

A Gospel Church

Acts 11:19-30

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Have you ever watched a football game or a basketball game, and a player comes off the bench and wins the game? It is kind of one of those feel-good stories. You know, your team is struggling, and then here comes a player or two that no one saw coming, and all of the sudden, your team gets it all together and plays like gangbusters.

This is kind of what is happening with the church at the end of Acts 11. The church is struggling with the issue of the Gentiles beginning to respond to the gospel. They do not know what's going on, so they send Barnabas to check it out. He learned about these two guys, one from the island of Cyprus and one from Cyrene in North Africa, who are evangelizing the Gentiles, and lots of them are becoming Christians. So, many were being converted that Barnabas needed help, so he recruited Saul to help him.

The Lord sent Barnabas to get Saul off the bench and used him to give the church a shot in the arm. Next Sunday, we will be in Acts 12, and after Acts 12, the rest of the book of Acts follows Paul's ministry to the Gentiles.

Here is what we will learn in Acts 11:19-30: *It is the faithful preaching and teaching of the gospel that builds a gospel-centered church.*

Let's do a quick walk-through of the text to get a picture of what the Holy Spirit is teaching us through Luke's writing.

In v. 19, we are reminded that the believers were scattered throughout the region because of Stephen's execution. We covered Stephen's execution back in Acts 7:54-60. However, it is unclear how much time has passed since Stephen's execution and the planting of the church in Antioch. It seems like it may have been about 5-8 years.

What we do know is that there were all kinds of new followers of Jesus. There were believers from *Phoenicia*, which was north of Samaria. There were believers from *Cyprus*, which was an island off the coast of Phoenicia. Then eventually, these new believers made their way to *Antioch*, which was located in ancient Syria.

Many of these new Jewish believers were Hellenistic Jews or Greek-speaking Jews. They weren't as influenced by old Jewish prejudice and traditions as the Hebrew-speaking Jews were. The Hellenistic Jews were sharing the gospel with the Gentiles, and they were becoming Christians.

Look in vv. 20-21:

But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

Then in vv. 22-24 Luke tells us that the church in Jerusalem heard that Gentiles were beginning to turn to Jesus and come into the church. It is hard to know precisely their motivation, but it is safe to say

that faithfulness to God was important. It seems they wanted to make sure that these conversions were real. So, like they investigated the conversion of Cornelius and his family, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to check things out.

Verses 23-24 tell us Barnabas was a good man and full of the Holy Spirit. He encouraged the new believers to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus. The phrase “*steadfast purpose*” simply means that the new believers should be obedient to Christ. So, his basic encouragement was for these new Christians to be faithful and obedient to Christ.

If you remember, we last met Barnabas in Acts 9. This was where he defended Saul’s conversion and ministry before the Jerusalem church. Now, in Antioch we learned that the Lord was saving the Gentiles just like He was saving the Jews.

However, the last sentence of v. 24 tells us that Barnabas had a problem. There were so many Gentiles coming to faith in Christ that he needed help. Look at what Luke tells us in v. 24:

And a great many people were added to the Lord.

Barnabas needed help. He needed a partner in ministry. So, in vv. 25-26, we learn that he went to Tarsus to find Saul. Barnabas knew the Lord Jesus had called Saul to be an apostle to the Gentiles. So, he went to *Tarsus* to get him to help him teach and disciple the new Gentile converts in the *Antioch church*.

Then for a whole year, they met with the church, and v. 26 says they discipled a *great many people*. Then the last sentence of v. 26 should be a very familiar and famous verse:

And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

It was in Antioch where we were given the wonderful name—*Christian*. It is difficult to know how this name came about and why. Most scholars believe it was a word meant to mock the followers of Jesus. Perhaps it was meant to *mock the members* of the church or *slander* them or even *a form of banter*.

However, no one can argue what the word means. It was a *mashup* of a word. It was part Greek and part Latin. It meant *followers of Christ* or *little Christs*. In other words, these new disciples were so committed to Christ that Jesus was constantly part of their conversation. They constantly talked about Him and acted like Him. Friends, it is wonderful to be called a *Christian*. It is a name we should seek to be worthy of in our lives.

There is a funny story that is told about Alexander the Great. The great general learned that of one of his soldiers who was named after him but was a notorious coward. This did not sit well with the great general who had conquered the known world by the age of twenty-three.

So, Alexander called the soldier before him and said, “*Is your name Alexander and are you named after me?*” The trembling soldier said, “*Yes, sir. My name is Alexander, and I was named after you.*” To which the great general replied, “*Then either be brave or change your name!*”¹

Brothers and sisters, the good news is that Jesus does not say this to us. However, He does exhort us to live lives worthy of our calling as Christians.

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word: Acts*, 162.

The last part of our narrative is in vv. 27-30. In these last verses, the prophet Agabus prepared the church for a great famine that was coming. Verse 28 tells us that the famine came during the reign of Claudius. It occurred sometime between 41-54 A.D.

Finally, in vv. 29-30, we see Agabus' preaching mobilized the church for ministry. The young church decided not only to prepare themselves for the famine but also to help the church in Jerusalem. What we have in these last two verses are the beginnings of disciples and churches cooperating for the sake of gospel ministry.

Remember our main point: *Faithful preaching/teaching of the gospel results in gospel growth among God's people.* Now let's consider three take-a-ways that faithful gospel preaching produces.

1. It is the faithful preaching of the gospel that *plants* churches (vv. 19-21).

Look at what happened in v. 19, when the church was scattered:

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.

It was persecution that scattered the believers from Jerusalem to Samaria, to Judea, and then to the ends of the world. This was just the beginning of the spread of the gospel.

In Acts 7, we considered how God used the execution of Stephen to spread the gospel. Now in Acts 11, Luke reminds us that God is still using the execution of Stephen to spread the gospel.

Notice that it says those who were scattered were preaching the gospel.

²⁰ *But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.*

Those that were scattered were not apostles but *average church members*. They were people who had been filled with the Holy Spirit, and they were being forced to leave where they were and as they went, they shared the gospel with others.

These believers who were scattered fell into two categories. One group only shared the gospel with other Jews. The other group, a group of Hellenized Jews, which means they were Greek-speaking Jews who were not so attached to Jewish prejudices, evangelized anyone and everyone.

These Hellenized Jews were not aware they were doing anything radical or out of bounds for Jewish believers. All they knew was that Jesus had saved them, and they were changed. No one had given them any instructions or rules to follow. They hadn't taken a class on Jewish evangelism do's and don'ts. All they knew was that when it came to Jesus, they were once blind, but now they could see.

These unnamed Jews were from the island of *Cyprus* and from *Cyrene* in North Africa. Bottom line: *The light of Christ was blowing up the old Jewish traditions and the paganism that controlled the culture.*

Look at what v. 21 says:

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

It was the preaching of the gospel by everyday Christians that gave birth to the church in Antioch. *Brothers and sisters, we can do a lot of practical things to plant churches like provide money, structure, and support, but if we do not have pastors and members who will faithfully preach and teach the gospel where they are sent, then that church will fail. Churches will not be planted where the gospel is not faithfully preached. Bottom line: It is preaching of the gospel that creates and plants churches, not our man-made methods.*

Here at Grand, we want to be a church-planting church. This means we must hold fast to the gospel and be people who understand the gospel and faithfully share it with others so that when they go out from us, they are so saturated with the gospel they share it with others.

So, if we send out people to plant churches, the gospel should be the driving force in their lives. They may have a plan, and they may have a strategy, but if the gospel is not at the center of what they are doing, it will fail. *It is the faithful preaching of the gospel that plants churches.*

2. It is the faithful preaching of the gospel that grows churches (vv. 22-26).

The preaching of the gospel not only *plants* churches but it also *grows* churches. Look at what happened after the church was planted in Antioch in vv. 22-26:

The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Don't you love how Luke wrote v. 22? The report of the creation of the church in Antioch "*came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem.*" In other words, they heard about what God was doing in Antioch, and they wanted to know what was going on there, so they sent Barnabas to check it out.

When Barnabas got there, he saw what the grace of God was doing in the lives of the believers there, and he was amazed. A church had been planted, and he realized they needed to be discipled. He began to teach and disciple them, but the growth was so fast that he realized he could not do it alone.

At that point, he left Antioch and went to Tarsus, where he knew Saul was preaching, teaching, and leading both Jews and Gentiles in their newfound faith in Jesus. He persuaded Saul to leave Tarsus and come with him to Antioch to teach these new Jewish and Gentile converts.

Antioch was where Barnabas and Paul began their partnership in ministry. They began to disciple the new believers by exhorting them and encouraging them. For a whole year, they taught them and challenged them to remain faithful to the Lord. Faithful preaching and teaching of the gospel had kicked the church in Antioch into overdrive.

The church in Antioch is a model for us. It is a church where the believers gathered to preach the gospel and disciple one another. Let's be a church where we come alongside younger believers and encourage them in the gospel. Let's be a church where older believers are sought out to help us grow in

our faith. Let's be a church where we do not sit back and wait to be discipled but seek out people to disciple or seek out someone to disciple us. Let's not sit on the sidelines and wait—go for it.

Think about it this way. The church in Jerusalem didn't wait. They sent Barnabas to Antioch to see what was going on in the church. When Barnabas realized what the Holy Spirit was doing, he exhorted the new believers in their faith. Then he brought in Saul to help him disciple all these new believers in Antioch.

Think about it this way too. The church in Tarsus had to say goodbye to Saul when he left them and went to Antioch. I'm sure this was not easy to do. They probably missed him, and his leaving left some big shoes to fill. However, for the sake of the gospel, they did what they needed to do to *plant* and *grow* the church in Antioch. They let one of their best leaders go so he could pursue God's calling on his life to plant churches.

Let's be a church that does whatever it takes to plant churches. Let's raise up leaders and then send them out to cities in Iowa, North America, and even the world. Brothers and sisters, if we faithfully preach the gospel, the Lord will do these things in our church.

Finally, in vv. 27-30, we see that the faithful preaching of the gospel *mobilizes* churches.

3. It is the faithful preaching of the gospel that *mobilizes* churches.

In vv. 27-30, we see that Agabus the prophet went down from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then by the Holy Spirit told them that there would be famine all over the world.

Here is what I want you to understand about Agabus' role as a prophet. The ministry of the prophet is commonly thought to have been that of prediction. However, the main role of the prophet was to prepare God's people for action. It was and is to mobilize the church through the preaching of the gospel. When Agabus came down from Jerusalem, it was not to make a lot of predictions about the future *but to equip the saints for the work of ministry by faithfully preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

Bottom line: the ministry of the prophet is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry by faithful preaching and teaching of the gospel. You see, it is the power of the gospel that mobilizes churches for ministry.

That is what we see in vv. 27-30. The faithful preaching and teaching of the gospel in the church in Antioch that opened the hearts of the members to give *money, energy, and mercy* to their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. The gospel had so deeply penetrated the hearts of the church members in Antioch that they could not just sit back and do nothing while others suffered.

The gospel moved this new church in Antioch to serve the mother of all churches, the Jerusalem church. The gospel had created a spirit of cooperation.

Brothers and sisters, I am sometimes hard on our Southern Baptist denomination, aka *Great Commission Baptists*. However, I will say that one of the best things Great Commission Baptists have done is to create the *Cooperative Program*.

Through the Cooperative Program, our little church works with 50,000 other Great Commission Baptist churches across the nation to support missions, evangelism, mercy ministries, and seminary training for men and women.

In addition to our national convention, let me tell you what our little state convention, the *Baptist Convention of Iowa*, did a week ago. On *Saturday, Nov. 6*, the messengers to the Baptist Convention of Iowa annual meeting voted to give 75% of our state *money* to the Cooperative Program to

support missionaries here at home and around the world. This money will also go to plant churches, do evangelism, and train pastors for the work of ministry. The Cooperative Program is a wonderful way that we can partner with other churches to faithfully proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Another ministry in which we cooperate with other Iowa Baptist churches here in Iowa is the *Iowa Ministry Fund*. Through the Iowa Ministry Fund we partner with other *Great Commission Baptist* churches in Iowa to preach the gospel through all kinds of ministries. We support ministries like the *Baptist Friendship Center*. The Friendship Center is led by Joe Quick, and they preach the gospel and minister to the needy in inner-city Des Moines. Another ministry we support is *Wings of Refuge*, which helps women who are coming out of human trafficking. These are only a few of the ministries we cooperate with other Baptist churches to do missions and evangelism.

It is not only on the national and state levels where we cooperate. We have members of our church who are actively engaging foster children, their families, and the agencies who do foster care with the gospel.

Here is my point. The faithful preaching and teaching of the gospel mobilizes the church to do ministry and to cooperate with other churches to do gospel ministry. When we work together, we are walking in the steps of the church in Antioch.

However, we have our obstacles when it comes to faithfully preaching the gospel.

1. The first one is prejudice.

- We saw this one in last Sunday's text, so I won't spend too much time here. However, prejudice was one reason the Jews were slow to evangelize the Gentiles.
- Prejudice will always be a sin that so easily entangles us, and the enemy will use it to keep us from sharing the gospel with those who are different from us because of race, color, looks, wealth, intelligence, education, politics, socio-economic or even how they talk.

2. A second obstacle is tradition.

- Tradition and prejudice were closely connected in Jewish life. It was tradition to be prejudice, so it kept them from sharing with the Gentiles.
- I love traditions. They are nice comfortable paths for us to walk down. However, traditions can also keep us blind to new opportunities for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.
- Let's make sure our traditions have purpose and keep us focused on the gospel instead of keeping us blind to new ministry opportunities.

3. A third obstacle is—fear.

- Fear can keep us from faithfully evangelizing and preaching the gospel in order to plant churches, grow churches and mobilize churches.
- When it comes to sharing the gospel, we might fear rejection. We become controlled by what others think about us. We don't want others to think bad of us, but when it comes to Jesus, we must let the fear of man control us. When this happens, man becomes big in our minds, and God becomes small.
- Other fears may be the fear of being arrested, or perhaps if we go to really dangerous places, we may fear death.

- We might even fear losing control of our money, and so we may not want to give money to those who are evangelizing or planting churches because they are not doing it exactly how we think it should be done. So, fear is a major obstacle that can keep us from engaging the lost with the gospel and faithfully preaching the gospel.

4. A final difficulty for some of us may be—comfort

- We get so comfortable where we are that we lose sight that God has called us to be witnesses who are sent to share the gospel. What if those early disciples had gotten so comfortable that they would not leave where they were to go to where churches need to be planted?
- What if the early church just wanted to hold on to what they had for the sake of comfort instead of giving it away?
- Comfort is always an obstacle to evangelism and faithfully proclaiming the gospel.

Brothers and sisters, it is the faithful preaching of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that creates churches. Jesus is the One who gives life to churches. When lost people hear Jesus call them from death to life, they are called into His church, and a church is planted.

It is also the faithful preaching of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that grows the church. Strategy has its place in what we do as a church, but if the gospel of Jesus Christ is not at the center of what we do, then it does not matter what we do. Anyone can develop an organization that will flourish for a season, but churches will only flourish when the gospel is at the center of our strategy.

Finally, it is the faithful preaching of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that mobilizes the church for ministry. It is the faithful preaching of the gospel that raises up people for ministry and calls us to engage the world in *ministries of mercy* and *biblical social justice*.

It is the gospel that gives us life and drives us to faithfully proclaim the hope we have in Jesus. Brothers and sisters, let's make sure Grand is a church that stays centered on the gospel and, therefore, faithfully preaches the hope we have in Christ.

One last question. Why? Why is it important to have gospel-centered churches? It is important because we need to help God's people get home. We are all headed home, out home in heaven and we must travel this road together. Gospel-centered churches help God's people make it home. This is our goal as a gospel-centered church. Our goal is not success or popularity or to impress others but to travel this life together and make it home to our Savior. Churches that center on the gospel help God's people make it home.