

**THE VISION**  
**“An Inclusive Church”**  
**Acts 16:13-34**  
**New City Church of LA**  
**August 31, 2008**  
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**I. Introduction**

Welcome to New City Church!

- We are a church in the process of being planted.
- Grand Opening. Invite friends. Call them. Send emails. Just ask them to come and check out New City Church. Take a stack of postcards. It doesn't have to be downtown. You can pass them out to everyone you know.

We're in a middle of a series on the vision of New City Church. As we prepare for our Grand Opening, we want to examine who we are seeking to be what we are seeking to do. Let's read our vision statement together. [Read together]

We are a church plant. So, I want to look at a story of a church plant by Apostle Paul. Among many churches he planted, the church in Philippi was one of the healthiest churches. The Philippian church was a diverse church, an inclusive church, and today's text gives us the story of how it became a non-denominational, multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic church.

Let's read Acts 16:13-34. Let me give you a little background. God leads Paul and his companions through a vision to Macedonia. And one of the leading cities of Macedonia is Philippi. This was the first church plant in Europe.

[READ]

**II. We see three absolutely different people coming together in the Philippian church.**

A. Ethnically,

Lydia is from Thyatira, which is in Asia. The slave girl was Macedonian because she appears to be local. And the jailer was in all probability Roman because civil service jobs were usually held by Roman because Philippi was a Roman colony.

B. Socio-Economically,

Lydia owns a home. She is a dealer in purple cloth, which tells us that she dealt with fine clothing. She would be a successful fashion CEO. She is a person of wealth and power. She has a downtown penthouse loft. She eats at Spago and Patina. She has a summer home in Malibu and a winter lodge in Veil.

The slave girl is utterly powerless and economically exploited. She's got nothing. She's possessed by a demon. And she was probably abandoned as a child because of her demon possession and sold as a slave. She is like a teenage drug addicted prostitute or an out of control skid row spiritualist.

The jailer was not as successful as Lydia but he wasn't down and out like the slave girl. He was middle class. He is a blue collar civil servant working in the post office or county jail. He might be a vet (because many civil service jobs were given to retired Roman soldiers).

There are people who would have never met but for their encounter with the gospel of Jesus Christ. I think it starting to sound kind of like New City.

C. They were different in their personality as well.

Lydia was rational. She needed an explanation. She needed to understand. Verse 14 says that she responded to the message of Paul. The word for respond really means attracted to it. She got it. She needed to get it and so the Lord opened her heart by opening her mind to get it.

Slave girl didn't need explaining. She needed an experience. She needed a power encounter. She needed to experience the power of God.

The jailer is practical and concrete. He's impatient with rational arguments and doesn't really trust emotional experiences either. He wouldn't like intellectual churches or Pentecostal church. He wouldn't come to church.

D. Their spiritual state

Lydia is empty. How do we know? She achieved status and power, something that is hard to do for women in our society and definitely even more difficult in that society. It looks like she is a single mother. There is no mention of her husband. Also, the Scripture says that she is a worshipper of God though she was a Gentile. She left her

root. She became a religious moral person through Judaism. Now, for any Gentile to do that means that she is seeking something. She is looking for something because she feels a sense of emptiness.

The slave girl is utterly tormented and oppressed. She was totally out of control. She was as oppressed as you can get. She was spiritually oppressed (she was demon possessed) and she was socially oppressed (she was exploited by her master) and she was emotionally oppressed (she was at one time in her life sold as a slave). She was in torment but attracted to Paul. There is an incredible restlessness.

The jailer has no spiritual interest. He knows nothing and cares nothing.

### **III. The way God connects with them is absolutely different as well.**

A. Lydia: Gospel for the religious.

How does the gospel come to Lydia? Through a rational message. As I said, the word “respond” means to be attracted. She saw the beauty of it. She got it. She left her roots and became a worshipper of God, meaning that she is a Gentile who converted to Judaism. She understood a lot but there were a lot of holes in her understanding.

She left her pagan religion to become a worshiper of God. But, she left one religion to another religion; she went from being a paganist and becoming a moralist. She started to obey the laws of Moses, and live by the laws of the Old Testament. But, she probably found that she couldn't live up to the law no matter how hard she tried. When, Paul explained that God sent his son to rescue us from our sins, that Jesus died for our sins, that Jesus became the sacrificial lamb, she got it.

When Lydia heard it, it made sense. She was attracted to it. She found beauty in it. The penny dropped. Because the Lord opened her heart by opening her mind.

She needed the gospel. She only had religion. Religion is outside in but Christianity is inside out. In religion, God is useful: he gives me things. If I do this for God, God will do this for me—he will bless me, he will send me to heaven, he will give me happiness. In Christianity, you obey because God is beautiful. When you see something beautiful or experience something beautiful, you feel like you have to share that with someone. That's what praise is. The more you praise it, the more you enjoy it.

Lydia had a God who was useful, but on that day, she met a God who was beautiful. Everything changed. She obeys to delight in him, to take pleasure in him. It's a totally different approach than religion.

B. Slave girl: Gospel for the oppressed.

Lydia didn't know the gospel at all. She probably thought she needed to be a good person. The slave girl understood that there is a way of salvation. The more you get sucked into evil, in some way, you get more insight. It's more understanding than nice people who have a more sentimental view of life. This girl understood evil and the need for a savior. But, she was enslaved on the inside to a bad master and was outside by a bad master. Paul confronts the bad masters. Jesus name is the strongest name and the glorious name. By the power of the name of Jesus, she is released and liberated from the bad masters. She is released not only from the demon, but also from the social system that exploited her. The power of God utterly freed her. This was a power encounter!

C. The jailer: Gospel for the secular.

Paul and Silas were stripped and beaten and then severely flogged and then put into prison. The jailer put them in the inner cell (no windows) and mercilessly put their feet in stocks. It's very painful. Stocks usually stretched their legs and left them in pain. He shows no concern for them. He is calloused.

He followed his orders. Did his job. What matters to him is honor. That's why he was going to kill himself. He doesn't seem to be at all interested in spiritual things.

Two things changed him; it was a rubber meets the road encounter:

(1) Paul and Silas' attitude towards suffering and the other prisoners were listening as well. They are praying and praising God in the midst of suffering. They had a joy that was rooted in something really deep that you can take everything away and the joy is still there.

(2) There is an earthquake. The prison door flew open, and everyone's chain became loose. The law at the time was that if a prisoner escaped while under your custody, you were executed. Paul and Silas knew that they can escape but they also knew that it would cost the jailer's life. They kept them in there. They paid evil with good.

The jailer never saw anything like that. When jailer saw that, he gets on his knees and says, you have something I don't have and I want it.

IV. What do we learn?

**A. The gospel is for everyone.** There is no religious type. There is no racial type. There is no class type. There is no personality type. The gospel cuts across all boundaries! The gospel is for gays and lesbians. The gospel is for straight moralistic type. The gospel is for addicted type. The gospel is for intellectual type. The emotional type. The pragmatic type. The gospel is for all!

If there is anyone here who says, I am just not that type. I dare say that you misunderstand the gospel.

If there is anyone here who says, they will never come to Christ, downtown people will never come to Christ, or if you lose hope in anyone, I dare say that you misunderstand the power of the gospel.

New City is about reaching people of every type. Whether we live in skid row or in a penthouse loft, whether we work in US Bank Tower or on General Relief, whether you are religious or demon possessed or “couldn't care less” about God, whether we are a Democrat or a Republican or an independent. God does not seem to focus on one kind of people. God is seeking all kinds of people to come together.

Many church plant experts say that we have to focus on one group of people. They call this the homogeneous unit principle.

Initially, despite the vision that God gave me from the beginning about planting a multi-ethnic and multi-socioeconomic church, we thought we had to target a specific group. We started to brainstorm the characteristic of the downtown dude—the dude that lives in a loft. The single, urban, upwardly mobile, college educated, liberal, fun loving, convenience seeking, socially conscious, artsy, trendy, Manhattan wannabes. We thought about targeting him and others like him. And if others come, we would welcome them. But, God just didn't give me peace about this. I was somewhat torn between the homogeneous unit principle and the inclusive (multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic) vision that God was calling us to. I studied all these church growth books that told us to target a

specific group of people. But, we felt repeated that God was calling us to plant a church where dramatically different kind of people come together because of the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I had very little faith. I didn't know if it would work. But, we were convinced that this is what God wanted us to do. It was like the like when Paul was repeatedly trying to minister in this one area but the Spirit did not allow them to go. Then, the Holy Spirit led him to go to Macedonia. That's why he went to Philippi. Every time we thought about creating a target for this church, we were prevented from doing so by the Holy Spirit. I had no peace about it. I kept on struggling.

Then, God spoke to Grace and me one morning. We were on a date at Starbucks. I was sharing with her about what I heard a few days ago about the biblical definition of success: figure out what God wants you to do, and doing it. I said to Grace: I sense that God wants us to seek to build a multi-ethnic and multi-socioeconomic church reaching out to both the skid row residents and the new residents of downtown. I don't know whether this will work or not, but I don't think whether something will work should decide whether we should do what God wants us to do. Even if it does not work, I think that's up to God. Our job is to just discern his will and obey.

Then, Grace said: it's interesting that you say that. I was surfing the web and Googled Ralph Winter. (he's the founder of US Center for World Mission and William Carey University and one of the most influential mission thinkers alive right, and Grace used to work for him as a book publisher and editor). She was wondering how he was doing. And she happened to find his autobiography on the web, and one section of that autobiography really struck her:

He said: "after we made the decision to leave Fuller we did not at any point in the next thirteen years, during which we paid off the campus, feel that God had promised us success. *We only felt that the value of the goal was sufficient justification to go all out, sink or swim. I coined the phrase, "You do not evaluate a risk by the probability of success but by the worthiness of the goal." We were willing to fail because the goal we sensed was so urgent and strategic.*

That phrase spoke to the soul of Grace and me: "You don't evaluate a risk by the probability of success but by the worthiness of the goal." When we heard each other, we started to cry because we knew that God had been speaking to us the same message. The

definition of success is not what happens, the result, it is looking into the heart of God, the worthiness of the goal, and finding his will, and doing it.

- After this, I spent a few hours just pouring through the book of Acts and discerning from the Word of God what the Spirit of God wanted us to do.
- It became clear as I was studying the passages that he wanted us to bring diverse people together by the power of the gospel, exactly what happened to the church in the beginning.
- So, Grace and I thanked God for guiding us, and decided to go forward with the multi-ethnic multi-socioeconomic model.

So, we reject the homogeneous unit principle because we believe that it is not biblical in our context and it's not what God is calling us to do. It wasn't like that in Philippi and it's not like that in downtown LA. We now target and specially embraced all types of people because the gospel is for all types of people.

**B. There is no one way to present the gospel or receive the gospel.** There are utterly different approaches. Look how different they were for Lydia, slave girl and the jailer. Some people only talk about power encounter in their church. It's all about spiritual battle. Yes, it is about that but it's also about understanding the gospel and getting it. But, it's not just about intellectual understanding; it's also about experience. And it's not just understanding or experiencing, it also about doing and showing.

Some people try to peg us down to categories.

You are an intellectual/cerebral church. Yes.

You are a charismatic/emotional church. Yes.

You are a social justice/seeking to liberate the oppressed church. Yes.

Yes. Yes. Yes. We are all of these things, because we are different and we engage God in a different way.

Some of us are more one way than another. But, we don't talk about how one is better than another.

I have a certain tendency. I am a thinker. I've always been a cerebral person. I love to analyze the Word of God. I love to taste every drop of the word of God. Somewhere along the line, even my law training made me more like this.

Bing charismatic does not come naturally to me, but I will never limit the way God works. I believe the power of the Spirit of God to prevail over evil. I believe in power encounter!

When we become inclusive of Pentecostals with Episcopalian with even Prebyterians with Methodists with Baptist with Catholics with non-denominational Christians, realizing that God works in different way in different people, we come to respect each other approaches, and become one. That's what New City is about.

**C. There is no greater unifying factor than the gospel of Jesus Christ.**  
There was an ancient Jewish prayer of the Jewish men: O Lord God, I thank thee that you did not make me a woman, a slave, or a Gentile. But, the gospel broke through all such racism, chauvinism, and elitism. That's what Paul and Silas used to pray. But, now they fellowshiped precisely with a woman, a slave, and Gentiles, and do so intimately by staying in their homes. What else can bring people like these together? When we come to the realization of our common brokenness and our common need for a savior, and we experience the power of our savior, we fellowship with people we would not otherwise fellowship with. Our primary identity is no longer one based on ethnicities, it is no longer one based on our education, it is no longer one based on our socioeconomics, it is no longer one based on where we are from. It is based on Christ, and when we based our primary identity on who we are in Christ, a family of God, there is no greater unifying factor.

We will with God's help be able to love one another, find beauty in one another, reconcile with one another, and become one with one another. Such unity will electrify this community and we will become a light in this community.