

# Three Marks of a Gospel Church

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Date: 17 March 2019

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[ 0 : 00 ] We turn now to God's Word, so please do turn to the book of Acts and to Acts chapter 11. And you'll find it on page 920, 920 in the Church Bibles.

Acts chapter 11, and we're reading from verse 19. So we're picking up the story of the book of Acts. And as we saw last week, the gospel has now exploded into Gentile territory. And the Apostle Peter has been speaking to the Jerusalem church.

And you'll see at the very end, they have come to realize, verse 18, to the Gentiles also, God has granted repentance that leads to life.

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.

[ 1 : 09 ] 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. And the hand of the Lord was with them.

And a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 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.

For he was a man, a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. And when he 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. Now in these days, prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

[ 2 : 20 ] And one of them, named Agabus, stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world. This took place in the days of Claudius.

So, the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

Amen. May the Lord bless his word to us this evening. Well, please do have your Bibles open and to Acts 11, which we read earlier, page 920.

Acts 11 from verse 19. Now, what does a healthy church look like?

If you were told that you had to move city next month, what would be your non-negotiable criteria for a new church?

[ 3 : 32 ] If you have children, what are you training them to look for in a church? So, when they leave home, do they know what to look for?

When they flee the nest, do they know what to look for? It's a key question, isn't it? And it's one that is tackled in our passage this evening. What does a healthy church look like?

Well, this section here, we're in chapter 11, it follows straight on from the hugely significant chapter 10 and start of chapter 11. We saw last time, didn't we, that the gospel was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

It's just as the apostle Peter came to understand in chapter 10. He said this, God shows no partiality. But in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. God shows no partiality. And so, the Jerusalem church, despite initial criticism in chapter 11 at the start and resistance, they have to concede, given the undeniable evidence presented to them, look at the end of chapter 11, verse 18, they come to realize that the Gentiles, to the Gentiles also, God has granted repentance that leads to life.

[ 4 : 57 ] This is a huge moment in the spread of the gospel. And so, what we see unfolding here in the second half of chapter 11 is the gospel going deeper and deeper into Gentile territory.

Luke is giving us a vivid illustration of the principle we've just seen outlined in the first half of the chapter. The gospel is truly for the Gentiles. Just look at what happens here in Antioch, says Luke. We've seen the principle in the first half. The Jerusalem church realized the gospel is for the Gentiles and now we see it go. It goes to Antioch and explodes across the world. And what we're being shown here is the reality of the unstoppable gospel.

of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus. He is bringing into reality what he said would happen. The gospel would go out from Jerusalem to all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

That was Jesus' program, wasn't it? Chapter 1, verse 8 of Acts. That was the contents page for the book of Acts. This is what's going to unfold. He would establish his church and nothing was going to stop it.

[ 6 : 12 ] That's the big picture of the book of Acts. And here we see it in front of our eyes. So what we see here, what do we see? We see the marks of the spread of the unstoppable gospel.

What are the marks of a truly gospel church? A growing church? What are we, as Christ's church today, supposed to be all about?

Are we on track as a church? How do we measure up to the early church here? Well, I don't have nine marks for you, as one popular American church would have us believe, but there are three marks here.

Three marks of a healthy church that truly has the hand of the Lord with them. And we would do well to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them.

And together, all of us ensure, with his help, that these are the marks of the Tron church. Now, these marks are not exhaustive. This isn't everything there is to say about what a church should be.

[ 7 : 21 ] But these, at the very least, are non-negotiable. And it's so clear, isn't it, as you read that, it's so clear that this is the Lord's work.

As we'll see, he is the one who is directing things and moving things forward. He is the one who is bringing about the growth. So this isn't some formula to be cranked out.

Just going through the motions, just ticking these things off. That won't lead, in itself, to gospel growth. Yes, we, as his people, we do plant.

We do all within our limited powers and capabilities. We do all that we can. But it is God alone who gives the growth. That's what we see here. That's the big picture.

But let's zoom in. Let's look at this passage more closely. So three marks. First, the first mark of a gospel church. And it's a church engaged in mission to the ends of the earth.

[ 8 : 23 ] Verses 19 to 21. A church engaged in mission to the ends of the earth. Now, verse 19 doesn't begin very promisingly, does it?

Look at how it begins. Now, those who are scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen. Now, this points us back to the start of chapter 8.

And just previous to that, you read about Stephen, one of the early church leaders being stoned to death by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. And it is, on the face of it, an absolute disaster for the early church.

One of their key men, one of their key leaders, is publicly humiliated and murdered. And following that, there is widespread persecution against the church in Jerusalem, such that all the believers there were scattered throughout all the region of Judea and Samaria.

They were fleeing for their lives. It seems, at the time, like the end. But it is, in fact, quite the opposite.

[ 9 : 38 ] For Stephen's death proves, actually, to be a real turning point in the advance of the gospel. From that point on, the gospel is carried on the lips of those persecuted Christians.

And it goes further into Judea and then Samaria and then, well, we catch up with them here in chapter 11, verse 19. We see where they've got to. Look at what it says.

Now, those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen, they traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. Now, what were they doing as they were fleeing, as they were running for their lives?

Well, they were speaking the word. And initially, they were speaking the word to no one except the Jews. They were witnessing to the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

It's just what he instructed them to do back in chapter 1. But there were some of them, look on, verse 20, some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also preaching the Lord Jesus.

[ 10 : 51 ] Now, the Hellenists, they were Greeks, non-Jews. And this is all taking place in Antioch, non-Jewish territory and Gentile territory here, and non-Jews are being told the gospel.

And Antioch, it was a huge city. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Major center, a real mixing pot from all across the Roman Empire. We're in firm Gentile territory here.

And what we see here at the start of 19 and 20 is that Jews and Gentiles were hearing the gospel from the lips of these scattered persecuted believers. And as we saw last time, both Jew and Gentile need to hear the gospel.

Remember what the Apostle Peter says. Back in chapter 10, he says, Jesus commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead.

To him, all the peoples bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. Everyone who believes, Jew or Gentile.

[ 12 : 03 ] And so, despite only initially speaking to the Jews, these scattered believers start to reach out to a wider audience, telling them about the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ.

And look at verse 21. And the hand of the Lord was with them. And a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

It was the Lord himself who was behind and with the whole operation. He was the one driving the mission forward and giving them success. He was the one driving forward his church in mission to the ends of the earth for all people, Jew and Gentile.

And this is the mark of a genuine church. This is the key task we are called to as his people.

We are to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. And the Lord will ensure that happens. He will take the initiative even if that means it is painful for us.

[ 13 : 09 ] Note what was the driver for the gospel going to Antioch. It was terrible persecution. That's what drove them to go.

None of them would have chosen to go to Antioch. They were quite happy in Jerusalem. But in the Lord's providence that terrible persecution you read about in chapter 7 and chapter 8 of Acts that in the Lord's providence was the catalyst for the explosion of the gospel out from Jerusalem.

Very painful. Very costly. But that is what it took for the gospel to go. Now you and I unless we're pretty unusual we will tend to opt for the status quo for what we know for what is comfortable.

At least that's what I'm like. We tend to go for the path of least resistance in life but the result of that is that nothing of major significance really happens. For progress for advance in any walk of life we need to be pushed don't we?

pushed beyond our comfort pushed to strive for what may seem initially impossible. And when it comes to the gospel the most dangerous place for a church to be is one of comfort and ease.

[ 14 : 35 ] We do need the Lord sometimes to come and shake us up to remind us of the urgency of the task we're called to. There's a whole world of people out there living in darkness sleepwalking into eternal hell as we heard this morning on that wide road to destruction.

And sometimes it takes as it did here severe and terrible persecution to mobilize the church.

Sometimes the Lord will bring things into our path that seem to us terrible.

we wonder how on earth we're going to get through this. How will we continue to function and grow as a church if this happens? But by his help we struggle through.

We keep the main thing the main thing and to our astonishment the Lord uses what seemed to us to be destined for harm. He uses it for good.

He does that. And we can look back with perspective and hindsight to see exactly what the Lord was doing in order to further his gospel purposes. We'd never have chosen it.

[ 15 : 49 ] But the Lord sometimes does what he has to to get us doing what he needs us to do. So when troubles come for us as a church or individually when things crop up and they will we're not to panic but rather we would do well to ask to consider what is the Lord doing here?

What's the Lord doing? And we perhaps won't have the answer for a long time but we can trust him and in so trusting him not move from the key task he's called us to which is the task that these persecuted Christians got on with here preaching the Lord Jesus and it's best for us isn't it to heed the warning that Luke intends to leap into action now rather than the Lord forcing us to that would be far more uncomfortable so there is a warning for us I think here but there's also great reassurance in the midst of that warning it's a humbling reassurance note that in all their efforts to evangelize the Hellenists and Antioch it was the Lord who did the work verse 21 the hand of the

Lord was with them and a great many turned to the Lord the Lord was with his people he was with them in their witnessing to the Lord Jesus he didn't just send them on their way and wish them good luck no the Lord was with them helping them he was the one winning souls he was the one bringing success and he will be with you and some will believe some will turn to the Lord some will repent from lives that have gone so far away from the Lord they've paid no heed to him they will repent from that that will happen the Lord can do that he can turn lives upside down turn them right around he's able to do that he's done it for you otherwise you wouldn't be here so the Lord was with them and he promises to be with his people as they go about that great task he's called them to he's called you to but also just know that these were ordinary believers back in chapter 8 where we read about that scattering following Stephen's persecution the apostles stayed in Jerusalem the rest of them scattered so it was these non-apostles ordinary believers that were going up to Antioch and speaking the gospel we're not told their names we're just told that they were men of Cyprus and Cyrene they weren't apostles they weren't super Christians just ordinary believers telling other ordinary non-Christians about the Lord Jesus Christ now this is controversial but I want to do a bit of congregational participation here okay so if anyone here is a super Christian put your hand up okay I don't think so so this is for us this encouragement is for you none of us here are super Christians we're ordinary believers and the Lord delights to work with ordinary believers like the ones here and use them for his gospel purposes and that ought to give us great confidence it doesn't depend on us it didn't depend on these guys no it was the hand of the

Lord that was with them he was the one doing the work there was no grand strategy from the Jerusalem church they didn't plan this this all takes part quite apart from the Jerusalem church doesn't it they only find out about it after the fact and then they dispatch Barnabas to go and see what's going on this wasn't some grand human made up urban evangelism strategy no this was the Lord at work normal Christians taking the word to their friends to people on the streets normal Christians taking something like the word one-to-one asking their friend have you read the Bible for yourself as an adult would you like to could I share with you what I've discovered about the Lord Jesus Christ has changed my life would like to hear about that there's nothing superhuman about that it's normal straightforward just those little conversations you might have with folk that you know parents at the school gate a colleague at the next desk the girls in your running club they will observe your life they will notice that your priorities are different can you say something just a little thing the

[ 21 : 16 ] Lord isn't asking you to stand there and preach a 50 minute sermon thankfully but the Lord does ask us doesn't he to do all that we can and not all of us are recotise are we that's a relief but we're not all like that are we so we're to take the gospel to the people we know and point them to the Lord Jesus Christ these were ordinary folk reaching out to ordinary folk well there's the first mark of a gospel church a church engaged in mission to the ends of the earth and that's what we are to be about as a church outward looking seeing to reach the lost to the ends of the earth and this is to be the number one priority for every local church mission to the ends of earth let's look on to mark two from verse twenty to twenty six the second mark of a gospel church and it's a church edified by the word a church edified by the word word word word reaches

Jerusalem of the extraordinary events that have happened here in Antioch they're hearing about many people many Hellenists coming to know the Lord and so they dispatch Barnabas to go and see what's going on and when he gets there and observes all that's happened when he sees with his own eyes the evidence of God's grace in these transformed lives he was glad he was glad and he immediately went on exhorting them to remain faithful to the Lord with a steadfast purpose there was no hint was there of disapproval over what he observed in Antioch you might have expected given the reception the apostle Peter had remember back at chapter 11 he has been up to Cornelius house amazing events there and he comes back to the church in Jerusalem and he gets criticized now you may expect something similar here from Barnabas but that's not what we see the opposite was the case and he described there as a man of faith verse 24 a good man full of the Holy Spirit and so because he is that because he's a good man full of the Spirit a man of faith he's glad when he observes what's happened in Antioch and that is a sign of a good Christian leader isn't it one who delights to see the Lord truly at work no matter where it's happening no matter who's responsible humanly speaking a good man full of faith will respond with gladness at new life at people coming to faith and that should be our response

shouldn't it to evidence of growth do we rejoice to see God's goodness to others and so Barnabas seeing this his response is to invest himself in these people to build up these new believers to edify to instruct so that they would remain faithful to the Lord Barnabas knew that the gospel church needs to be well fed to be built up if it was to prove fruitful to the Lord and that is exactly the results from his work so look at verse 23 he sees this astonishing growth of grace of God in Antioch he was glad he exhorted them to remain faithful he taught them he edified them and then verse 24 a great many people were added to the Lord so that's the result of Barnabas teaching edifying instructing a great many people were added to the Lord edification teaching instructing in the word edification far from being a distraction was crucial fuel for evangelism true and good edification leads to evangelism leads to real gospel growth if you strip away edification strip away the teaching and the zeal for evangelism will ebb away stay away from the church where you get edified taught stay away from the church and your spiritual temperature will begin to drop you see true and good edification like what Barnabas was doing here that leads to growth it leads to evangelism and so much so that Barnabas needs backup he's got too much on his plate with all these new believers in

[ 26 : 32 ] Antioch so what does he do well verse 25 off he goes to Tarsus to look for Saul so off he goes he brings back Saul and the both of them stay in the city verse 26 for a whole year what were they doing during that year well again verse 26 they met with the church and taught a great many people you see a gospel church with ordinary Christians involved in the work evangelism with their friends and colleagues and neighbors that sort of church needs this sort of edification it needs teaching and this is deep not superficial edification this is an all-consuming work that Barnabas is committing to so much so that he recruits the best teacher the early church had imagine imagine the apostle

Paul coming here for a year and teaching intensely this congregation for a year this wasn't superficial easygoing teaching this was deep edification and the church needs building up doesn't it with the word from its leaders leaders who are good men full of the spirit and of faith leaders who will devote themselves to teaching the church who exhort the followers to remain faithful to the Lord to keep them on task with the work that is the work of church leaders that is what the leaders of any gospel church of this church must not fail to do and that is why we do what we do that is why the focus on all our gatherings is the preaching and teaching of the word of the Lord it is the word of God that leads this church it's Jesus Christ who directs the purposes and the priority of his church and so we come and we listen to his word not my ideas not Willie's ideas not Edward's ideas but the Lord we listen to him in his word and that drives us as a church to reach out to bring the gospel to others without that edification there'll be no evangelism so we ought mustn't we to make the very most of the time sat under his word seek out every opportunity that we have in this church to do that to be taught to be fed so if you have friends in the church who don't regularly come out to the evening service drag them along point them to Acts chapter 19 to 30 show them what the result was of edification in the church there great gospel growth that came from edification so if there's friends who just come in the mornings bring them in the evenings edification in the word will sustain them it will equip them will help them to remain faithful in the

Christian life it's very hard to grow without a hunger for good teaching so let's cultivate together that hunger for the word that hunger for edification let me read to you a quote I shared with our small groups the other week we're working through Romans in our small groups and that's hard work it's not the easiest book to get your but this is the quote I shared with them at the start to encourage them as Christians we are in a war that is why Paul gave the Roman letter to the slave class of Rome and they wrestled with it imbibed it grappled with it mastered it and allowed it to master them no doubt they found it deep and stretching and heavy and at times they wished for something simpler but simple things do not make warriors there is no other way for God's people to be transformed into soldiers who will truly stand by Christ no other way but real deep edification in his word simple simple simple simple things do not make warriors and we may not look like it but we are warriors we're in a spiritual battle and we need edified so a growing gospel church is a church edified by the word and that's exciting to be built up by something as unimpressive as what's happening right now this doesn't look flash but this is how God is at work in his church across the globe and a focus on it is not something to apologize for this is good and right and this alone will equip the church so that's the second mark of a gospel church edified by the

word let's look on then to the last few verses to the final mark of a growing gospel church so verse 27 to the end this is the third mark a church eager to love and serve fellow believers so what we see here in this last section is a real genuine concern for fellow believers in

[ 32 : 13 ] Christ and it's a concern that moves beyond mere sentiments to real action and sacrifice they send relief that is cold hard cash a determined sacrificial service and concern that reach beyond geographic and ethnic borders and what happens here is pretty staggering what's the catalyst for this giving well again it's the Lord who's driving it forward isn't it look at verse 27 and 28 prophets came down from Jerusalem and one of them stands and speaks by the spirit and he speaks of a coming famine it is the Lord by his spirit again that is directing and leading so the believers there in Antioch they hear about this famine that is going on in

Jerusalem and Judea and you can read accounts of the time not from the Bible but they speak of these famines there were quite a few and successive years around this time so what do these Gentile Christians living up there in Antioch what are determined to do and for whom suppose these Christians there in Antioch they could well have shrugged their shoulders well that's all very interesting Agabus thanks for that but what has got to do with us but they don't do that do they no this remember is a church that has been built up by the word a church that has been edified a church that is sensitive to God's leading and so they respond with and together verse 29 they determine to send relief to the brothers living in Judea that's a pretty remarkable thing to do isn't it if you go back a year from this point or 18 months and these folk in

Antioch they were Gentiles dead in sin walking in darkness couldn't give two hoots for the folk in Jerusalem but now they're sending their own money down to people they've never met in Jerusalem what's happened well they've responded haven't they in faith to the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ they have become Christians their whole lives have been turned around and they've been welcomed into the family of God and so they now understand because they've been taught by Barnabas and Saul for the last year they understand that these folk living in Judea they're not distant people but actually brothers and sisters in Christ they're part of the same family and so they realize they've got obligations to each other they are fellow Christians and so they are to be treated as just that as brothers as family and so verse 29 they determine to help who is involved in the giving well it's everybody verse 29 everyone according to his ability to send relief to the brothers living

Judea everyone is involved according to his ability this wasn't a subset of the particularly wealthy here within Antioch church it wasn't just the high earners the rich weren't to shoulder the burden alone not at all all would give as they were able all were to play their part who do they entrust the gift to well Barnabas and Saul do you find that bit surprising aren't they Barnabas and Saul beyond being messenger boys delivering the cash well no this is a serious matter this isn't some small issue on the side this was major issue for them this is a serious matter and so they entrust this giving to their most senior leaders they entrust it to those who have the major responsibility for the teaching of the word men who are crystal clear on the gospel and on gospel priorities that's who takes this money down to Jerusalem now as an aside it's always a key appointment in the church the appointment of the folk to look after the church finances and it must be somebody or a group of people who are crystal clear on the gospel and the priorities of the gospel so don't automatically assume that the most senior accountant in a congregation is the person to appoint as treasurer can be disastrous they may not be clear on the gospel or on gospel priorities or be willing to take gospel risks so no doubt there were folk here in

Antioch who were highly qualified accountants but they didn't get sent Barnabas and Saul so we see here so clearly that the young church in Antioch was a church eager to serve and love fellow Christians even though there was significant geographic distance and ethnic history to overcome they were willing to do it because they knew that these were close brothers and sisters in reality that is the mark of a growing gospel church and so it does call us doesn't it it does call us to examine our own giving our own efforts to bring relief to brothers and sisters in Christ that we know are in need and there are so many in need aren't there it's overwhelming so many were the recipients of the relief we could provide and so discernment is needed it's far better to direct our resources rather than have a scattergun approach far better to redirect our resources towards churches or organizations that we know and trust whether it's

[ 38 : 46 ] DBI in North India or whether it's money given to Imran Gill to help him build a home for his family or whether it's a relief sent through the Barnabas Fund for a particular project it is right

isn't it to seek to bring real relief to brothers and sisters in their need it is right for each of us to send relief according to our ability and so if you are not giving financially to either the work of the gospel here or to particular needs that arise with our gospel partners around the globe then you need to loosen your wallet all of us are called to give according to our ability that is the mark of a real gospel growing church and of each of us as individuals as real growing gospel people why should others have to bear the burden if you are not willing to pull your weight can't just lean on those who we perceive to be the wealthy this is all of our jobs all of our responsibilities and this was the mark of the

the Antioch church they were a generous church eager to love fellow believers even a long way away not just in theory but in practice in reality by dipping into their bank accounts important this was a church that was at the very forefront of God's great gospel expansion to the ends of the earth Antioch was the center going forward for gospel mission Jerusalem sort of fades into the distance into the background Antioch is the real center and it's a church that we would do well to emulate and strive to be like a church known for its eager generosity in loving fellow believers. A church known for its edification in the word. A church known for its engagement in mission to the ends of the earth.

And we would do well to do likewise, to be likewise. Three marks of a growing gospel church. Three marks to teach your children.

Three marks to look for as you move city. But it was a church above all, driven and led by the hand of the Lord.

[ 41 : 25 ] That's the key factor. The Lord was with them. And we will do nothing of profit unless the Lord is with us. We will not be engaged in effective mission unless the Lord is with us.

We will not be edified with good teaching unless the Lord is with us. We will not be eager to love our brothers and sisters in Christ in concrete ways unless the Lord is with us.

So let's ask him to be with us as a church and as individual believers within the church. Let us ask him to help us be an effective gospel church.

So let's do that. Let's pray. Our Father God, we do thank you so much that you promise to be with your people.

That you promise never to leave nor forsake those who are yours. And Lord, we are called to a great task.

[ 42 : 35 ] Which can at times seem daunting. We are at times discouraged. But Lord, we take heart. That you are with us.

And would you please help us to be a church. Known for its love for the lost. Known for its love for the word.

And known for its love for fellow believers. Please, please would you help us to be a church like that. We ask it in Jesus' name and to bring you glory.

Amen.