

19. Real Gospel Growth is by God's Hand

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[0 : 01] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to your Bibles and to the passage that we read there at the end of Acts chapter 11. And it's a little passage that tells us that real gospel growth is always by the hand of God himself.

One of the things that we've learned in our studies in Acts thus far is the supreme realism that the Bible has always about the real nature of Christian ministry and mission. It is wonderful, but it's never, ever easy.

Wherever a great and effective door is open for the gospel, says Paul to the Corinthians, there are many adversaries. And so we need to be sober. We must never be triumphalistic as believers.

Through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God. That's what Paul says later on to the church in Antioch and Iconium in Acts 14. But likewise, we are never also to be totally depressed or in despair.

Because the reverse of that statement must also be true. It will be very likely that when, in the midst of finding that there are many adversaries, so also we will find that there is the very place where a great and effective door is open for gospel ministry and mission.

[1 : 17] So we mustn't be Eeyores. Even if, like me, you tend to be an Eeyore by nature. It's very easy to be an Eeyore at the moment, to be depressed and despairing about the state of our church, especially in our own denomination, for example.

Well, look at this passage. Look at verse 19. It takes us back to the great persecution that arose over Stephen. Now, you remember that began in Acts 8, verse 1.

There was a great scattering all over the place following that martyrdom of Stephen. It was very painful. It was very terrible. But you remember how we saw at the end of Acts 9, verse 31.

What was the result of all of that? The result was, says Luke, that the church was built up and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it multiplied. Well, Luke is telling us exactly the same thing again here.

He's telling us that the persecution led directly to real gospel growth, because God's hand was with his people in the midst of it.

[2 : 20] Look over to the end of chapter 12, at verse 24. It's another of Luke's little summary verses that rounds off this whole section. It sums up the end result of this persecution and scattering of all these believers, and also the specific opposition of Herod, the king.

What happens? But, in contrast to Herod's untimely demise, the word of God increased and multiplied.

You see, real church growth, according to the New Testament, is growth of the word of God. It's where the gospel increases and is multiplied, just as real church decline, by contrast, is where the gospel is forgotten about and abandoned.

That's why there's so much decline around the churches of our nation today. It's because the gospel has been diminished. The gospel has been ignored. The gospel has been silenced. But here it's the opposite.

We'll come to Herod's story in due course, but I want to focus on this chapter, this little bit at the end of chapter 11 today, because it's a worked example, as it were, of how that kind of growth of the word comes about.

[3 : 27] What kind of church is it that experiences real gospel growth at the hand of the Lord himself? What we see in the church in Antioch that's described here is a church that is aligned with the priorities of God himself.

He's devoted to reaching out and to building up and to sending out, and because the church in Antioch is devoted to these things also, we see the hand of the Lord at work doing exactly those things.

And it's very encouraging, I think, for us as Christians today to see that, that there's a great simplicity about what we're called to do as Christian believers. As long as we are aligned to the plan and the purpose of the risen Lord and his mission to our world, then we can trust him to be at work.

Real gospel growth is always by the hand of the Lord himself. So I want to see how that's so then in the three sections of this passage that we read, which exemplify for us real gospel mission at God's hand, real gospel ministry, and also real gospel mercy, at work in a church that is driven by the spirit of the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

First of all then, look at verses 19 to 21, all about reaching out in real gospel mission. And the point is, it's the Lord who reaches out when his word is increasing and multiplying among his people.

[4 : 56] The risen Lord himself reaches out in mission and plants churches when ordinary believers are committed to sharing the gospel with other ordinary non-Christian people.

When that happens, as verse 21 tells us, the hand of the Lord is with it. And people will be found turning to the Lord. Perhaps the most important thing of all to notice about this first great pushing out into real Gentile evangelism in numbers in the early church is that it's what we might call a lay movement.

That's what's being described to us here in verses 19 to 21. Not the apostles, it's the ordinary punters. We had, of course, Cornelius' conversion, his household in chapter 10 at the hand of Peter.

But this new thrust, this whole movement to plant wholly new Gentile churches is a whole new order of significance in Acts. And it's not a top-down initiative.

The church in Jerusalem, we read in verse 18, certainly does recognize the possibility that, yes, Gentile believers can be, just like Jews, true Christians.

[6 : 13] But there's no evidence that the Jewish church ever began to systematically evangelize the Gentiles. It just happened. In verse 19, we're told that those who were persecuted went to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, and as they went, they just shared their faith.

But they only did it among Jews at first, because I guess it wouldn't have entered their heads to do it to anybody else. But then, in verse 20, something strange happens. Some of them don't have any names, just from Cyprus, from Cyrene in North Africa.

Some of them spoke to the Hellenists also, to the Gentile Greeks who were living in that city of Antioch. They shared the gospel with total pagans, godless people, probably very unpromising material, and a new work of God was born.

Antioch was a very big place. It was the third city of the empire. After Rome and Alexandria, it was upriver from the coast of Syria, and it was the capital of the province of Syria.

It was about half a million people, not really all that unlike Glasgow. A bit smaller. It was a very cosmopolitan place, full of parks and fountains, and very impressive architecture.

[7 : 29] But it was a place of notable occultism. There was a temple of Daphne, very much associated with it. There was a morass of sexual immorality, and perversion, and temple prostitution, and all those kinds of things.

And yet, to this cosmopolitan centre, full of pagan immorality, full of a highly sexualised culture, these unnamed ordinary believers proclaimed, says verse 20, Jesus as Lord.

No doubt, just as Peter had proclaimed him to Cornelius' household, as Lord of all, remember Peter said, and therefore judge of all. And therefore, they would have told these people that all are therefore guilty in his sight.

All need forgiveness, lest they face his judgment and his wrath. But also, no doubt, of course, they proclaimed the forgiveness that is in his name alone, that the prophets had spoken of.

And what happened when they proclaimed these things? Verse 21. A great number believed, we're told, and turned to the Lord. That is, they turned from their sinful ways and to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

[8 : 40] They bowed the knee to his rule, to his Lordship. In other words, they repented. They turned away from their former lives, which they now saw to be wicked and immoral and pagan thinking.

They turned away from a whole world view of their prevailing culture and they submitted to the unique Lordship of Jesus Christ.

They believed and they turned to the Lord. Now, be very clear what Luke is telling us here. He's telling us that that Gospel, a Gospel that calls for a turning away from sin and a submitting to Christ as Lord, that that Gospel, offensive as it must have been, was what impacted a pagan and confused and idolatrous culture and a very sexually immoral world.

That Gospel. Not a Gospel that said to the people in Antioch, now just stay as you are. We Christians aren't really all that different from you. You carry on living as you want to live. There's no need to change and we'll just baptise your culture into our church.

No. Quite the opposite. Now that's staggering, don't you think? Think about it. It's one thing to go into a big pagan city like Antioch or like Glasgow for that matter and say, well, let's look for people who look ripe for a religious experience.

[10 : 05] Who look like they're looking for a change in life, for God, for religious things. Quite another, isn't it? To just think that total pagans, unbelievers, people living in sexual gratification and other things might ever want to become disciples of Jesus when that is the cost.

Not if they have to turn, turn away from all that they lived for before and turn to the control and the authority of the unique lordship of Jesus Christ.

But that's exactly what happened, verse 21. Many, a great number. Well, why did that happen? How did that happen? Because, says verse 21, the hand of the Lord was with those unnamed ordinary believers as they just shared the gospel with ordinary, unbelieving, non-Christian people.

But the hand of the Lord was in it. God did it. God changed them because the gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God for salvation. It's the power that turns lives around, that changes people forever.

And it seems, if we believe this account anyway, that the hand of the Lord is pleased to be with ordinary people, nameless people like these men and women from Cyprus and Cyrene, when they just say, well, look, let's just share the gospel with whoever it is that we meet.

[11 : 35] Let's just share the gospel with them, however unlikely conversion fodder they seem to be. Let's just see what happens. Let's just see what God will do if we start doing that.

And they did. And they found that as they did it, the Lord himself was reaching out and planting a new church from those pagan unbelievers.

And it happened just like that. Not through some great centralized office program from the church in Jerusalem. Just through ordinary Christian people going where they went and trusting the gospel of God to do the work when they shared it.

like David Gooding in his commentary says that if they'd waited for the Jerusalem church to send them out as missionaries to the Gentiles, the church in Antioch might not have been founded yet.

That's the truth. But ordinary people just got on with sharing the gospel with others. And the hand of the Lord was with them. And a new church was born.

[12 : 39] Doesn't that encourage you? that real gospel growth is at the hand of the Lord through ordinary people. They didn't seem to need to have a great new special strategy for urban mission, did they?

They didn't seem to stop and say, well look, we better have a great conference here on how to reach the post-modern people of Antioch with the gospel. They didn't have great seminars trying to target which was the best demographic group to go to.

They just went on and said, let's tell ordinary people who we meet the gospel of Jesus. Let's tell them who he was and what he said and what he taught.

Let's tell them above all what he did, how he died on the cross to bear away our sins and rose again for our justification so that we might be accepted before the judgment seat of Christ.

In other words, they did Christianity explored with them, I guess. It's just what we do, isn't it? And lives were transformed forever. And a new church was born.

[13 : 42] A church, by the way, that became the greatest missionary church that the world has ever seen. And that's how it began. And notice too, again, that no apostles were involved here.

Not Peter, not Philip. Of course, they have their role. We'll see a very important role. But the vital thing to see here is that the great factor in the huge missionary advance of the gospel going out to the Gentile world was through the witness of ordinary Christian people.

It's gospel people who advance the gospel. It's you and me. Not people with special titles or special degrees or special jobs. You and me.

We are the church of Jesus Christ. We are the organ of mission. Never forget that. It's not institutions and structures and traditions that do mission. It's people.

More often than not, in fact, it's institutions and structures and these sorts of things that hinder mission. But what does it matter if the establishment is riddled with inertia?

[14 : 47] What does it matter if the establishment is even opposed to real gospel work if the hand of the Lord is with ordinary people who love to share the gospel with other ordinary people? And the hand of the Lord is with just those kind of people.

like the venturesome men and women who proclaim Jesus as Lord in the midst of that great pagan city full of half a million people built on a big river a little bit up from the coast and full of all kinds of sexual immorality and idolatry and darkness.

Isn't that encouraging to you and to me who live in Glasgow, a big city by the river full of all these things just like Antioch? It's the Lord who reaches out in real gospel mission and he does it through the word of the gospel on the lips of ordinary people.

That's what plants new churches among complete pagans and ordinary people live out that gospel and speak it all over their city in their schools in their offices in their labs in their college with their friends on the football field wherever it is.

The hand of the Lord gives real gospel growth. There's more for us to see here though about how God's hand is at work in this kind of church.

[16:07] It's not just reaching out in real gospel mission that we see here but it's building up through real gospel ministry and that's what verses 22 to 26 are all about. The point in these verses also is that it's the Lord who builds up through his word increasing and multiplying among his people.

It's the risen Lord himself who strengthens and equips his church notice through leaders who are committed to ensuring that the word of the gospel is taught deeply and extensively in the church and therefore through leaders who give that task their highest priority so that they will enable it and support it and insist that it happens.

If verse 21 was the key verse of the first section then here it's verse 24 tells us again that the Lord the Holy Spirit similarly is in control here through Barnabas a man full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.

Verse 22 tells us that the Jerusalem church hears reports of all this activity in Antioch and so they want to get involved. We're not told why. Could be that they wanted to take control and perhaps regulate it but probably seems a rather positive thing.

It's like chapter 8 when they sent the apostles up to see what went on in Samaria. At any rate the choice of Barnabas seems to be a very inspired one and it suggests that they were pretty positive and thoughtful in their approach and indeed Barnabas does become a pivotal figure in this church and he is the one who makes sure that this church is not a church just full of converts but that it becomes a mature church full of real Christian servants real partners in gospel mission people who will impact the whole world for Jesus Christ and that's what we're to learn from these verses.

[17:56] The focus in verses 19 to 21 was not on leaders but on the laity if you like because the outreach and the mission of the church the evangelism of the church depends on every single one of us being an evangelist.

That's plain and obvious. The leaders the teachers in the church the full timers they can't get into your classroom or your office or your common room with the gospel but you can. That's why you're there.

But the focus in these verses is on the leadership in verses 22 to 26 because building and strengthening and equipping of the church does depend chiefly at least on its leaders.

And if that's going to happen we must have leaders in the church who will ensure that the gospel does go deep and that it shapes not only the lives of individual believers but also the corporate thinking and the corporate activities of the whole church.

And in Barnabas we see precisely that kind of Christian leader. And he's deliberately held up here as a kind of example of the man who can be pivotal in a church so that it really is built up so that it does reach its true potential.

[19:01] A church not full of passengers but full of partners in the glorious mission of Jesus Christ. So if there's one of the elders or one of the staff sitting next to you just poke them and make sure they're awake because this is especially for those of us in leadership in the church.

Surely every church needs and wants leaders like verse 24 describes Barnabas was a good man. By the way that's a unique description in Acts.

Nobody else is described as a good man like that. Full of the Holy Spirit and faith. Now that solid Christian character explains the way that he acted. That's what Luke tells us.

He did what he did in verse 23 for verse 24 he was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. His activity and his action flowed from his attitude as a Christian leader.

That's important. So we need to ask how does a Christian leader singled out as such exhibit that spirit-filled goodness of faith? What kind of attitude do leaders need to have so that they're in tune with the Lord Jesus himself and so that they are a vehicle for the Lord to use to build up his church and equip it for real Christian ministry?

[20 : 20] Well I want to suggest that in Barnabas' attitude we can see at least three clear characteristics that are essential of Christian leaders if they're going to truly help and not hinder the ministry of the church.

First, Barnabas is a leader who exhibits the selfless generosity of real spiritual insight. Look at verse 23. When he saw the grace of God we're told he was glad.

It was a totally open-hearted response wasn't it? He was just thrilled to see a true work of God in progress. There was no jealousy there was no hint of well I'm not invented here we didn't think about this so there's sour grapes here we didn't do it so we're not going to support it.

There's no sense of him saying well this should never have been started without discussion at the highest level with all the rest of us here in Jerusalem. No, he was a man full of the Holy Spirit and of faith so naturally he rejoiced where he saw the grace of God at work genuine gospel work taking place.

Now that is not alas universal among Christian leaders. There are many Christian ministers who can't bear somebody else's work to be blessed more than their own can't bear to see something happening in somebody else's passion that's not in their own.

[21 : 42] And many elders in churches would rather see nothing going on in the church than something going on that they're not in control of or they haven't initiated. But it's Barnabas who shows us the real selfless generosity of a man of true spiritual insight.

And you'll never be able to be a real leader in the Lord's church who advances the gospel unless you can see the grace of God at work and be glad about it wherever it is.

Do you remember back in Acts chapter 4 we were told that Barnabas was a man deeply generous with his substance. He sold his property and gave it to the church. And it's no accident is it that just such a man is also so generous of spirit.

Those two things tend to go together don't they? Howard Marshall says the fact that Barnabas had the spiritual insight to recognize that God's plan was being fulfilled at Antioch was of decisive significance for the growth of the church.

So it is in any church if it's to be truly growing and truly equipped by God its leaders must be people who exercise the selfless generosity of real spiritual insight like Barnabas.

[22 : 56] But second in Barnabas we see a leader who shows the selfless encouragement of real spiritual mentoring. Second half of verse 23 he exhorted them encouraged them kept on to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

Again his approach is very selfless. It's totally Christ focused. He exhorts them to be faithful to Jesus. He doesn't try and just push his own influence personally.

He doesn't try and just push the influence of the Jerusalem establishment. There's no hint in Barnabas' action of jealousy or of tribalism as alas there so often is in the Christian church. He doesn't say you must submit to Jerusalem now.

Nor does he say you must follow my leadership now. You must be Barnabas' people. No, he presses loyalty to Jesus Christ. And it's highly significant, isn't it, that verse 26 tells us that it was in Antioch that the believers were first called Christians, Christ's people.

They weren't called Barnabasites. They weren't called Jerusalemites. They were called Christians. They weren't called Baptists or Presbyterians or Anglicans or anything else.

[24 : 10] They were called Christians. That's what everybody saw they were. That was what was important to them. Some Christian leaders never stop going on about exhorting people to be faithful Presbyterians or whatever else it might be.

Dozens of other things. Barnabas didn't seem to be very interested in that kind of thing at all but he was very interested in encouraging people to be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that's what we need in Christian leaders today in our churches. The selfless encouragement of real spiritual mentoring. Encouraging people above all to be faithful to the Lord Jesus.

To keep the main thing as the main thing in our church life not to be taken up with all these other things. And we need to learn that from Barnabas. Of course, if people are to be kept loyal to Jesus Christ alone then they need to be taught in Christ deeply and extensively.

And Barnabas knew that and so also he was determined that that would happen in the church at Antioch. And so thirdly we see in Barnabas a leader who exhibits the selfless strategy of real spiritual thinking.

[25 : 20] he knows that the church needs depth and quality in its teaching and he knows that that's something he on his own can't provide. But he also knows a man called Saul who he knew was uniquely gifted for a strategic task like this in a church with such great potential.

And so he had no hesitation in making sure what needed to happen happened. And he went to get Paul. he thought strategically and he acted strategically.

Verse 25 So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul and when he found him he brought him to Antioch and for a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people.

Isn't that again the action of a big man, a generous man, a selfless man? A lesser man would have surely said something like this, boy this is a terrific opportunity this church in Antioch and it's going to be my show.

I'm going to be the leader of it. I'm going to keep all these others away. I don't want any rivals in my pulpit taking the limelight here. Certainly don't want somebody with all the abilities of a Saul of Tarsus taking the light off me.

[26 : 29] I'm going to keep people like that right away. But Barnabas did exactly the opposite of that, didn't he? Because he had a generous heart. Because he wanted to encourage and strengthen Christian people.

Because he was truly selfless. And that's why he could be truly strategic for the kingdom of Christ. You cannot be truly strategic in your thinking for the church of Jesus Christ if crowning your own ego is actually more important than seeing the crown of the Lord Jesus Christ advance in the church and in the world.

But it can be hard to play second fiddle. And yet Barnabas gladly did that for the sake of the Lord Jesus. And what harmony there is when really spiritual Christian leaders have a realistic assessment of themselves.

They know what they can do and they know also what they can't do. And they recognize what others can do that they can't do and they put the needs of the gospel and the kingdom first and ensure that these things happen.

That's what happened in the church in Antioch. And the result was not only growth in numbers, verse 24, many people were added, but also great growth in maturity and strength, verse 26.

[27 : 48] They were taught, many of them, searching truths of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ through Barnabas, the great encourager, and through Saul, the great expositor. And the results were obvious for everybody to see.

It became a powerfully distinctive force in the midst of that pagan city. The world around about noticed big time. And the culture even gave them a name, verse 26, Christianoi, Christ's people.

And all of that happened because there were leaders who were determined to ensure that the church would be built up through a searching ministry of the word of God at the very heart of the work, through men who were able and capable of doing it.

And so they made that the top priority of their leadership in the church. and they acted strategically to make sure that that would happen. It was the work of the gospel that truly set the agenda for Barnabas' leadership strategy.

It was not his personal agenda. That's always a big challenge, isn't it? Because when we think of leadership, of course, our own corrupt natures always want to twist that and think about status instead of service.

[29 : 04] service. But that's fatal to the real purpose of God's spirit. That's been the chief factor in the corruption of the office of the eldership by and large in the Church of Scotland.

That's why so many churches in our parishes are in the state that they're in today. Because their leaders have precious little insight or interest in ensuring that the church really is built up and equipped.

And so they haven't made it their chief task to ensure that deep and extensive ministries of the Word of God are at the very heart of what goes on in their churches. They have no interest in that.

They've got plenty of interest maybe in asserting themselves or controlling themselves or being taken up with all kinds of trivial secondary and tertiary matters but hampering the real work of the Gospel of Jesus.

But how totally different it was for Barnabas. He was absolutely selfless in service, generously encouraging and above all determined to make strategic plans and actions to ensure that the ministry of the Word was established and released in every part of that church so that they would be equipped and so that the Word would increase and multiply among the people.

[30 : 18] And that is the kind of church that made a monumental impact on the pagan culture. A church that is built up by the Lord himself through real gospel ministry.

there's a lot more we could say about that and much for us to ponder especially those of us called I think to Christian leadership. I want to look briefly at the final section verses 27 to 30 which speaks all about us sending out in real gospel mercy.

And again it's the Lord himself who sends out to resource his church when his word is increasing and multiplying in the midst. The risen Lord himself provides for his church through a real gospel fellowship of Christians whose hearts are open to God's word and therefore whose pockets are also open to God's people in acts of tangible mercy.

Once again we see that behind all the human activity is the guiding hand of the Lord by his spirit. It's plain in verse 28 when it's the action of the spirit through the prophets that elicits all this response.

You see when you're in a church that is in step with God's spirit, when it's a church that exists because believers are outward looking and gospel focused and therefore mission oriented, and when its leaders are committed to ensuring the church is built up and equipped for the gospel through a deep ministry of the word, then in that kind of church there will be real sensitivity to the spirit of God and what he's leading in.

[31 : 51] There will be a real responsiveness to the needs of brothers and sisters in Christ, whatever kind, wherever they are when God brings it to their attention. It will be a church that's open hearted in real fellowship because there's a natural sense of true family, of real tangible unity in the gospel, of rejoicing in true spiritual kin wherever you find them, whatever culture, whatever country they're in.

And there will be a real sense of desire to share with them in their burdens of ministry, whatever they are. Where there is ministry of the word with real depth and persistence in such a church, there will also be a ministry of fellowship and of mercy, of real breadth and determination from that church.

And that's exactly what we see here in Antioch. The great evidence of solidarity across the cultures as these Gentile believers in Antioch give money to help Jewish believers, brothers they call them, back in Judea.

It's a tangible example of what Paul speaks about in Romans 15 verse 27, when he says that Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings and therefore they also share their material blessings with the Jews.

They owe it to them, he says. And actually that's something that we shouldn't forget today either, most of us as Gentile Christians. We owe it to our Jewish brethren, to love, to support them, to help them.

[33 : 17] Salvation is of the Jews, says Jesus. But you see that fellowship, that koinonia, that communion in tangible ways, was a mark of the New Testament church.

Remember back to Acts chapter 2 and Acts chapter 4, we read that people were all giving according to their means, that they were receiving according to their means. There was a real support, a real mercy shown in the church.

And notice in these verses, it's the same, there's no coercion. Verse 28 says they heard of this need, so, verse 29, they decided everyone according to his ability to send relief to their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

And no doubt there was discussion and deliberation about how they should organize that, just as we've been having discussion and deliberation about how we organize our giving. But there's a great sense here of how natural it was.

Of course we must help, they thought, because they're our family in Christ. And that's a right emphasis, isn't it? Of course as Christians we want to love and help all our neighbors and friends.

[34 : 22] We're to do good to all, says Paul to the Galatians, but especially, he says, to the household of faith. Well, of course, because we're family. And notice in verse 29, everyone took part.

Nobody said, oh, we'll just leave that to the people who've got lots of money. Everyone did what they could. But at the same time, obviously, those who had more had a responsibility to give more. Each gave according to his ability.

It's a disgrace to the name of Christ, isn't it, where there are some folk in a fellowship that have to take a far greater burden of giving in the church because there are others who God has blessed with more gifts who aren't as generous.

That's wrong. And we need to remember that although all our giving is in secret, the Lord himself can see all our bank accounts and all our credit card slips. But if it really is a joint effort in the church, there won't be freeloaders, will there?

Notice that they entrust also their management of the specifics of this giving to a few reliable men like Saul and Barnabas to actually deliver it, to make sure it goes to the right place properly.

[35 : 30] Again, that's another New Testament principle. The church entrusts their giving to the kind of people who are very clear and very solid about true gospel priorities. ways.

So that's used in ways that are indeed responsive to the intimations of the Holy Spirit, not to other intimations. Again, that's perhaps a timely word for us at the moment.

But again, don't miss the chief thing here. It's the Lord who's at work in this merciful provision. It's his spirit that's speaking through the prophetic word.

It's his spirit who is eliciting that response in the hearts of these believers to do real service, real help to hard pressed believers elsewhere. That's always so.

It's always so where there's a real tangible sense of fellowship. Whether it's money like here or whether it's prayer or whether it's other gestures of support. It's the Lord that's at work through his people in these things.

[36 : 34] We've seen that very greatly just recently ourselves in our situation in the Church of Scotland. We're having a famine. A famine of faith and of truth, aren't we? And we've known such support from those who are real family all across the world who have been praying for us, who have been giving us moral support and messages of support in the time of our General Assembly.

You can tell a lot, can't you, about who your true family are when you're in difficulty. Isn't that right? Sadly, you find that some that you thought were true family, well, they're just laughing at your misfortune.

They can't resist cheap shots and scoring points from you. You discover that the very best, they're actually a very distant family, perhaps not even family at all. But then there are others, of course, who prove to be real Christian brothers and sisters because they rush to support and help other Christian people when they're struggling and under the cosh and facing difficulty and hardship of whatever kind it is.

Real brothers and sisters rush to the help of Christian brothers and sisters all over the world. And that's one of the great blessings of our globalized world situation today, isn't it?

Never was there a time, I think, in the whole of the history of the church when it's been so much like the first century where the world church can all know each other, when people travel between different places and we have links and friendships and partnerships.

[37 : 58] And it's wonderful to see it happen. And when we hear of real needs as a church, where we discern that real needs for the gospel and gospel people will arise, then it's the Spirit of God at work in us.

And he wants to supply those needs himself through what we do. I remember hearing William Stowe once say, we don't need to be worried at all in the church about resources because God's got plenty of money.

And indeed he has. Of course, what he does is, the Lord is a very practical Lord. He keeps that money very handy. He doesn't keep it in heaven where it would be very hard to get to earth in an emergency.

He keeps it very handily on earth, in your bank account and in mine, so it's readily available whenever it's needed. All he has to say is, are we prompt in our hearts? And the Antioch church heard that there was a need, and so they determined to be a sending church.

And they actually did it, says verse 30. It wasn't just the thought that counted. In the Bible, it's the act that counts. And it was a joyful service, a natural service. Because when the Lord is multiplying his word among his people in real gospel ministry, then an attitude of real gospel mercy, of giving, of fellowship is always there.

[39 : 18] Well, that's the church at Antioch. Truly, it's just the kind of church that we all want to belong to today. At least I hope it is. It's a sending church. From Acts 13 onwards, we see the story of the greatest missionary expansion that the world has ever seen.

It all came from that church in Antioch. It was planted that way. But it's no accident that it was also a giving church, marked by overflowing generosity of gospel-hearted people in mercy, as well as gospel-hearted mission.

Because both those things flow from the same thing, from an attitude of love to Christ and therefore love to his people. But that too was no accident, because it was a church marked by the leadership of godly men who were filled with the Holy Spirit, who were selflessly devoted to directing others to Christ, who were generous in welcoming always, wherever they saw it, every evidence of the grace of God being at work, and who were committed to ensuring that their church was deeply taught, therefore readied and equipped for gospel mission.

And it was a church that was going on as it had begun. Ordinary people being faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ, sharing his gospel with other ordinary people day by day throughout their lives.

People who are willing to share their saviour are always people who, when called upon to do so, are willing to share their substance with God. There's nothing complicated about it, is there?

[40 : 51] Nothing very fancy, nothing very high-tech, nothing very modern, just the Lord himself at work in every stage through the increasing and multiplying of his word among a willing people.

What a great encouragement that should be to us. I'm so thankful, aren't you, that there's just such a simplicity to God's message to us about how to be the church. That if our focus is the same as his focus, we're believers reaching out in real gospel mission, if we're leaders building up through real gospel ministry, and if we're everyone sending out in real generous gospel mercy, then Luke is telling us that real gospel growth will be at the hand of the Lord himself in our midst.

Christ. Let's pray. Gracious God, we thank you that indeed it is your work to spread the glorious message of Jesus Christ, to build and to equip your church, and to make it responsive to the needs of your people and the needs of all those throughout the world who you're calling to be your people.

Help us, we pray, to be aligned with you, that we might rejoice in saying, the hand of the Lord is with us, the spirit of the Lord himself is doing great things among us.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.