life alongside those we disciple, participating in everything we ask of them.
6. **He gave them tasks**, preparing them for a time when they would be leading others.
- We delegate work that can be delegated for the purposes of growth and development.

7. **He kept track of their progress**, challenging them and encouraging them to grow into maturity.
 - o We exhort and encourage, remembering the call to be patient with one another.
8. **He expected reproduction**, wanting them to produce new leaders, not just new followers.
 - o We do not disciple the same people forever, but send them out to disciple others.

The incarnation of Christ happened for many reasons, but one reason was to provide a model for living a godly life. For us to make disciples like Jesus, we must follow His example and enter into the lives of others. We must go beyond simply teaching people about their new identity in Christ. We must invite them to watch us declare and demonstrate the gospel in our own lives. Discipleship at its core is modeling, not merely teaching.

Equipping Classes

Equipping is an explicit command from Scripture to train the saints for the work of ministry. By God's grace, we have over a thousand people annually enroll in one of dozens of different equipping classes across our congregations. We offer a wide range of topics designed to develop people in all stages of life to grow in character and discipline and to know current cultural issues. Again, the purpose of these classes is not knowledge-transfer or a Christian version of a self-help course. In these equipping classes, we are begging God to release willing hands into our church and the world for the purposes of redemption and restoration.

The Austin Stone Development Program

While it is not a requirement for people to have a comprehensive understanding of theology to become a partner at the Austin Stone, we hope that our partners take advantage of the many opportunities to grow and be trained in theology.

Equipping classes are a great place to start, but a partner who desires something more thorough and comprehensive is encouraged to apply for The Austin Stone Development Program.

The Austin Stone Development Program is a nine-month class designed to grow participants in four specific areas: theology, spiritual discipline, character, and gospel fluency. Since the introduction of this class, hundreds of people have graduated from ASDP with a working knowledge of systematic theology and the doctrinal distinctives specific to our church.

In addition to equipping participants theologically, ASDP also challenges people to grow in godly character. Participants are placed in small cohorts of four or five people led by a trusted leader in our church. This leader is committed to developing each person individually and holding them accountable to faithfully completing this program.

Kids and Students

Our KIDS program at The Austin Stone is another environment where equipping happens each week. Our KIDS ministry is built on three pillars:

1. Truth
2. Fun
3. Love

To equip our children in the truth, the KIDS curriculum is centered around Seven Basic Truths:

1. God made everything, including me.
2. God is King of everything, including me.
3. God is good and is the greatest treasure in the world.
4. I am born a sinner, and I need a Rescuer.
5. Jesus is the Rescuer who can bring me to the greatest treasure in the world.
6. God gives us the Holy Spirit who helps us remember and obey what Jesus taught.
7. Tell the world that Jesus is the Rescuer.

We emphasize these Seven Basic Truths in our toddler, preschool, and grade school worship and teaching environments. In preschool and grade school, we use The Gospel Project for Kids, which is a three-year chronological curriculum published by LifeWay that highlights how every story in the Bible—from Genesis to Revelation—ultimately points to Jesus. We teach the Bible story every Sunday in both small group and large group environments. The end goal of all our teaching is that our children would know, trust, and obey Jesus more.

Our STUDENTS program builds on KIDS. It involves large group meetings on Sundays, where kids sing songs, learn from the Bible, and play games. STUDENTS also employs DCOMM, or Discipleship Community. DCOMM prepares STUDENTS to pursue godliness through living the Christian life alongside others.

Care and Counseling

Sin broke relationships with ourselves, God, others, and the world around us. Jesus came to restore the brokenness in each of these relationships.

In 2010, it became evident to the leaders of our church that there was an opportunity to minister to people in a unique way. We decided to open a counseling center for a simple reason. We want to help people know God better. People's lives change as they gain a greater awareness of who they are and who God created them to be. Through the love and grace of Christ, there is hope and change for every human being, regardless of their history or experiences.

By 2011, The Austin Stone Counseling Center opened, with a vision to provide professional counseling from a gospel-centered perspective, to offer training for churches, and to pursue the renewal of our city through mental health. Each year, over two thousand clients are served by dozens of professional and biblical counselors at multiple locations around Austin.

Equipped to Counsel

The Austin Stone Counseling Center also hosts a class that trains lay counselors, pastors, small group/Missional Community leaders, and ministry staff to apply the gospel to the hearts and struggles of others. This eight-month course addresses both the theology and practice of gospel-centered counseling. Participants are prepared to minister effectively to individuals, couples, and families, with a biblical perspective on change in the context of community. Issues such as addictions, anxiety, anger, and depression are covered.

Recovery Ministries

Another clear expression of gospel-saturated discipleship in our church can be found in our Recovery Ministry. Recovery is a safe place for stepping out of darkness and into the light so that God's grace can change hearts. Recovery meets every Monday night and is a place for anyone struggling with their sin and the damage it has caused, the sin of others and the wounds it has left, or the hardships related to living in a sinful and broken world.

Starting with Christ's perfect life, death, and resurrection as our unshakable foundation, Recovery applies the Twelve Steps to help move people toward change, healing, restoration, and hope in God.

The program begins each September and is taught by the staff of The Austin Stone Counseling Center.

Residency Program

Each year, dozens of people from around the world apply to The Austin Stone Institute for a chance to become a resident on our church staff. While residents often play an integral role in the functions of our church, the main emphasis of our Residency Program is on leadership and personal development. We are committed to the growth and development of each resident in the areas of doctrine, character, and hands-on skills.

Residencies can be as short as one summer and as long as two years. People considering this opportunity range anywhere from recent college graduates to empty nesters. Residents gain professional experience on teams such as Austin Stone Worship, congregation teams, KIDS and STUDENTS, church planting, missions, and more. Each resident enrolls in The Austin Stone Development Program, with the option to gain transferable seminary credit. Addi-

tionally, each resident is placed under the care of a supervisor who is committed to developing them for the duration of their residency.

Partnership Agreements

Because we are gospel-saturated in discipleship and devoted to equipping the saints, partners will:

- 1. Pursue training opportunities through classes, conferences, seminars, and partner gatherings**

If every saint is called to be a minister of the gospel, then every saint must also pursue training and discipline to be an effective minister. God has given some believers in the church the task of equipping the saints so that the whole body might participate in the work of the ministry. But it is the call of every Christian to participate in God's work through the church. We value getting trained for ministry here at The Austin Stone, not just so that we can say we know a lot about God, but so that we can put what we know about Him into practice for the edification and building up of the church.

- 2. Teach nothing contrary to The Austin Stone Affirmation of Faith**

This agreement pertains to all partners who will be serving our church in a teaching or preaching capacity through the ministry of our church. It is not required that all partners fully understand and embrace every doctrinal position outlined in the Affirmation of Faith. Rather, only those who will be teaching and preaching agree to teach nothing contrary to it.